



COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

John Woodhouse





'Over a period of several months at Moore College, Dr John Woodhouse preached a series of expository sermons on Paul's letters to the Colossians and Philemon which were clear, insightful and wonderfully refreshing. The publication and expansion of these fine messages in the Focus on the Bible commentary series will now benefit a much wider audience. Honest readers will be challenged by the gospel of God's gracious saving plan for the world, the place of the Lord Jesus within it, and how those who have been united with Christ are to live. May the God who is the Author of these two powerful letters use John's rich exposition to challenge and encourage us in the twenty-first century'.

*Peter O'Brien,
Emeritus Faculty Member, Moore Theological College, Sydney*

'This commentary by John Woodhouse is a rich source of biblical insight on the texts of Colossians and Philemon. This volume is a great resource for the pastor as he prepares to feed his flock, but it is equally helpful for students of the Bible who desire to understand better these magnificent letters. Maybe even more importantly, the text reflects the author's own love for the Savior. I can gladly commend it.'

*Bill Cook,
Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky*





COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

So walk in Him

John Woodhouse

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the *Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked REB are from the *Revised English Bible*. Copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press 1989.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved."

Scripture quotations marked TNIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *Today's New International Version*®. TNIV® Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked HCSB are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*®. HCSB®. Copyright ©1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers

Copyright © John Woodhouse
ISBN 978-1-84550-632-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2011
in the
Focus on the Bible Commentary Series
by
Christian Focus Publications, Ltd
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Great Britain
www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by
Daniel Van Straaten

Printed by
Bell & Bain, Glasgow



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-002769
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London, EC1 8TS. www.cla.co.uk





Contents

Introduction to Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon	7
--	---

Colossians

1. A Letter from Paul (1:1, 2)	17
2. 'We always thank God' (1:3-8)	29
3. 'We have not Ceased to Pray for you' (1:9-14)	41
4. Christ and All Things (1:15-20)	51
5. 'And you...' (1:21-23)	65
6. The Servant of the Gospel (1:24-29)	77
7. The Great Struggle (2:1-5)	91
8. The Christian Life (2:6, 7)	103
9. You've Been Warned (2:8)	117
10. Teaching Everyone ... (2:9-15)	125
11. Shadows and Substance (2:16, 17)	145
12. Disqualified by Spirituality (2:18, 19)	155
13. Dictated to by Rules (2:20-23)	167
14. The Power of the Christian Life (3:1-4)	177
15. The Victory of the Christian Life (3:5-11)	187
16. The Quality of the Christian Life (3:12-17)	199
17. Family Life in Christ (3:18-21)	215
18. Slaves of Christ (3:22-4:1)	227
19. Pray (4:2-4)	239
20. Towards Outsiders (4:5-6)	249
21. Concluding Words (4:7-18)	259

Philemon

22. Effective Fellowship (vv. 1-7)	275
23. The Fellowship at Work – I (vv. 8-16)	285
24. The Fellowship at Work – II (vv. 17-25)	295
Subject Index	309
Scripture Index	315





*To the students and faculty of Moore College, Sydney,
who for a couple of years shared weekly with me in
hearing the Word of God from Paul's letters to the
Colossians and to Philemon. Thank you for your
effective participation in the faith (Philemon 6).*





Introduction to Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon

Behind the letters of Paul to the Christian believers in Colossae and to one of their number by the name of Philemon is a wonderful story of evangelism, church planting and Christian growth. Some of the details of the story are a little unclear, and there are some gaps in the evidence, but the main lines are vivid enough. I will take the liberty of filling in some of the gaps in the following reconstruction of what took place.

The story begins with a rather well-to-do businessman who lived in the town of Colossae. His name was Philemon. It may have been his business that brought him one day in about the year A.D. 53 down to the coastal town of Ephesus, not far from Colossae. No doubt he had visited Ephesus many times, but on this occasion there was quite a stir – because a Jewish man, by the name of Paul, was gathering crowds in a hall in the town and arguing about one he called Jesus, who (he claimed) was not only the Messiah of Israel, but also the Lord and judge of all people everywhere (see Acts 19:8-10). Other astonishing things were happening around this man Paul: diseases were remarkably healed, evil spirits left people (Acts 19:11, 12). Like many others in Ephesus at the time, Philemon (though not Jewish himself) came to hear Paul. To his own surprise he was persuaded by this extraordinary message and came to faith in Messiah Jesus, the Lord. Philemon actually became involved in some way with Paul in his work. It is likely that he subsequently returned to Ephesus on a number of occasions over the next year or two, and supported and helped Paul in his missionary labours there.



At about the same time, another citizen of Colossae had much the same experience as Philemon. His name was Epaphras. (Epaphras, like Philemon, was not Jewish.) Unfortunately the details are vague, but both of these men returned home to Colossae, now believers in Jesus, the Christ and the Lord. We know that Epaphras told 'the word of truth' to many of his fellow citizens of Colossae, the gospel that he had learned from Paul. A number of them understood the truth of the grace of God and also came to faith in Messiah Jesus (see Col. 1:3-8). Epaphras went on with the same news to the nearby towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea, with similar results. In Colossae the new believers in Christ Jesus began meeting together in Philemon's house. No doubt Philemon, from his time with Paul, was able to provide some kind of leadership and encouragement to the growing gathering of new believers meeting under his roof.

Our attention must now turn to one member of Philemon's household, a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus, whose name meant 'useful', did not live up to his name. He was not the best of slaves, and does not appear to have got on well with his master. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Onesimus was not caught up in the strange ideas his master had brought back from his recent trip to Ephesus. The odd gatherings of people from different backgrounds that had started to take place in the house must have been perplexing to him.

Again we wish we had more details, but we don't. For some reason Onesimus chose to run away from his master and, in the process, may have robbed him. For slaves to run away like this was not unusual, but it was dangerous. It seems that Onesimus fled far from Colossae (for understandable reasons) and found his way eventually to far-off Rome.

