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Paul greets the Colossians

Please read Colossians 1:1-8

Greetings (1:1-2)

Paul followed the usual custom of the day and used the formula: ‘The writer to the reader, greetings.’ This can seem odd to modern Westerners who are used to finding the writer’s name at the very end of a letter, but letters in the ancient world were written on scrolls rolled up from the bottom. The sender needed to place his name at the top!

1. The writer and his fellow worker

It is worth noting that Paul made each part of the customary formula of his day distinctively Christian. He began with his name. His title, ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ’, was a reminder to his readers that he wrote with authority. He was more than a concerned friend. His experience on the Damascus road meant that he was as much an eyewitness of Christ’s resurrection as the

original disciples. He was a special ambassador from the risen Lord, carrying the King's commission. Moreover, apostleship was not something that he had aspired to, or attained through the sustained pursuit of spiritual excellence. It was bestowed upon him 'by the will of God'.

Timothy was with Paul at the time of writing and was therefore included in the greeting. A native of Lystra with a Gentile father and a Jewish mother, Timothy had been converted on Paul's second missionary journey. In spite of his physical weakness and occasional emotional frailty, he had become indispensable to Paul. The apostle confided to the church at Philippi: 'I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel' (Philippians 2:20-22).

2. *The readers to whom the letter was addressed*

Paul went on to describe his readers as 'the saints and faithful brethren in Christ ... in Colosse'. Our word 'saints' translates a Greek term meaning 'holy ones', people whom God has called out from the world and set apart for his own use. It does not mean 'eminent Christians'; it simply means 'Christians'. 'Brethren' translates the Greek word '*adelphoi*', which can mean either 'brothers' or 'brothers and sisters', depending on the context. As it is addressed here to the members of a church, it refers to them all, males and females of all ages. 'Faithful' is the same word that is used in verse 7 to describe the calibre of Epaphras' service for God. By calling his readers 'faithful brethren', Paul indicated that he thought that his readers were Christians of proven character.

3. The form of greeting

He went on to express his desire that they might enjoy grace and peace 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. In writing as he did, Paul echoed the conventional form of words in use at the time. Instead of the Greek word for 'greeting' (*chairein*), the apostle used a similar-sounding word, which means 'grace' (*charis*). To this he added the Greek version of the familiar Jewish greeting, 'Shalom', or 'peace'. This was much more than mere formal politeness. 'Grace' and 'peace' are two of the loveliest words in the Christian vocabulary.

'Grace' is the undeserved favour of God, his kindness to those who merit his wrath and condemnation. Human sinfulness means that we are entitled to feel the weight of divine anger against sin, but God in his grace has sent his Son into the world to live and die in the place of sinners. Peace follows on naturally from grace. Because God is gracious, it is gloriously possible for those who have offended him to be reconciled to him. Paul's readers in Colosse had already experienced the grace of God in their lives. Had this not been the case, they would not have been Christians at all. But if God saves us by his grace, he also keeps us by his grace. The help that Christians receive to live for God each day is gracious help. That is why Christians in the first century were in the habit of commending one another to the grace of God (see Acts 15:40). In effect, Paul expressed a heartfelt longing that the God who had been gracious to the believers in Colosse at the outset of their Christian lives would continue to sustain and help them in the future.

The same logic is at work in what is effectively a prayer that God would grant them 'peace'. In one sense, peace was something they had already experienced. Because of all that Jesus Christ had achieved in living and dying for his people,

where once there was enmity and estrangement, now there was peace. Paul's readers knew that, since God no longer has a quarrel against his people, they could be at peace within and among themselves. It follows that this word 'peace' involves more than the absence of hostilities between God and man. Paul was giving expression to a deeply held wish that his friends might increasingly enjoy what Leon Morris calls 'a flourishing state of soul'.

Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

It was typical of Paul to give thanks for his fellow-believers. We often find this note near the start of his letters. The direction of his thanksgiving is important. It is not that he thanked the Colossians themselves for having attained certain spiritual qualities, but rather that he was grateful to 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3) for all that he had done in the lives of these Christians to produce such qualities.

1. The Colossians were true Christians

Moreover, his thanks were more than an expression of heartfelt gratitude. He made them known in order to address a pastoral need. Paul knew, from what Epaphras had told him, that the Colossian believers had had their confidence in the simplicity of the gospel subtly undermined by the new teachers. It is likely that they had begun to feel insecure. It is the same nowadays. When you repeatedly hear a line of teaching that leaves you to make the inference that you are lacking the vital element needed to make you a 'full' Christian, you begin to wonder whether you are a real Christian at all. This is the concern that Paul addressed in verses 3-5.

