

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

## **Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-23) The Proof of the Gospel - Colossians 1:3-8 (Part 1)**

### **Colossians 1:3-8**

**3 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel 6 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; 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, 8 and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.**

In these verses, Paul is expressing how the gospel has transformed the lives of these believers in Colosse. In verse 2 Paul had made a simple statement of fact, that the gospel had transformed them into holy and faithful brethren. Now, in verses 3-8, we have the “specifics” of the gospel transforming power. Paul here gives the evidences, the proofs of their transformation by the power of the gospel.

This is significant because one of the issues for these believers was that they were being taught by some other teacher that their standing with God may not be secure; that faith in Christ may not be enough, that they ought to be more concerned about personal knowledge than serving others, that their assurance of heaven was not sure. Paul writes to ensure them how they might know that they have indeed been transformed by the power of the gospel that was preached to them. He writes and in verses 3-8 gives the very proofs, the evidences of the power of the gospel at work in them.

In these verses before us, Paul answers a question that might have been on the hearts of the people in some form or another and I know is a question that can arise in the hearts of those who attend church today. That question is this, “How can I know that I have been changed by the gospel even as Paul or Timothy have been changed?” To state it another way, “What are the proofs or evidences of the power of the gospel at work in us?” Paul presents to his readers the proofs of the gospel.

Before we look at these proofs, I would like to have us quickly define the word “gospel”? What do we mean when we say “the gospel”? Of course we could spend many sermons answering this question, but lets keep things simple (okay, maybe a little commentary), but let us notice how Paul defines the gospel in this first chapter. Let us use his thoughts. Let us read Colossians 1:21-23a.

**21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, [everyone’s condition before coming to Christ in faith] 22 yet He has now reconciled [made peace between you and God] you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach [to make you like Himself so that you will enjoy the glories of heaven] — 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast,**

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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The gospel is simply this, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, those alienated and hostile in mind toward God and to bring you near to God. How did Jesus make this peace? The One who was God and was with God left the glories of heaven, became man, and died in the place of those who would believe in Him. His blood paid the penalty for the sins of His people; and by faith in His death for us who believe, we are provided the righteousness of Christ. Why is this important? Because Jesus has reconciled sinners to God, He is bringing many sons to glory, all who believe will share in His pre-incarnate privilege of dwelling in the presence and fellowship of God. The gospel is this, that Jesus has made peace between evil, alienated and hostile sinners and a holy and just God so that those sinners might, by God’s grace, cease being sinners to become more and more like Christ and be fit for eternity with Christ. This is the good news.

This is the gospel; this work of Jesus to reconcile us to God and to make us fit for heaven. And now the question is this, “what are the evidences that this gospel; this reconciliation, is at work in us?” Let us consider two general proofs from our text. There are actually three, but we will only consider the first two this morning. First, in order to see the power of the gospel at work in us we must....

## I. Thank God for the gospel at work in the lives of others (3)

*We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you...*

### 1. We recognize the work of the gospel in others (corporate)

As Paul begins his greeting, he does so by thanking God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and identifying the reason for this thankfulness in the rest of our verse as being because of the evidence or proof of the gospel at work in them.

We know that as Christians, we are to be a thankful people. In fact, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says this, **“in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** In everything we are to give thanks. But note that in our text Paul is giving thanks specifically for the proof of the power of the gospel in their lives as he will describe their faith, their love and their hope.

And this got me to thinking. Do I thank the Lord for the proof of the gospel’s power at work in the lives of you in this church? Do I recognize these proofs and utter praise to God that not only do you have a profession salvation, but that you also have the practice of salvation? Do I thank the Lord for the working of this gospel in the lives of my family? Do I see it in my wife and my children?

And when was the last time you thanked the Lord, not simply for your own transformation by the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and you recognized that you are a sinner to be saved, but that you thanked God for the recognition of the gospel at work in these people whom you worship with week after week?

Notice as well that this is not simply an individual or personal event. It is not that Paul is saying, “While hiding in my prayer closet and thinking about God’s salvation, I remembered His work in you and quietly praised Him by myself. This thankfulness for the working of the gospel is a corporate event. He says, “We give thanks to God...” The “we” here has to include at least Paul and Timothy. It might even be safe to say that “Epaphras” as mentioned in verse 7, the deliverer of the report of the working of the gospel in the Colossians’ lives was involved in this

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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praise. And we might even be safe to extrapolate and assume that many, or all to whom Paul heard or read this commendation of the Colossians transformed lives gave thanks to God.

Can you imagine the power of giving corporate thanks for seeing the faith, the love and the hope of members of our Church increasing. The implications are profound. For to be able to thank God for the power of the gospel at work in others implies that we are seeing such a power at work in others. It means we are seeing people repent of their sins; and not just unbelievers repenting for the first time, but believers confessing that they had struggled with sin and are now renouncing it and turning afresh to Christ. We will be engaged in the Lord's Table in a few moments. A time when we are called to reflect upon our lives and confess any sin; and remember that Jesus died for those sins so that we might pursue a life that pleases Him. While we generally do that in silence, perhaps there is a place when someone would confess publicly, “I have struggled with anger this week and have been verbally rotten to my family and friends. I confess anger as sin and repent of it and ask the Lords forgiveness and the forgiveness of my family and friends. I pray for the grace to over come this sin.” Beloved, that is the power of the gospel transforming a life. That would be something for which to thank God for as a church. If we are not repenting; if we are not publically forsaking sin; if we are not communicating Christ to others, how can we specifically give thanks to God the gospel's power?