Some years had passed since Paul had been preaching about Christ Jesus in Ephesus. It was now about A.D. 60 or 61. Much had happened to Paul through these years, but by the time Onesimus came to Rome, by a remarkable providence, Paul, too, was in Rome. He was there, however, as a prisoner. He lived in his own rented quarters, with a Roman soldier guarding him (Acts 28:16). The book of Acts tells us that he 'lived there two whole years at his own

expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (Acts 28:30, 31). Once again we are tantalized with a lack of answers to many questions, but among 'all who came to him' was apparently Onesimus. What drew Onesimus to the friend of his former master, we can only guess. The fact is that Paul led Onesimus to Jesus. Onesimus became a believer! Furthermore, a deep affection grew between Paul and Onesimus, and he assisted Paul in various ways.

Some time passed. Then one day, there was another surprise for Paul. A familiar face from those years in Ephesus appeared among his visitors. It was Epaphras. Here the lack of detail is very frustrating. The circumstances of Epaphras' coming to Rome are unknown to us, as is the way in which he came into contact with Paul. However, it seems that he, like Paul, was (or became) a prisoner of the authorities, somehow in connection with his faith in Christ. What we know is that Epaphras shared with Paul news of the believers back in Colossae, and also in Hierapolis and Laodicea – news of their solid faith, their extravagant love, their confident hope, and their orderly lives (see Col. 1:7b, 8; 2:5).

Paul was, of course, overjoyed and full of thankfulness to God. Yet two things now needed to be done. First, he needed to make contact with this group of believers meeting in his old friend Philemon's house. He needed to ensure that they were firmly established in the faith, that they continued to walk in Christ Jesus the Lord. So he wrote a letter to confirm and strengthen and stabilize the faith of the Colossian believers. This letter has found its place in the New Testament, and is the concern of the first part of this commentary.

Second, what was to be done about Onesimus, the slave who had now come to faith in Christ Jesus, but who had run away from Paul's dear friend and brother in Christ, Philemon, in whose house the Colossian believers now met?

Paul carefully wrote another letter (the focus of the second part of this commentary). He sent the two letters off to Colossae by the hand of a long-time, trusted colleague,

Tychicus. With Tychicus he also sent (no doubt to everyone's surprise) Onesimus!

When Tychicus and Onesimus reached Colossae, word soon spread among the believers that a letter had arrived from Paul, the man who had taught Epaphras and Philemon the news about the Lord Jesus that they had all come to believe. They gathered (as I imagine the scene) in Philemon's house to hear the letter read, and Tychicus read the longer of the two letters he had carried from Rome.

I have tried to imagine what was happening with Onesimus. Did he join the gathering? Or was he kept out of sight for a while? We do not know. But when Tychicus finished reading the longer letter, I picture him saying, 'Brothers, I do have another letter from Paul that he wants you all to hear. It is brief, but important.' Tychicus then read the letter we know as 'Philemon'.

The account I have given includes a number of assumptions and other understandings that are not beyond doubt. Here I will briefly comment on the most important of these, but refer the reader to the more substantial commentaries for detailed discussions of the evidence.

1. The authorship of the letters

Since the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century questions have been raised about whether Paul really wrote Colossians. Arguments have been made about differences between the style, vocabulary and theology of this letter, when compared to other letters more certainly by Paul. These arguments are all indecisive, depending on substantial assumptions (based on a very small corpus of writings agreed to be by Paul) about what he could and could not have written.

Against these arguments stands the clear claim of the letter, not only in its opening words, but in many personal references to Paul and his circumstances through the document. Any suggestion that this evidence is not to be taken at face value calls for far more significant proofs than have been advanced.

The situation with Philemon is rather different. Few scholarly challenges have been mounted against the plain claim of that letter to have been authored by the apostle Paul.

In each case it is possible that the actual physical writing may have been done by another hand, under Paul's direction or dictation. This may be suggested by the way in which he draws attention to the points at which the words have in fact been written 'with my own hand' (Col. 4:18; cf. Philem. 19, but see our comments later on this verse). This, however, does not alter the fact that the 'I' of these letters is clearly presented as Paul himself.

2. The date and place from which they were written

These matters are related and the subject of considerable scholarly discussion. When he wrote both letters, he was imprisoned (Col. 4:10, 18; Philem. 1, 23). The letters, however, nowhere directly say where this was. There are two main possibilities. Paul may have been imprisoned during his three years in Ephesus, in about A.D. 52-55. The account of Paul's time in that city in the book of Acts does not mention a period of imprisonment, but it is possible. The book of Acts does, however, record Paul's two years of house arrest in Rome in about A.D. 60-62. Arguments in favour of the letters having been written during an imprisonment in Ephesus include the closer proximity of that city to Colossae, and the numerous movements of people indicated in the letters between where Paul was and Colossae. However (while certainty is not possible) I have assumed that the imprisonment from which these letters were written was the one described at the end of the book of Acts. This fits with all of the data that we have, and it is hardly ruled out by the difficulty of several trips by various persons between Rome and Colossae. Indeed the later date of the Roman imprisonment (compared to a hypothetical Ephesian incarceration) may better allow for the various things that appear to have happened between Paul's evangelistic work in Ephesus and the writing of these letters (see the reconstruction above).

3. Why was the longer letter to Colossae written?

The motivation for Paul writing his longer letter to the believers in Colossae has been the subject of a great deal of discussion and debate. Much of this has focused on attempts to discern a 'false teaching' present at Colossae and which Paul had presumably heard about from Epaphras. On this view, the letter was written 'to provide the resources that the Colossian Christians need to fend off some kind of false teaching to which they are exposed'.¹ The commentaries generally accept that there was such a teaching present in Colossae, and that Paul's letter was intended to address this problem.

