

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae; Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

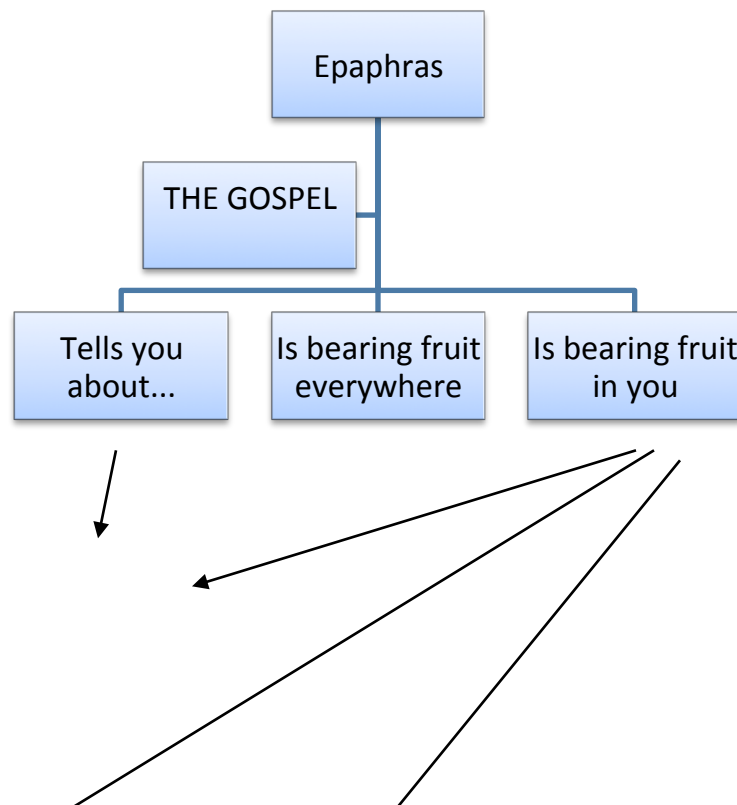
With that sentence (a pretty standard Roman greeting, which starts a letter by stating who it's from and who it's to), Paul greets the church at Colossae.

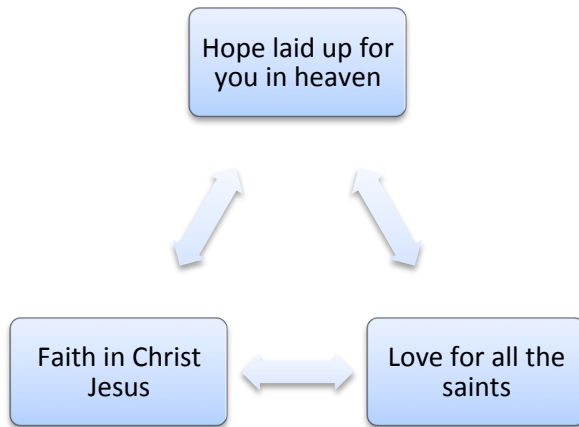
Paul has never visited this church, but it is something of a daughter church to the church at Ephesus. It appears that a man named Epaphras was in Ephesus when Paul was there, became a believer, and then headed back to his hometown of Colossae to plant a church. Colossae was not a major city by any stretch of the imagination, but it appears to have had a stable church. The church was less than ten years old, and as Paul writes this letter, it is only 25 or 30 years since the death and resurrection of Christ.

Epaphras apparently did a wonderful job planting the church, but some issues have arisen and he has come to Paul for help. The basic issue is that the church is drifting towards syncretism, mixing some Jewish legalism and some spiritistic worship with the gospel of Christ. Paul emphasizes over and over again the sufficiency of Christ for their every spiritual need. Christ, as revealed in the Gospel, completely redeems and radically changes the believer.

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

Whew. That is one really long sentence. Let's diagram it to break it down.





