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# Colossians 1:1–8



**P**AUL, AN APOSTLE of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,  
<sup>2</sup>To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—<sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. <sup>7</sup>You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup>and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

## Original Meaning

THE FIRST TWO sections of Paul's letter to the Colossians consist of his customary salutation (1:1–2) and the prayer of thanksgiving that he offers to God on behalf of the believers in the churches (1:3–23). These sections help set the agenda for the rest of the letter.

### The Salutation (1:1–2)

PAUL BEGINS HIS salutation identifying himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." He does not write as a private interested party but as Christ's apostle who speaks with authority. By identifying himself in this way Paul is not trying to establish his badge of rank or to put his readers under his thumb. His authority is not increased by the use of the title *apostle*, just as it is not reduced when he omits it (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) or substitutes "servant" (Phil. 1:1) or "prisoner" (Philem. 1). Being an apostle is simply what he is.

We therefore should not assume, as some do, that when Paul refers to himself as an apostle, he is defending his calling against bitter opposition.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone to whom Paul wrote was suspicious of his eligibility or adequacy as an apostle, and he was not always on the defensive. He praises the Colossians as a loving, supportive community, not a bickering, backbiting, spiteful group (1:8; Philem. 5). Though many in the Colossian church have not met Paul personally, the letter gives the impression that they esteemed both him and his coworker Epaphras, their evangelist.<sup>2</sup> Paul writes to them because they already accept his authority, which derives from the gospel he has been called to preach, a gospel they have learned from Epaphras.

When Paul says that his calling as an apostle came “by the will of God,” it reflects his basic conviction that Christ called and empowered him to carry on a divine task that was entrusted to only a few. In the Old Testament, God appeared to prophets and sent them forth to proclaim the word. In Paul’s case, Christ appeared to him and sent him out to proclaim a particular gospel (Gal. 1:12, 16; 1 Cor. 15:8–10). He did not decide to go into the apostolic ministry but understood himself to have been set apart by God from his mother’s womb to carry the gospel to the nations (Gal. 1:15–16).<sup>3</sup> His authority was unique since it derived directly from Christ, but Paul did not see himself as set apart for high office from which he could rule the roost and issue divine directives (see 1 Cor. 4:9). God assigned him a task, not a status.

As Christ’s apostle Paul is not tied to any one congregation but is obligated to all, particularly the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:7; Eph. 3:1–2). The world is his mission field. All he does as Christ’s apostle involves Christ’s church. Therefore, his charge to preach the gospel and build up the body of Christ by helping believers with their struggles in obedience leads him to intervene in the Colossian controversy.

Paul includes Timothy, “our brother,” as a cosender of the letter.<sup>4</sup> Timothy appears as the cosender in five other letters: 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and

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1. See Schweizer, *Colossians*, 28. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, 34, makes the statement without a shred of evidence: “While he has not yet met with his Colossian readers, no doubt there is opposition to his ministry and teaching among them.” Paul is not trying to defend his apostleship to the Colossians because in 1:23 he simply designates himself as a “servant” (*diakonos*) of the gospel (like Epaphras, 1:7). He identifies himself as a “fellow servant” with others (1:7; 4:7). A later copyist apparently did not think Paul’s status as a mere servant grand enough; the text of  $\mathfrak{N}^*$  reads “preacher and apostle” (*kerux kai apostolos*) and reflects a later preoccupation with titles and authority.

2. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 16.

3. That imagery echoes the calling of prophets in the Old Testament (see Isa. 49:1; Jer. 1:5).

4. Other persons Paul designates as “brothers” are Quartus (Rom. 16:23), Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1), and Apollos (1 Cor. 16:12). See also 2 Cor. 8:18; 9:3, 5; 12:18.

Philemon, and with Silvanus in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. According to Acts 16:1–2, Paul met this young man during his ministry in Derbe or Lystra. Because Timothy's mother was Jewish, Paul made his status as a Jew official by circumcising him (Acts 16:3). Timothy joined Paul on his missionary travels, and Paul extolled him as a devoted son (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22) and trusted him as a faithful emissary, sending him to various churches to help assuage anxious converts or to put out fires of conflict (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:2, 6). Although Timothy was not an apostle, Paul affirms him as one who carries on the same work (1 Cor. 16:10) and the same preaching task (2 Cor. 1:19).

We have no record of Timothy's direct connection to the Colossians. Possibly his name appears in the salutation because he composed the letter from Paul's dictation or at his direction. His inclusion also makes clear that what follows is not Paul's peculiar opinion. Paul is no maverick and does not stand alone on these issues. He works with a team of ministers, and this letter reflects the consensus of those who are with him (see 4:10–14).