The existence of what we may generally call 'false teaching' in many early Christian communities is beyond doubt. A number of Paul's letters have explicit references, not only to such teachings, but also to the false teachers themselves. One striking feature of the letter to the Colossians is that there is no direct reference to either false teachers or particular false teaching. This has led to a wide range of proposals concerning the kind of teaching that Paul may have been 'correcting' or at least responding to in this letter. The range of views is wide because there is such a lack of evidence to control speculations.

Another possibility is attractive. Perhaps Paul makes no direct and explicit reference to false teachers and false teaching simply because there was no such specific threat in Colossae, or at least none of which he had particular knowledge. If this were the case, Paul's letter would have the purpose summed up in the following words: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving' (Col. 2:6, 7).

In other words, Paul wrote to the believers of whom he had heard such a marvellous report from Epaphras, not because they were in some *particular* danger, but to confirm them in their 'good order and the firmness of [their] faith

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), p. 47.

in Christ' (Col. 2:5b). Certainly Paul was aware of the many challenges to this faith in the world of his day (as in ours!). Therefore he warns them of dangers. However, these are not to be interpreted as clues about a specific 'false teaching' in Colossae, but to be understood as indications of the *kind* of threat that believers could be expected to face.² This view has been adopted in the exposition that follows, and will be explained more fully at various points.

In this commentary I have tried to imagine us joining the believers gathered in Philemon's house to hear Tychicus read these two remarkable letters. I invite readers to join me in this imaginative and highly instructive exercise.

Study Questions

1. Read the account of Paul's time in Ephesus in Acts 19 (where, we understand, Philemon and Epaphras were among those who became believers in Christ Jesus the Lord).
 - a. Note the indications of the effectiveness of Paul's ministry among non-Jewish hearers. How was it, do you think, that such people came to believe in the Messiah of Israel?
 - b. What was it about Paul's message that aroused opposition?
2. Read about Paul's time in Rome in Acts 28:11-31 (where the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon were probably written).
 - a. What happened in Rome that emphasized, for Paul, the importance of the gospel going to the nations?
 - b. How does Luke summarize Paul's teaching to those who came to him during his two years in Rome (including, we understand, Onesimus).

² A view along these lines is argued persuasively by Morna D. Hooker, 'Were There False Teachers in Colossae?' in Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley, eds, *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of Francis Digby Moule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 315-31.



3. Read through the letters Paul wrote from Rome to the believers in Colossae and to Philemon (preferably at one sitting), noting everything we learn about:
 - a. Epaphras;
 - b. Tychicus;
 - c. Onesimus;
 - d. Philemon;
 - e. the circumstances of the recipients of the letters;
 - f. Paul's purpose in writing these letters.



Colossians

*As you received Christ Jesus the Lord,
so walk in him.*







A Letter from Paul (*Colossians 1:1, 2*)

There is much we do not know about the circumstances on the day in the early 60s of the first century A.D.¹ when two men, named Tychicus and Onesimus, arrived in the town of Colossae bearing two brief letters. Colossae, located about 100 miles inland (as the crow flies) from the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey, on the south bank of the Lycus River, was not a particularly important town at the time. We know little about the group in Colossae to whom the letter was addressed. Some of its members may have been ethnically Jewish, but most were not. From time to time they met, it would seem, in the house of one Philemon (see Philem. 2).

The only reason we know anything at all about this group of people is that the letters that arrived in Colossae that day are now to be found in the New Testament. They

¹ The precise date is far from certain, and depends among other things on whether the letter was written from Rome or Ephesus. The evidence for this question is also inconclusive (see the Introduction). These matters have very little bearing on our understanding of the letter, and so are not pursued here. I am assuming that the letter was written by Paul from prison in Rome in about AD 60. The case for this view is presented by Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), pp. 41-46. The case for the letter being written from an otherwise unrecorded imprisonment of Paul in Ephesus between 52 and 55 is argued in N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp. 34-39.



were written by someone very well known to us: the great apostle Paul.² Although Paul is one of the most influential figures of world history, his importance was far less obvious to his contemporaries. Indeed it is interesting to reflect on what the recipients of his letter that day in Colossae would have thought about him. Most of them had not seen him in the flesh (2:1), although some of them (including Philemon) had. Yet they had certainly heard of him. From the available evidence it seems that they had become Christian believers some time earlier as an indirect consequence of Paul's vigorous teaching about Jesus Christ in the coastal city of Ephesus, about 100 miles to the west (see Acts 19). Apparently among those who heard Paul then, probably in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), and were persuaded and repented and believed, was Epaphras, a citizen of Colossae (Col. 4:12). Such was his joy at his new faith in Jesus Christ that he returned to Colossae, and to the nearby cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea, himself proclaiming Jesus Christ (see 4:13). One of the letters now borne by Tychicus and Onesimus from Paul (see 4:7-9) was addressed to those in Colossae who had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the efforts of Epaphras (1:7).

Although we do not know exactly what happened that day, I like to imagine the small group of believers called together, presumably to Philemon's house, with the rather exciting news that a letter had arrived from Paul – the man who had taught Epaphras about Jesus.

In the first part of this volume we will be listening to the letter that was read to the gathering that day in Colossae. Our purpose is strikingly like theirs. We will be hearing a letter from a man *we* have never seen in the flesh, but who has played a significant role in *our* faith in Jesus.

In my imagination I see Tychicus standing before the hushed gathering, taking out the parchment, and beginning to read: 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers

² There is a debate among scholars about whether Paul the apostle was in fact the author of Colossians. However reasons for doubting the authenticity of the letter are not compelling. See the Introduction and Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), pp. xli-xliv.

in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father' (1:1, 2).³

We who have the great collection of Paul's letters in the New Testament are a little spoiled. The first few lines of a letter from Paul begin to sound the same. Today's readers of the New Testament have heard something very like these opening words many times. But for the listeners in Philemon's house that day this was new. True, they were familiar with the form. Letters typically began in this way.⁴ I doubt they thought twice about that. It was what was said that captured their attention.