His statement that he was 'praying always' (1:3) makes it clear that Paul prayed frequently and regularly for his friends in

Colosse. This in itself is a challenge to modern Christians. It is easy enough to finish a conversation with a cheery, 'I'll be praying for you.' It is quite another thing to see it through. The thrust of these verses is that on those occasions when Paul did pray for the Christians in Colosse, he thanked God for them because he was confident that they really were true believers. This reassurance must have meant a great deal to them.

This inevitably leaves the reader asking an important question, one that we do well to ask ourselves. What qualities make a real Christian, and are they present in my own life? Paul mentions a group of three such qualities—faith, love and hope. We often find Paul referring to one or more of these graces and sometimes to all three. For example, he did so on other occasions when he gave thanks to God for all that he was doing in the lives of a group of Christians. To believers in Thessalonica he wrote, 'We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father' (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). Paul was not alone in linking these three words. Other examples can be found elsewhere in the New Testament,¹ perhaps because these three qualities provide a summary of what it is to be a Christian. Whether in first-century Colosse or anywhere else, it is wonderful to belong to a gospel church because the world at large is faithless, loveless and hopeless.

By 'faith' (1:4) Paul meant a solid conviction that certain things are true, combined with a willingness to venture everything on those truths. It involves believing that the Bible is absolutely right, not only about the human predicament, our deep sinfulness and guilt before God, but about the only solution to it, the cross of Christ. It also involves entrusting ourselves to

Christ crucified, handing over our lives, our whole selves and our eternal destinies to him.

We should also note that Paul did not mean faith in the abstract, faith as a power or principle. The believers in Colosse put their faith 'in Christ' (1:4). Everyday experience will tell you that your capacity for trust will let you down if you place it in someone who is untrustworthy. Entrust yourself to Jesus, and you won't regret it. Entrust yourself body and soul to anything or anyone else instead of him, and tragedy will ensue.

Paul had also learned of a second quality that could be detected in his friends in Colosse. Besides their faith, he also thanked God for their 'love for all the saints' (1:4). This kind of love is one way of proving that the faith we claim to have is genuine. Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone: 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death' (1 John 3:14). What made the church in Colosse impressive was the fact that this love was not selective. They did not confine themselves to loving the saints who were easy to get on with, or the ones with money or influence. Of course, it is not realistic to be equally drawn to all our fellow Christians. Each of us will 'gel' more readily with some than others. But we can resolve to do everything in our power for the good of all. Often, once we have decided to love someone and begun to live that decision out in practical ways, the feelings will follow.

Thirdly, Paul went on to mention the 'hope' that is 'laid up' for believers 'in heaven' (1:5). The way that Paul described this hope almost suggests that his readers needed some assurance on this matter, perhaps because the newcomers had been teaching things that called into question the Christian's confidence in a

blessed future. Firstly, a hope that is located in heaven is beyond the reach of anything that might threaten it. No combination of spiritual foes can undermine this hope, for it has, in effect, been stored in the safest location of all. Secondly, Paul's comment that this hope was something they had already 'heard before' (1:5) was essentially an endorsement of Epaphras over against those who had intruded themselves into the church with a very different message from his. The founder of the church had instructed them correctly about the Christian's hope, whereas those who threw it into doubt had not.

2. The Colossians had heard the true gospel

Paul also wanted to assure his readers that not only were they true Christians, but also that they had heard the true gospel. Epaphras had not fobbed them off with a partial or inadequate version of it. It is unlikely that many of the believers in Colosse would have heard Paul himself. Some, influenced by the new teachers, would therefore be tempted to jump to conclusions that Epaphras was not teaching all that Paul taught. Paul went on to address this concern in verses 5-8.

Verse 5 closes with a complex phrase, 'the word of the truth of the gospel'. Every element in it is important. 'Word' makes a simple but important point. In the first century, the gospel was presented verbally. Epaphras had won a hearing with his fellow Colossians by talking to them. Nowadays in some circles the gospel is acted, danced or mimed. Circus clowns and body-builders are also pressed into service. Are such approaches popular because they are not as confrontational as preaching, or indeed straight talk in informal settings? Paul coupled the word 'truth' with 'gospel' to make the point that the Christians in Colosse had not heard an incomplete presentation of the Christian message that would need rounding off. The same

point is emphasized in verse 6. They had 'heard and knew the grace of God in truth'. The Colossians had no need to fear that what they had learned from Epaphras had been inadequate, partial, or even false.