Paul greets the church as "holy and faithful brothers in Christ."<sup>5</sup> Holiness has to do with being set apart from the world unto God and does not imply that these believers belong to some exalted echelon of saints. As God has made Paul his own as Christ's apostle, so God has made the Colossians as his covenant people in Colosse. The word "holy" (or "saints") was applied to Israel in the Old Testament, and Paul intentionally includes Gentile Christians under this category.<sup>6</sup> It means that they also belong to the eschatological people for whom all the promises apply.

Paul customarily identifies the recipients of his letters as "saints," but he does not usually address them as "faithful."<sup>7</sup> This expression most likely refers to their steadfastness under pressure. Some commentators take it to mean exactly the opposite of what it says. They suggest that Paul subtly hauls over the coals those in the church who have been unfaithful by forsaking the true gospel for the so-called "philosophy."<sup>8</sup> This reading assumes that Paul is

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5. The NIV takes the word "holy" as an adjective. It could also be rendered as a substantive, "saints" (NRSV). Paul uses the word as a substantive in addressing the churches in his letters to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Ephesians, and it has this meaning in 1:4. Since one definite article governs both "holy" and "faithful," it is likely that he intends an adjectival meaning; but it could be a careless usage that simply omits the article.

6. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 48.

7. The exception is Eph. 1:1.

8. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 130, suggests that Paul called them faithful in hopes of warding off any more unfaithfulness. He contends that by calling them faithful, Paul "obliquely hints at the defection" that has already occurred among some whose allegiance has been shaken (132). Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, 38, concurs with this view: "In stressing *faithful brothers*, Paul may very well have the audience's religious confusion in mind."

being disingenuous. His praise becomes a backhanded compliment with a warning: "I am not fully convinced that you are faithful, so you better watch out." Commentators have unduly read the threat from the "philosophy" into every phrase of Colossians. But Paul's statements do not all contain some hidden nuance. If the Colossians were not faithful or were verging on abandoning their faith, Paul is perfectly capable of warning them forthrightly. He does not use "faithful" in Ephesians 1:1 in a reproving way, nor does it have any hidden meaning when he uses it to describe his coworkers Epaphras, Tychicus, and Onesimus (Col. 1:7; 4:7, 9; see also Eph. 6:21).

We should therefore accept the plain meaning of the text: The Colossians are genuinely "faithful," which is the reason for his thanksgiving. Their faith is not teetering on the brink of extinction, trapped in error, or at the mercy of those hawking false teachings. They are holding fast to the head (2:19), and Paul only warns them about others who do not. Their faith is not perfected, however, and Paul wants to buttress it further and revitalize their growth. In this greeting, he establishes their common commitments so that he can move on to instruct and warn them. His goal is to ensure that they remain securely established in their faith (1:23) and growing in their knowledge (1:10).

The NIV chooses not to retain the parallelism in the Greek text by translating 1:2, "To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse." Literally, the Greek reads: "in Colosse . . . in Christ." The parallelism implies that the recipients may reside in Colosse, but more importantly they live in the sphere of Christ. "In Christ" and related phrases appear frequently in Paul's writings, and the concept is central to his understanding of our salvation.

(1) To be in Christ means to be incorporated in him so that he encompasses the entire life of the believer. The recipients may be Colossians, but the only identity that matters to God is that they are Christians. That means that Christ determines everything in their lives. Paul will later make clear in the letter that his death becomes their death, his burial their burial, his resurrection their resurrection, his victory their victory (2:6–23).

(2) To be in Christ means that the Colossians are exclusively joined to him and to no other. One cannot be "in Isis," "in Artemis," or in any other god or goddess and also be in Christ.

(3) To be in Christ means that he determines the behavior of believers. One cannot be "in the world" or "into magic or drugs," for example, and be "in Christ." Elsewhere Paul uses this basic idea to denounce immorality: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!" (1 Cor. 6:15).

(4) To be in Christ means that believers are inseparably joined to him. Paul expresses this powerfully in Romans 8:38–39: "Neither death nor life, nei-

ther angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(5) To be in Christ means that believers are also joined to a new family where the dividing lines that separate and categorize persons have been erased (see Rom. 12:5). Their mutual faith in Christ has created a spiritual kinship that supersedes blood ties.