In these opening words Paul summed up, in a way that the letter will more fully explore: (1) how they should think of Paul; (2) how they should think of themselves; and (3) how they should think of life.

1. How to think of Paul (1:1)

How do you think of Paul? After all these years, with the great volume of commentaries that have been written on Paul's letters, the vast tomes on Pauline theology found in theological libraries, as well as the smaller number of biographical works on this great man's life, we might well think that we are in a very different position from those who first heard these words that day in Colossae. While the obvious differences between now and then are considerable, I would like to emphasize the similarity of our situation. How *we* think of Paul is just as important as it was for those believers in Colossae.

a. Apostle of Christ Jesus

Paul introduced himself as **an apostle of Christ Jesus**. The message that Epaphras had earlier brought to Colossae was about *Jesus*. Jesus was a Jewish man, who had lived only a few decades earlier in a relatively remote corner of the Mediterranean world that was the Roman Empire.

³Except where otherwise indicated Bible passages are cited from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴The pattern was common in the opening of letters in Paul's world: name of sender, name of addressee, a greeting.

Through Epaphras' words those listening to this letter had come to believe something about *Jesus*. The message about Jesus claimed this title for him: Christ. *Christos* is Greek for the Hebrew title *Messiah*. This could only be understood by reference to the Jewish scriptures that we now know as the Old Testament. The promises and the hopes found in those scriptures were the basis for the message about Jesus. It was precisely because of *Christ Jesus* (Messiah Jesus, promised King Jesus) that Paul (himself a Jewish man, of course) had written this letter to the group of non-Jewish people (at least predominantly so) in Colossae, a city he had never visited (as far as we know).

These Colossians had already learned enough about Messiah Jesus to have their own lives radically changed. We will hear more about that in due course. For the present we notice that Paul introduced *himself* as one who had been sent ('apostle' comes from the Greek word meaning 'send') by the Messiah Jesus: Israel's King. Unless we see something of the peculiarity of this situation we will not appreciate the impact these opening words must have had on those who first heard them.

There are so many things to say about *Paul*. It has been plausibly argued that he was the greatest intellect of the ancient world, surpassing even Plato and others. Certainly his impact on world history has been immense, although largely unacknowledged. We could speak of his particular and profound insights, his extraordinary strategic missionary effort through the Mediterranean world, his capacity to address the needs of the churches he founded, and so on. Volumes have been written about Paul. Rightly so. We can study his brilliant understanding of so many things: the work of Christ, the justification of sinners, the church, eschatology, the Spirit. As Peter acknowledged, 'there are some things in [Paul's writings] that are hard to understand' (2 Pet. 3:16). There is certainly much to learn.

Nevertheless there is a fundamental question that can easily be overlooked. How do you think of Paul *himself*? As we listen to Paul, as we study his teaching, as we learn from him, it is very important for us to recognize that he is not simply another thinker or teacher, but

that he addresses us as Jesus Christ's representative and spokesman: 'apostle'. He speaks not just *about* Jesus Christ, but *for* and *on behalf of, from* Jesus Christ. No less is meant by the introduction, 'Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus'.

There was, therefore, something special happening as this letter began to be read that day in Colossae. I suspect everyone would have sensed it as these first words were heard. They had learned well of Christ Jesus from Epaphras. They had (as we will see) come to true and marvellous *faith* in Christ Jesus through Epaphras' faithful testimony. But now the apostle of Christ Jesus himself was addressing them.

This certainly means that Paul speaks with *authority*, the authority of Christ Jesus. It means he has every right to claim a hearing from anyone who claims to take Christ Jesus seriously. Our attitude to the apostle of Jesus will reflect something of our attitude to Jesus. Yet it is more than that. We ought not to think of Paul *only* in terms of his authority. He was sent by our Lord Jesus Christ. We ought to be as thrilled, delighted and eager to hear Paul as we would be to hear Jesus himself. Indeed his words come to us from Christ Jesus.

b. By the will of God

Furthermore Paul is this apostle **by the will of God**. It will become clear in the course of this letter that this is more than a general assertion of divine providence over things that happen. In that sense you may be a student, a husband, a mother, an electrician (or whatever) 'by the will of God'. That is an important perspective for us to have on all of the events of life. God's good and sovereign hand does rule over all things. The implications of that for our Christian lives are huge. In the course of this letter we will see that *the will of God* of which Paul speaks is both more specific and more magnificent than general providence.

In 1:9 we will hear that he prayed for the Colossian believers that they 'may be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will'. That does not simply mean filled with the knowledge of God's providence over everything that happens. *God's will*, Paul will go on to explain, involves

how all things were created for his beloved Son (1:16). *God's will* is that all his fullness dwell in him (1:19). *God's will* is to reconcile all things to Christ, making peace by the blood of his cross (1:20). In other words, *God's will* is his great purpose for the whole of creation, at the centre of which is Jesus Christ.

Do you think you are filled with the knowledge of God's will?

If you are (or if you want to be) then you need to understand that Paul is Christ Jesus' apostle *by the will of God*. The great plan of God, in other words, to reconcile all things through Jesus Christ, includes making Paul Christ's apostle. This will be explained more fully as the letter unfolds (see especially 1:23–2:5). As Christ Jesus' apostle, Paul was a servant of the gospel (1:23), he suffered (1:24), he was given by God the stewardship to make the word of God fully known (1:25). Knowing and understanding that Paul is Jesus Christ's apostle is part of knowing *the will of God*. Pay careful attention therefore: as we respond to what we hear from Paul, we are responding to the will of God.