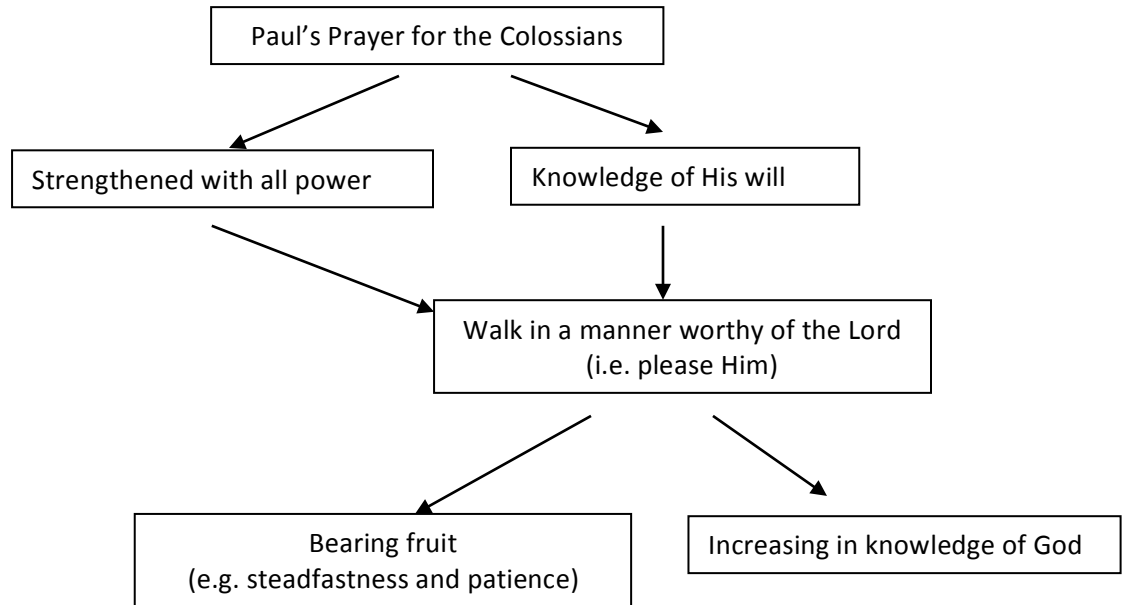
Put another way, Christ revealed the Gospel to Paul who then shared it with Epaphras. Epaphras then took the Gospel to the Colossians and, like it does everywhere, the Gospel bore fruit. The Gospel is both informational (news about the hope of salvation) and transformational. What is that transformation, that new fruit in their lives? The Colossians now have hope, which coincides with their faith in Christ and increases their love for the saints.

You may notice that the three main types of fruit mentioned above are the three supreme Christian virtues identified in 1 Corinthians 13. “Now these three remain, faith, hope, and love.” It seems odd, but here, it seems that hope is the foundation of the other two. And in a sense, that’s true. The way Paul uses it, hope is not a wish, not “I sure hope that...” Instead, hope is a confident expectation. Something that you already have, it is just not in your possession. Like hoping for a marriage partner when you’re engaged. The assurance of the reality the Gospel proclaims changes us completely. We are now freed to love the people around us because we no longer have to protect ourselves at all costs in this world. C.S. Lewis said, “Think the most of the world to come seem to do the most for this world.” And that love becomes attractive, like we see in Acts 2. Others are drawn to great love amongst believers. The confident hope also enables us to act on what we know of Christ. That is “sincere faith,” not just intellectually assenting but acting in obedience to Christ. That demonstrates our faith. Knowing what is laid up for us in heaven (eternal, unhindered relationship with God) compels us to have faith in Christ here.

Finally, it is clear that the power here is not in the Colossians but in the Gospel. The Gospel (also known as the Word of Truth) bears fruit. That’s what it does. It’s not the wisdom of the speaker or the demonstration of power that changes people, it’s the Gospel. And it cannot be stopped. It’s going throughout the world and increasing and keeps doing it in the heart of the Colossians.

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience

Another really long sentence. So here’s another diagram.



All of this sentence is a prayer. We've moved from Paul recounting the Colossians' spiritual past to praying for their future.