Being in Christ gives Christians their true identity beyond their race, nationality, or clan. Paul therefore calls the Colossians "brothers." Jews addressed fellow Jews as brothers (Acts 2:29, 37; 3:17; 7:2, 26; 13:15; Rom. 9:3), but for a devout Jew to call Gentiles brothers, many of whom he has never met, reveals the radical consequences of a gospel that swept away all racial prejudices isolating people from one another (see Col. 3:11; cf. Gal. 3:28; Philem. 16).

As many have noted, the customary greeting of letters, *chairein* ("greetings," Acts 15:23; 23:26; James 1:1), is transformed into a promise of "grace" (*charis*). The letter itself is intended to be a means of grace, and the word reappears in the concluding wish in Colossians 4:18. "Peace" was the traditional greeting in Hebrew (*šalom*).<sup>9</sup> The peace Paul has in view is peace that only God's salvation brings—harmony, wholeness, and serenity. These are things that human force or a balance of terror cannot establish. Paul shows an ardent concern that the effects of this peace from God be obvious in the life of Christian communities.<sup>10</sup> "Peace" becomes a key component of his moral exhortation and appears in his appeal to the Colossians in 3:15.<sup>11</sup>

Paul confesses that both grace and peace come "from God our Father." The thanksgiving that follows is based on all that God has done and will continue to do (1:7, 12–13). The image of father conveyed power, authority, and loving care. The nearness and love of God as Father was something particularly esteemed by Christians, and Paul usually identifies God as the Father of Jesus Christ, as he does in 1:3.<sup>12</sup> For Christians, God is our Father because he is the

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9. Peace appears in all the greetings of letters attributed to Paul (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 4) and in many of his closing benedictions (Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 6:23; Col. 1:2; 2 Thess. 3:16; see Phil. 4:9).

10. Buttrick, "Philemon," 563, comments: "The grace is God's free unmerited favor to sinful men through the forgiving Cross and the enabling resurrection of his Son, and the peace is the consequent reconciliation of men with God."

11. See Rom. 12:18; 14:17, 19; 1 Cor. 7:15; 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Tim. 2:22; see also Rom. 3:17; 8:6; Eph. 2:14–17; Col. 1:20.

12. See Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; 11:31; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 6:23; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Philem. 3. It may well be that Paul omits mention of Jesus Christ here because he wants to affirm his monotheism prior to the Christological hymn.

Father of Jesus Christ, to whom we belong.<sup>13</sup> The Father is not an impenetrable and invisible God but one who makes himself known through his Son (see Matt. 11:27). Both Father and Son can be known even by those disdained as “babes” by the so-called “wise and learned” (Matt. 11:25).

### **The Structure of the Thanksgiving (1:3–23)**

PAUL ADOPTED THE custom in ancient letter writing of offering a prayer of thanks to the gods and transformed this convention by expanding it and filling it with Christian meaning. His thanksgiving is not some perfunctory nod to various divinities for blessings received and misfortunes averted. It is a prayer to be read aloud in Christian worship and thereby becomes a witness of Christian faith and a means of Christian instruction. Paul never trots out some stock, all-purpose prayer but carefully tailors it to the situation of the church he is addressing. He sensitively weaves together the church’s progress in the faith, their needs, and his hopes for them into a beautiful tapestry of praise and thanks to God.<sup>14</sup> One should not ignore the thanksgiving proems in Paul’s letters as unimportant devotional meditations unrelated to the key themes of the letter. They lay the groundwork for what follows in the letter, previewing its major themes and setting the tone of the letter.

The thanksgiving section in Colossians extends from 1:3 through 1:23 and includes the Christological prose hymn in 1:15–20. The key ideas of “faith,” “hope,” and “hearing” in the opening (1:4–6) are repeated in 1:23 to form an inclusio—a rhetorical device in which the beginning of a unit is repeated in its ending. The thanksgiving divides into two parts, 1:3–8 and 1:9–23. The first part focuses on the effects of the gospel in Colosse and the whole world, the second on Paul’s intercession for the Colossians and his celebration of the salvation accomplished by Christ.

In 1:3–5, Paul tells the Colossians that he always thanks God for them because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for all the saints. The focus on the community suddenly shifts in 1:6 to the whole world as he exults over the universal effects of the gospel. In 1:7–8 he returns to how the gospel took root in Colosse through Epaphras’s ministry. This first section of the thanksgiving forms a chiasm, a literary pattern in which two or more terms, phrases, or ideas are stated and then repeated in reverse order (ab ba):

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13. Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 168.

14. Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, 165, insightfully observes that when Paul begins with a thanksgiving, he can inform the readers how he is pleased with them “yet protect them from smugness by a reminder that their Christian faith and life are the product of God’s unmerited grace.”