All this casts an important light on what was happening on that day when the Colossian believers heard Tychicus begin to read this letter. As we begin to read Paul's letter it is important for us to recognize whose words these are.

c. Timothy our brother

Having introduced himself in such striking terms, Paul included another name with his own: **Timothy our brother**. We know that Timothy had been involved with Paul in the Ephesus ministry (Acts 19:22). Perhaps Epaphras had spoken of him. Certainly Timothy was a most trusted colleague of Paul; his right-hand man, we might say. Timothy was a *brother*, not only to Paul, but also to these Colossian believers (hence '*our brother*') even though, as with Paul, most of them had never have actually met him. The point of mentioning Timothy here will become clearer in a moment.

2. How to think of yourselves (1:2a)

The addressees of the letter are now identified: **To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.**

In many contexts Paul uses the expression ‘the saints’ to refer specifically to Jewish believers in Jesus.⁵ It is possible that ‘the saints and faithful brothers’ refers to *the Jewish* (‘the saints’) and *the non-Jewish* (the ‘faithful brothers’) believers in Colossae. The non-Jewish believers have been brought to join the Jewish believers when they came to trust in Messiah Jesus, Israel’s promised king. They became ‘faithful (that is, believing) *brothers*’. They now belonged to the new family of God’s people as fully as ‘brother Timothy’. A little later, Paul will put it like this: ‘[God] has qualified *you* [Gentiles] to share in the inheritance of *the saints* [the Jews] in light’ (1:12).

It is not clear that Paul means to make that distinction (between Jewish and non-Jewish believers) in verse 2. These words could be translated: ‘To the holy and believing brothers in Christ at Colossae.’ The original grammar slightly favours this and the following exposition understands the words in this way.⁶ Yet the weight of what Paul is saying here does not depend on resolving this small ambiguity, for either way he is speaking of the astonishing new identity of the Colossian believers. We must understand that this is identical to *our* identity today if we believe in Messiah Jesus as they did. Let us notice carefully five things that the Colossians were being encouraged to understand about themselves.

a. Holy

First, Paul calls them ‘holy’.⁷ That is an astonishing thing for a Jew to say of non-Jews. *Israel* was God’s *holy* people (Exod. 19:6). Within Israel the Levitical priests were the *holy* ones (Exod. 28:2). The ‘*holy* ones of the most high’ in Daniel’s famous vision were those of *Israel*

⁵ D.W.B. Robinson, ‘Who were “The Saints”?’ Chapter 10 in Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson, eds, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works, Volume 1: Assembling God’s People* (Camperdown, N.S.W.: Australian Church Record, 2008), pp. 160-169; originally published in *Reformed Theological Review* 22/2(1963): 45-53.

⁶ In the Greek one definite article (‘the’) governs the whole expression suggesting that one group of people is on view.

⁷ The word translated ‘saints’ is a plural of the adjective meaning ‘holy’.

who would rule the world (Dan. 7:22). Yet Paul calls this gathering of mainly non-Jewish Colossians 'holy'. It is not a description of their character or conduct. They are *holy* in the sense that Israel was *holy*: set apart by God and for God.

It is an astonishing privilege to be able to say that this is true of Christian believers today. The arrogance of the claim would be breathtaking were it not all of grace: *we* are *God's holy ones*. Is that how you see yourself, and your fellow believers? Later in the letter we will hear Paul draw out some of the consequences of this wonder: 'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, *holy* and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ...' (3:12).

b. Believing

Second, Paul calls them 'believing'. If that is the sense (rather than 'faithful') it demolishes any misunderstanding that 'holy' could be an arrogant claim. For 'believing' is not something you can boast about. He does not say 'circumcised', or 'baptized', but 'believing' or 'trusting'. Believing here means *dependence on another* (namely, Christ Jesus, as we will hear in 1:4). Such faith is not *impressive*, but it is all-important. In a few lines Paul will be saying how he *thinks God* because he had heard of the Colossians' *faith* in Christ Jesus (1:3, 4). A little later, he will underline the supreme importance of continuing in this trusting dependence (1:23). It is a theme that we will hear much more of as this letter unfolds (see 2:6, 7).

c. Brothers

Third, Paul calls these Colossian Gentiles he had never met 'brothers'. As truly as Timothy, Paul's close companion and trusted co-worker, who was with him as he penned this letter (Timothy may have been the scribe who took down the apostle's words, see 4:18), was a brother (1:1), so were they. Christ Jesus, you see, was drawing together a new family in which people – as different as Greek and Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free (3:11) – love one another as brothers (3:14).

We have an awkward language problem here that I doubt we can solve. 'Brothers' in this context, of course,

embraces ‘brothers and sisters’.⁸ The problem is that ‘brothers and sisters’ categorizes us into two groups at the very point where the biblical language wants us to see one group. We are to understand that we believers are *all* ‘brothers’.⁹

d. In Christ

The fourth reality Paul points to is the Colossians’ life ‘in Christ’. He will say later ‘your life is hidden *with Christ* in God’ (3:3). The intimate, personal relationship they have come into with Christ Jesus accounts for everything that has been said so far. ‘In Christ’ they are the holy ones. ‘In Christ’ their faith rests. ‘In Christ’ they are brothers. These things, in other words, are only real because of Christ, and because of their relationship to him. We will hear more about this wonder in due course.

e. In Colossae

The fifth thing Paul says here about the Colossian believers is simply that they are ‘at [literally “in”] Colossae’. The wonderful theological assertions that have been made (holy, believing, brothers, in Christ) apply to a particular group of real people in a specific location in this world. They are not abstract ideas. They are as real as the people gathered in Philemon’s house in Colossae, listening to this letter being read.

3. How to think of life (1:2b)

The identification of the sender and the recipients of the letter is followed by a greeting: **Grace to you and peace from God our Father**. This is what I want you all to know in life, Paul seems to say: Grace and peace from God our Father.

a. Grace

Grace is what characterized the message about Christ Jesus that Epaphras had brought to Colossae some time earlier.

⁸ Some English versions make this explicit by rendering the Greek word as ‘brothers and sisters’ (so NRSV and TNIV).