His ultimate desire is that they would "please the Lord in all respects." In order to do that, though, they'll need two things: wisdom and power. In other words, they'll need to know what pleases God and then they'll need the strength to do it. So Paul prays first that they would have "the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." The unwritten assumption is that there is a wisdom and an understanding that does not come from the Holy Spirit, a fleshly wisdom and understanding that runs counter to the will of God. Then, he prays that they would be "strengthened with all power according to His glorious might." The astounding assumption here is that God would deign to give us *all* power and use His glorious, omnipotent might in order to mold our character. Manmade power will not suffice here.

So if it takes wisdom and power to live a life worthy of the Lord, one that pleases Him, can we at least know something of how that life looks? How can we recognize it? Paul gives two hints. First, he says that the Colossians might bear "fruit in every good work." No surprise here; believers please the Lord by doing good work. Examples of fruit abound in Scripture, but one specific example here pops up when Paul suggests that His glorious might enables us to attain "steadfastness and patience." (Imagine that. His glorious might employed not for dramatic displays of power but for giving us patience. Must be a great miracle indeed). Second, Paul says we please the Lord by "increasing in the knowledge of God." One can only assume this implies the experiential, relational knowing of God that Jesus talks about in John 17:3 ("that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent).

Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

We're back in the past again, but now, instead of reliving the Colossians' material past, Paul focuses on their spiritual past. Paul makes it very clear,

“He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved son.”

Without realizing it, each and every Colossian lived within the domain of darkness. Unable to recognize the darkness or force their way out of it, the Colossians were stuck. That is, until God took the initiative in Christ to rescue us. And where did He take the Colossians? Not to a no-man’s land, but to a new kingdom. The kingdom of Jesus, His beloved son. God delighted to reward us to His son, just as Jesus delighted to present us to his Father. And the Colossians (and us)? We are the beneficiaries of this relationship. We’ll see it what the domain of darkness and the kingdom of Christ look like. For now, it’s good to simply see what God has done.

Paul also outlines three of the prerequisites for this transfer. We’ll look at each quickly.

- “Qualified us”—Again, the Colossians were unqualified, unworthy to receive this rescue and transfer (because of their sin). But God has qualified them.
- “We have redemption.”—This echoes Old Testament stories such as the exodus from Egypt, the return from the Babylonian captivity, and the story of Ruth. The word ‘redemption’ refers to a slave that is unable to pay one’s own freedom price. A redeemer is needed to pay the price and purchase the slave’s freedom.
- “The forgiveness of sins.”—From this passage, it is clear that it is sin that disqualifies us from the kingdom of Christ and sin that keeps the Colossians in slavery and in debt. Without forgiveness, there can be no transfer.

Without being qualified, redeemed, and forgiven, the Colossians cannot experience the sharing “in the inheritance of the saints in light.” We know from elsewhere in Scripture that we have been made co-heirs with Christ of God’s victory over the domain of darkness. And that is indeed cause for “thanks.”

Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Read Passage
- III. Exploratory Questions
 - a. Let's figure out what's going on in the 2 long sentences.
 - b. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - c. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - d. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - e. Define "the Gospel."
 - f. Define "redemption."
- IV. Application Questions
 - a. What is your experience of being "rescued from the domain of darkness and being transferred to the kingdom on His beloved son"?
 - b. What's the fruit that you have seen the Gospel bear in your life?
 - c. Where do you need "spiritual wisdom and understanding?" What about "all power?" (Is it so you can please Him, increase in your knowledge of Him, be steadfast and patient?)
 - d. Do you have Colossians in your life? That is, people, who you see practicing faith, hope, and love?
 - e. What about people you really desire good things for? You really want them to know and follow Christ?
 - f. Do you pray like this? Why? Why not? How should our prayers change?
 - g. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- V. Other questions/thoughts
- VI. So what we've seen here is...
 - a. The power of the Gospel; it all starts and ends with God. It's nothing we do.
 - i. What God has done for us (v.13-14)
 - ii. What God enables us to do (v.4, 6, 9-11)
 - b. Relationship between Paul and the Colossians; what a godly relationship looks like
 - i. Admiration (v.3-5)
 - ii. Desire (v.9-10)
- VII. Pray