- A v. 4: We have heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of *the love* you have for all the saints
- B v. 5: the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and that you have already *heard* about in the word of *truth*, the gospel
- C v. 6a: that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing,
- B' v. 6b: just as it has been doing among you since the day you *heard* it and understood God's grace in all its *truth*.
- A' vv. 7–8: You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a *faithful minister of Christ* on our behalf, and who also told us of *your love* in the Spirit.

From this structure we see that the heart of the first part of the prayer is verse 6a, in which Paul gives thanks for how the gospel has spread throughout the world.

The second section of the thanksgiving consists of Paul's intercession for the Colossians (1:9–14). Paul restates that he does not cease praying for them (1:9; cf. 1:3), and in 1:9–11 he reiterates in reverse order the key phrases in 1:3–6. He repeats the phrase "since the day we heard about you" (1:9; 1:6, "since the day you heard it") and then lists how he intercedes for them. He prays that they will increase in "bearing fruit" and "growing" (1:10; cf. 1:6) and in "the knowledge of [God's] will" (1:9; cf. 1:10, "of God"; see 1:6, of "God's grace"). In 1:11–12 he also prays that they may be "strengthened with all power according to his glorious might" and that they may give thanks joyfully.

He lists three reasons for giving thanks in 1:12–14.<sup>15</sup> Some question whether 1:12–14 are part of the prayer and treat it as an introtit leading in to the anthem to Christ in 1:15–20. Paul is not working from a precise outline, however, and we should regard 1:12–14 as part of his intercession. It gives the reasons for joyfully giving thanks to God and flows naturally into glorifying Christ. These verses therefore place 1:15–20 in the context of the celebration of redemption rather than abstruse, metaphysical ruminations.<sup>16</sup>

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15. The traditional verse division puts "joyfully" (literally "with joy") in 1:11 and connects it with what precedes, "so that you may have great endurance and patience with joy." The NIV correctly renders the prepositional phrase with the participle that follows. It matches a syntactic pattern in 1:10–11: (lit.) "in every good work bearing fruit," "growing in the knowledge of God," "with all power being strengthened," and "joyfully giving thanks."

16. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33; and Yates, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, 10.

The prose hymn to Christ in 1:15–20, which affirms Christ's absolute and universal supremacy, bursts forth like a supernova, whose resplendence eclipses everything around it. The verses surrounding this poetic celebration, however, also offer up praise for what God has done for us through Christ. God has made the Colossians fit for a share in an inheritance for which they did not previously qualify as Gentiles (1:12). God has rescued them from the dominion of darkness (the plight of pagans) and brought them in a new Exodus to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1:13). God has redeemed them and forgiven their sins (1:14) and has reconciled them through Christ to present them holy, without blemish, and free from accusation (1:22).

In the final verses of the thanksgiving (1:21–23), Paul recounts how the Colossians accepted this reconciliation (1:21–22). He mentions again (1:23) the hope held out in the gospel (see 1:5), their hearing of it (1:5), and how it has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (1:6) so that it can bear fruit and grow. He concludes the thanksgiving with mention of his own role as a servant of this gospel (1:23), a topic he will take up in the next section (1:24–2:5). This long, rhapsodic thanksgiving lays the foundation for the exhortation beginning in 2:6.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, 1:3–23 is like a mighty river meandering through stunningly beautiful terrain. To appreciate fully the theological landscape, we will need to break up the unity of this segment by discussing it in separate sections in the commentary.

### **Thanksgiving for the Colossians' Reception of the Gospel (1:3–8)**

PAUL INFORMS THE Colossians that he regularly prays for the church and gives thanks for them in every prayer.<sup>18</sup> Thanking God for their faith and love implies that he gives God the credit for it, not them. The theme of

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17. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 48.

18. The "we" in 1:9 may be a literary plural, a royal "we," which would mean that Paul has only himself in mind. Since he switches from the plural to the singular in 1:24, it is more likely that the "we" refers also to his coworkers (see Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 166–68). The "always" may go with "we give thanks" to God (NIV) or "praying for you" (so KJV). The NIV translation implies that every time Paul prayed for the Colossians he gave thanks for them (see 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:2). Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 50, argues, however, that "always" should go with "praying." Paul wants to convey that he "does not pray haphazardly only when the mood strikes him, but keeps regular hours of prayer (probably morning, noon, and evening), and the church in Colosse is always mentioned." Dunn, *The Epistles of Colossians and to Philemon*, 56, imagines that Paul prayed during his travel or long hours of stitching. Paul may also have continued in his Jewish tradition of praying at the three hours of prayer (see Dan. 6:11; Acts 3:1; 10:3).