⁹ The only way to capture this in contemporary English is with the rather uncommon word ‘siblings’. I doubt that it will catch on as a translation!

Paul describes that day as ‘the day you ... understood the *grace* of God in truth’ (1:6). He will conclude this letter with the simple powerful words, ‘*Grace* be with you’ (4:18).

Of all the forces and influences that surround you, does grace, the grace from God our Father, have its dominant place? Soon we will hear something of the transforming power of this divine kindness in the lives of those touched by it (see 1:3-14).

b. Peace

Peace here is not simply peace of mind, but the peace that the grace of God has established: the peace that has been made by the blood of Christ’s cross (see 1:20). Later in the letter Paul will fill out this brief word: ‘And let the peace of Christ *rule in your hearts*, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful’ (3:15).

‘Grace and peace to you from God our Father’ is what we know if we are ‘in Christ Jesus’.

Conclusion

It would have been something, wouldn’t it, to have been in Philemon’s house in Colossae on the day Tychicus began to read Paul’s letter?

In every way that matters, it is just as important for us today to hear these words from Christ’s apostle. There is no good reason why their impact on us should be different from their impact on them. Think carefully, in the light of these opening words, about your own attitude to Christ’s apostle Paul, your understanding of yourself as a Christian believer, and what matters to you in life.

Study Questions

1. What attitudes have you encountered, among contemporary Christians, towards Paul? Why is what we think about Paul important?
2. What do we learn about God’s ‘will’ from the three mentions of it in this letter (1:1, 9; 4:12)?



3. Consider what it means to you to be a Christian. How would you describe your relationship to Jesus Christ? How does this compare to Paul's view that the Christians in Colossae are 'in Christ' and therefore
 - a. holy,
 - b. believing, and
 - c. brothers?

4. How do Christians experience
 - a. grace,
 - b. peace, and
 - c. God as 'our Father'?





2

‘We always thank God’ (*Colossians 1:3-8*)

It is altogether too easy, even for Christian believers, to underestimate the significance of Christian faith. Indeed formidable pressures to do so surround us. There are the direct attacks on Christian faith from the angry atheists of our time, as well as the prevailing mood of secularism in the media and institutions of our society, demanding that ‘religion’ stay where it belongs, on the margins and out of the public discourse. There is the relatively recent distortion of the concept of tolerance, which pretends (and, of course, it can only ever be a pretence) to give equal honour to every belief and culture. There is also the close familiarity and contact that we now have with so many different, sincerely held, religious beliefs. Perhaps we should add the overwhelming problems of today’s world, in the face of which *Christian faith* can seem insignificant, impotent and unimportant.

From these and many other directions there is pressure on Christian people to keep their Christian faith ‘in its place’. This may mean to keep it to yourself, or to recognize that it is, after all, only a ‘belief’, or to acknowledge the irrelevance of your faith to the vast majority of people today, whatever it might mean to you personally.

I am sure you could expand this sketch of the pressures around us *to underestimate the significance of Christian faith*.



The form these pressures take may be new, but such powerful pressures are as old as Christian faith itself.

We have begun to listen to the remarkable letter that was brought from Rome to Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus, and read out (as I imagine it happened) to a small gathering of relatively new Christian believers which met that day in the house of one of their number named Philemon.

The letter is remarkable in several respects. Some of them are hard for us to appreciate, since we are so far from the historical situation, and this letter has become so well known because it is now included in the pages of the Bible. But it is worth the effort to put ourselves in the place of those Colossians that day, gathered in Philemon's home to hear this letter from a Jewish man whom most of them had never met, who was in prison in Rome.¹ He was in prison very largely because he was out of favour with the Jewish authorities. The rather complicated story is told in Acts 21–28. The Colossians listening to Paul's letter were not Jewish (most of them at least), but Paul wrote to them about their faith in the one he called Christ (Messiah) Jesus. Every aspect of this situation was strange!

After the greetings in the first few lines of the letter (which, as we have seen, hint at the astonishing situation that occasioned this letter from the Jewish prisoner of the Roman authorities to this group of Gentiles in the distant town of Colossae), and before the actual purpose of the letter becomes clear (which does not really happen until 2:6), there is a long section that, in effect, presents the astonishing *significance* of what had happened: the significance of their faith in Christ Jesus. That, it seems to me, is the purpose of this introductory section of the letter (1:3– 2:5).

It is very important to notice that Paul chose to take them into that subject by telling them about his prayers. Paul's account of his prayers (1:3-14) has the effect of showing us the astonishing significance of Christian faith. It begins:

¹ Paul was, in fact, under house arrest (see Acts 28:16, 30), if we are correct in our assumptions about when he wrote to the Colossians (see the Introduction). Paul describes his circumstances as 'my chains' (Col. 4:18).

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, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 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 and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit (1:3-8).

1. Giving thanks to God (1:3)

We always thank God. Thankfulness to God is a distinctive characteristic of the Christian life. In the course of this letter the subject will be touched on repeatedly. In 1:12 we will hear Paul pray for the recipients of this letter that *they* will be ‘giving thanks to the Father’, echoing his own thanks expressed here in verse 3. In 2:7 we will hear him exhort his Colossian readers to ‘abound in thanksgiving’. A little later in 3:15 he will say simply, ‘And be thankful’. He will underline those simple words by speaking of ‘thankfulness in your hearts to God’ in 3:16, and then ‘giving thanks to God the Father’ in 3:17. In 4:2, as he urges them to continue in watchful prayer, he cannot help adding ‘with thanksgiving’.

Indeed when, on another occasion, Paul set out to describe the plight of the human race from the perspective of the gospel he was proclaiming, he said: ‘they did not honour [God] as God or *give thanks* to him’ (Rom. 1:21). That is the expression of the futility of the human mind, the dark foolishness of the human heart: to fail to *give thanks* to God our maker.