Another reason why they could feel confident in Epaphras' message was that the message that came to them had also been heard 'in all the world' (1:6). At this point we need to appreciate that Paul was not indulging himself in wild exaggeration. At the time of writing, few people would have had a more complete grasp of the true spread of the gospel than he did. We know from his writing elsewhere that he was painfully aware that much of the world was still virgin territory as far as the gospel was concerned. There were regions where no one yet knew the name of Christ and, if possible, Paul wanted to reach them first (Romans 15:20). Nevertheless, there was already a growing body of towns and cities with an established Christian presence, enough to make comparisons appropriate. Believers in Colosse could be assured that, far from having heard an incomplete version of the gospel that would need to be fleshed out with important details that Epaphras had missed, they had heard the same gospel that all other Christians everywhere had heard. It was not as though others had heard the whole truth but they had heard somewhat less than the full gospel.

In passing we should note here that, though Paul's primary purpose was to reassure the Colossian believers, there is a strong hint of a note that we find elsewhere in the New Testament. The gospel is not something which has only a limited, local appeal, as though people of one cultural background were disposed to give it a hearing while others from a different background would be indifferent to it. The gospel is a dynamic force well able to transform people of all nations, languages and cultures.

In the same way, the Colossians could reflect with encouragement on the thought that the gospel that was 'bringing forth fruit' (1:6) in their town was equally productive elsewhere. We first meet the idea that the gospel grows in the hearts of men and women in the same way that seed grows in the ground in certain of Jesus' parables, notably the parable of the sower and the soils (Luke 8:4–8, 11–15). Paul may have had two kinds of growth in mind. Perhaps, on the one hand, he was thinking of the way that the gospel can produce a harvest of good deeds in the life of those who hear it, what he called elsewhere 'fruits of righteousness' (Philippians 1:11). On the other hand, he may equally have been thinking of fruit as a graphic way to describe a harvest of souls—in other words, the fact that people were coming to faith in Christ in numbers. Whatever kind of spiritual fruit Paul had in view, the same conclusion holds good. If Epaphras' evangelism had the same results as those of other evangelists in other places, whether in terms of evangelistic success or of transformed lives, he must have preached the same gospel as they did.

This endorsement for Epaphras and his ministry is stated clearly in verse 7. The Colossians had 'learned' the gospel from him. Paul's choice of verb is unusual here. Ordinarily we find Paul writing of Christians 'believing', 'hearing' or 'obeying' the gospel. It is likely that his choice of words was deliberate and that he intended to suggest that Epaphras had done his work well, providing thorough and systematic teaching of Christian truth. Indeed, far from being an ineffective communicator who had left the job unfinished, he was 'a faithful minister of Christ'. (We should note in passing that the word 'minister' is one rendering of a Greek word that would be better translated 'servant', given that in today's world, the word 'minister' often has overtones of the 'clergy', the employees of various religious

denominations.) Paul used the same word on other occasions to describe Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2) and Tychicus (4:7).

The same idea is even present in verse 8. Epaphras had told Paul and Timothy about the Colossians' 'love in the Spirit'—that is to say, it was a love that was supernatural in origin, a love that no one could produce by himself, but the Holy Spirit had been at work in Colosse in such a way that the believers there showed clear evidence of it. Surely a man who told Paul the truth about the Colossians was a man of integrity who could be relied upon to teach them the truth about the great message of sin and salvation?

It may seem tempting to think that quantities of ink used to buttress the reputation of a first-century evangelist have little to say to modern people. This is light years from the truth. Modern people still need to know what the true gospel is and they still need people of calibre to explain it to them. There is a vacancy in every town for an Epaphras.

Conclusion

Before we leave this opening section of Paul's letter to the Christian believers who made up the church in first-century Colosse, it is worth noting that we are given a glimpse of one theme that preoccupied Paul more than any other, the gospel. (The fact that he said, in Romans 1:16, that he was 'not ashamed of the gospel of Christ' means that he was actually proud of it, that it thrilled him to the core.)

We see it, first of all, in the effect that it has on human lives, producing people characterized by faith in Christ, love for one another and a vibrant hope for the future. We do well to ask ourselves whether the gospel that we have encountered

has had that kind of effect on us. Secondly, we also see it in Paul's defence of his colleague Epaphras, where he has given us a portrait of the kind of person who can proclaim this life-changing gospel with credibility. There is no doubt that Paul was a man of one thing. Today's churches would be well served if modern believers had even a little of his clarity and intensity of focus.