Therefore it would be misleading to simply hear Paul’s expression of his own thanksgiving to God at the beginning of this letter as no more than a formality, as though Paul was simply following the conventions of contemporary letter writing. This is thankfulness of a particular character: an expression of the very

change that had taken place in the lives of this group of Colossians. They were now to be people who give thanks to God the Father (1:12). Here Paul expresses his (and Timothy's) thankfulness to God.

Any reader of Paul's letter should reflect on whether he or she shares with Paul this experience of thankfulness to God. Is it a reality (more than a formality) in your life?

What produces this thankfulness to God that should characterize the Christian life? Notice that what we hear from Paul in verse 3 is not of a *general* thankfulness to God for good health, family, friends and food. Indeed his *situation* at this time gave him plenty he could be reasonably *complaining* about. He was incarcerated, probably in Rome. A death sentence was a distinct possibility. We gather from the way he refers to his circumstances later in the letter that his Colossian hearers knew about them (see 4:18). Paul's thankfulness does not come simply from how well things were going for him!

The thankfulness that marks the Christian life (about which we will be hearing so much in this letter) is always much more than a response to happy days. So again I wonder how familiar we are with the kind of thankfulness expressed by Paul here. Perhaps the best test of this is how much we know of this thankfulness when our circumstances in life are not as happy as we might like.

The first striking thing about Paul's words of thankfulness in verse 3 is his description of the God he thanks: **the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. If we were not so familiar with such words, perhaps we would notice how remarkable they are. This Jewish monotheist, who knew God was the Father of *Israel*, and that *Israel* was his son (Exod. 4:22; Hosea 11:1), speaks of God as the Father of *Jesus Christ*, whom he also calls 'our Lord'! These expressions are all pointers to the message that Paul had been taking around the Mediterranean world. The message included the following truths about Jesus, the Jewish man who had lived, died and risen from the dead about 30 years earlier in Jerusalem, some 600 miles to the south-east of Colossae:

- (1) He was *the Christ*, that is, the long-promised Messiah of Israel;
- (2) He was *the Lord*, that is, the ruler of the world; and
- (3) He was the Son of God, and that God is therefore called his *Father*.

We could say that one of the most astonishing early consequences of the Christian message was this man, Paul, expressing this thankfulness to the God he now calls 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

The second thing to notice about Paul's thankfulness in verse 3 is that it is not about himself or his circumstances at all. It is about 'you' – you Colossians. The very Jewish Paul says 'we always thank God ... **when we pray for you**' – you very gentile Colossians. This is remarkable. In the history of the world, in particular the history of Israel, can you think of an occasion prior to this when a Jewish man spoke like this? This is not how David spoke of the Gentiles ('the nations'²) in some of the Psalms (see Ps. 2:1; 9:5, 15, 17, 19, 20). It is not how Isaiah (Isa. 17:13), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:10), or Ezekiel (Ezek. 28:7) spoke. This expression of *thankfulness* from Paul concerning these gentile Colossians is itself one of those wonders of history that calls for an explanation. What had happened to cause this Jewish man to write these words to the group that gathered to hear them in Philemon's house on the day this letter was first read?

2. What had happened? (1:4-5a)

The immediate cause of Paul's thanksgiving to God was something that had happened in the lives of these Gentiles.

Modern Christians can easily miss the fact that a major interest for first-century Christianity, reflected in much of the New Testament, was the relationship between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the nations. The issue is addressed explicitly often enough in the New Testament (e.g.

²It is important to be aware that the Greek term *ethne*, while often translated 'Gentiles' (e.g. Col. 1:27) is the normal word for 'nations' (e.g. Rom. 4:18). In some cases where 'Gentiles' occurs in English Bibles 'nations' may be a preferable translation.

Rom. 9–11; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22). It is in the air, so to speak, almost everywhere in the New Testament.

This is hardly surprising, if we keep in mind the story that the whole Bible tells. Very early in that story we hear of the promise God made to Abraham that God would bless, not only Abraham's descendants, but through them also 'all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12:1-3). We then find that the Bible's climax (the New Testament) involves profoundly the matter of the blessing promised to Abraham reaching beyond Israel (Abraham's descendants) to the nations (or Gentiles). (See, for example, Gal. 3:7-9.)

It is also important to understand this in the light of the message of the Old Testament prophets, who reiterated the promise to Abraham in fresh terms appropriate to their historical context. If Israel's Messiah has now come, and we remember the message of, say, Isaiah, we will be asking: How will *the nations* come to 'the mountain of the house of the LORD' (Isa. 2:2)? How will God's servant bring forth justice to *the nations* (Isa. 42:1), and be a light for *the nations* (Isa. 42:6; 49:6)? How will *the nations* come to the light (Isa. 60:3)? How will the wealth of *the nations* come to Israel (Isa. 60:5, 11; 61:6)?

When Paul heard about what had happened to this group of Colossian Gentiles who had become believers, he understood that God's ancient promises concerning *the nations* were being realized. That is why he gave thanks!

a. Faith

Since we heard of your faith in Christ [Messiah] Jesus. It was wonderful enough for Paul and other *Jewish* believers to have recognized Israel's Messiah. That was no small thing, particularly in Paul's case (see his own reflection on this in 1 Timothy 1:12-15). But for these *Gentiles* (from 'the nations') to have been brought into the sphere of influence of Messiah Jesus, and there not to be hostile or afraid, but to believe, to trust, to have confidence – that was an *extraordinary* wonder! That is why we thank God, says Paul.

b. Love

... and of the love that you have for all the saints. We noticed previously that for Paul 'the saints' (or 'the

holy ones') is often a reference specifically to Jewish believers in Jesus, the true 'descendants of Abraham'. This is probably the sense here. What he heard was that these Gentiles in Colossae who had come to faith in Messiah Jesus now had a love for those who were the first believers in Jesus, without whom, humanly speaking, they would never have heard of Jesus and to whom they have now been joined as God's people. What a wonder, that between these Gentiles and these Jews there should now be *love*! That is why we thank God, says Paul.

c. Hope

... **because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.** A little later we will hear more about this 'hope'. It is the privilege of these Gentiles to share in the inheritance of 'the saints' (see 1:12, 22; 3:4). That is why we thank God, says Paul.

The truly thrilling thing as far as we are concerned is that the experience of these Colossians described here by Paul is the experience of Christian people today. We may not be as aware as we should of the Jewish roots of our faith, but we have certainly come under the influence of Messiah Jesus, and in doing so we have come to *faith* in him, to a *love* that crosses boundaries, and to a *hope* that is beyond this world. In other words, what caused Paul's remarkable thanksgiving to God is a reality known to Christian believers today.

We will have the opportunity to think further about this faith and love, caused by hope, as these three themes reappear later in the letter. Here we will briefly notice *how* this wonder had happened in Colossae and *when* it had happened.

3. How had it happened? (1:5b-6a)

Of this [hope] you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you. The hope that gave rise to their love for all the saints and their faith in Christ Jesus came to them in a message. It was, of course, the very message that Paul himself had been proclaiming

throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul's word for this message ('gospel' or 'good news') again provides a glimpse of Paul's understanding of what was happening. It was Isaiah who had used this vocabulary when he promised a day when *good news* would be proclaimed:

How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of him who brings good news,
 who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
 who publishes salvation,
 who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'.
 (Isa. 52:7; cf. 40:9; 41:27; 60:6; 61:1).

The message that had now come to Colossae and changed the lives of these Gentiles was the good news, the gospel, of which Isaiah had spoken!

Furthermore, Paul calls this gospel (literally) 'the word of the truth'. Here we should not overlook the verbal character. The gospel came (and comes) to people in words. It must be spoken (cf. Rom. 10:14). They are, of course, not just any words, but the words that tell us 'the truth' – the truth about God and his purposes.

... as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing – as it also does among you. That way of putting it seems to reflect God's wonderful purpose from the beginning of creation. Then God said to mankind, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Gen. 1:28). God's promise to Abraham and the patriarchs was expressed in similar terms (see Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; Exod. 1:7) which indicated that through Abraham's descendants God would bring his good creation purpose to pass: they would, so to speak, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and thus bring blessing to the nations of the world. The prophets also spoke in language like this, echoing the promise to Abraham, and the word of blessing in Genesis 1:28 (see Jer. 33:22).

It does seem that Paul understood that God's purpose to bless the whole world and the human race he had created, the nations of the world, was now being realized as the

gospel was *being fruitful* and *growing* there in Colossae and in the whole world.

'In the whole world' may seem to us a rather over-stated claim for the spread of the gospel at this time (cf. 1:23!). Yet the utter wonder that people were being brought into the kingdom of Jesus Christ (1:13), without ethnic distinctions (3:11) or geographical restriction, was evidenced by what had happened when the gospel had come to Colossae.

4. When had it happened? (1:6b-8)

... since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth ... Do not overlook the fact that the Colossians had benefited from the gospel by *hearing* and *understanding*. It would be wrong to reduce Christian experience to the intellectual grasping of ideas, but it would be equally wrong to ignore the fundamental place of *hearing* the word of the truth and *understanding* it. This can never be a merely intellectual experience, for what is understood is 'the grace of God'. The message about Jesus Christ is the truth about God's grace.

... just as you learned it from Epaphras. The wonder of the gospel bearing fruit there in Colossae had come about by the faithful Epaphras who had told his fellow Colossians the news he had heard and learned, almost certainly from Paul, probably when Paul had been in Ephesus.

Paul's affection for Epaphras and his confidence in him are conveyed in the warm designation **our beloved fellow servant**. Epaphras shared with Paul the status of a slave (as the word can be translated) of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1).

It is most important to underline the faithfulness of Epaphras. This implies Paul's full confidence in the gospel Epaphras had brought to Colossae. **He is a faithful minister [or, servant³] of Christ on your [possibly, our⁴] behalf ...** If

³ Two different Greek words are used in verse 7, translated in the ESV by 'servant' and 'minister'. However both are close in meaning and refer to one who renders service.

⁴ As the ESV footnote indicates, some Greek manuscripts have 'on your behalf', while others have 'on our behalf'.

the reading should be 'on your behalf' Paul is emphasizing that the Colossians were the beneficiaries of the labours of Epaphras (see 4:12). If Paul wrote 'on our behalf' he was underlining that Epaphras bringing the gospel to Colossae was an extension, so to speak, of Paul's own gospel work.

Epaphras had now brought news to Paul in his Roman prison of what had happened when he brought the gospel to Colossae. He **has made known to us your love in the Spirit**. Epaphras told Paul of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these Colossians: their love. It was, as Paul has said in verse 4, 'for all the saints'.

Conclusion

Epaphras did what countless 'faithful ministers (servants) of Christ' have done since that day. The wonder that occurred in Colossae continues to happen as people in every place 'understand the grace of God in truth'. Who did for *you* what Epaphras did for the Colossians? For whom have you been an Epaphras? Can you therefore share in Paul's thrilled thankfulness to God?

Study Questions

1. Why is thanking God important for Christians? How can we learn to be thankful, as Paul was thankful? What might cause us to be less thankful than we ought?
2. Consider how knowing God as 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' is the distinctive experience of Christianity.
3. How is Christian hope the cause of faith and love (see '*because of the hope*' in v. 5)?
4. Make a note of everything that we learn about 'the gospel' from Colossians 1:3-8. Are all these things true of the gospel as you have heard it?
5. What do we know about the Christian experience of the believers in Colossae from Colossians 1:3-8?



In your own words describe how your experience is like and/or unlike theirs.

6. How does Paul's view of *the gospel* shape his attitude towards *the nations*? How should our view of the gospel affect our attitude to so-called missionary work?
7. What is the importance of the relationship between Jewish and gentile Christians today?