## 2. A constant theme of our gratitude for the gospel's working (always)

One final thought, notice that this attitude of thankfulness was a constant theme in the prayer life of Paul. How often does he state he gives thanks to God for hearing of the lives of the Colossians as they pursue the life of faith. He says, **“praying always for you...”** This thankfulness to God for the Colossians' faith is a constant theme in His prayers and I dare say that such an attitude of thankfulness for God's gospel power at work in others ought to be a constant theme in our prayers as well. Will you begin to note in the lives of others the working of the power of the gospel?

## II. Manifest the fruits of the gospel (1:4-5a)

*Since we heard of your...(testimony)*

In addition to giving thanks to God, in order to see the power of the gospel at work in us we must manifest the fruits of the gospel. The gospel produces something real, something identifiable in the lives in whom it is at work. As we noted last week, the gospel is the power of God for salvation according to Romans 1:16. The gospel is working salvation in the lives of believers. But what does that look like. Here in our text, Paul identifies three key fruits as proofs of the power of the gospel at work in the Colossians; three fruits that must be evident in our lives as well if we would have the assurance of the gospel's working in us.

### 1. Faith in Christ Jesus

The first fruit is called, **“faith in Christ Jesus.”** Here Paul is commending the believers at Colosse. These were no closet Christians. There had been a testimony, witnesses who communicated to others that in the church at Colosse, were those who demonstrated vital, visible faith in Christ Jesus. Verse four begins with, **“since we have heard...”** There is testimony of their faith. Remember that at this time, there was increasing persecution in areas for those who were Christians. Yet these continued to live their lives differently. Their faith was something

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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others noticed, that caused people to talk. Their faith in Jesus, their trusting in following His ways, caused their behavior to be obviously different from the world. What would be said of us, I wonder? Are our lives, both here and throughout the week demonstrably “Christian”?

But what kind of faith does Paul speak of here. It is not faith in faith, or faith in something worldly, or even faith in self. I am reminded of many songs that have a line that goes something like, “You believe in me.” “You have faith in me.” There are even some “Christian” songs that speak of God as saying that He believes in us. I can’t begin to imagine having faith, spiritually speaking, in anything in this fallen world, or of God Himself “believing in us” because apart from Him at work in us, we will always fail Him. These believers at Colosse and believers of every generation don’t have faith in anything but in Christ Jesus.

We read, **“faith in Christ Jesus.”** This speaks of both the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Our faith is placed in a living Person, who is God’s Son, God’s anointed and appointed Redeemer for man. The title Christ reminds us of His deity and the name Jesus reminds us of His humanity. Deity and humanity perfectly united in Jesus. Our faith is in the God-man, not in some man-made philosophy. Our faith is a trust and a confidence in the truth that God came to us, that He came to save us; not that we reached out and took hold of Him. Our faith looks to the perfection of Jesus, the holiness of Jesus, and the righteousness of Jesus in fulfilling God’s law for us, even becoming our substitute and satisfying the righteous judgment of God for us.

What does it mean to have faith in Christ Jesus? This is the gospel, this is the good news. And I can say it to you no more clearly than J. I. Packer when he wrote that to have faith in Jesus means “knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one’s natural enmity and rebellion against God for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one’s heart by the Holy [Spirit]. And to the further question still: how am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things? it answers: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on His mercy; ask Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from Him. Turn to Him and trust Him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him; watch, pray, read and hear God’s Word, worship and commune with God’s people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you.”

Beloved, this is the type of faith that Paul “heard” concerning the believers at Colosse. Is this your faith? Would this be the testimony of faith given on behalf of Hope CBC? Let us pray for such a faith, a faith that believes, a faith that repents, a faith that works to the glory of God.

## 2. Love for all the saints

*...and the love which you have for all the saints;*

The next proof of the power of the gospel at work in the lives of believers is expressed in terms of loving the saints. Paul mentions their love for **“all the saints”** – that is a love which is first and most notably demonstrated as one saw their interaction with one another, but also of a love, or concern for other believers abroad, including Paul himself. The word Paul uses for love

## Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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is the familiar “*agape*” – that divine or intensely Christian love. Let me give a simple definition for love and then put it into the context of the church at Colosse before we apply it. Love *is the pursuit of the highest good of another regardless of the cost and all to the glory of God*. It is putting others and their needs first. It is having a care, a compassion, a mercy and a respect for all the saints.

What makes this remarkable in the church at Colosse is when we understand the climate from which these believers were saved. The people of Colosse were a unique mixture of cultures living in a fairly prosperous area of Asia Minor. We know that Laodicea, just about 10 miles northwest was known for being a financial center as well as being known for its wool-dyeing. Hierapolis, about 10 miles due north was known for its recreation-oriented hot springs. And Colosse was known as a religious center for paganism. In the church at Colosse were people that had been surrounded by wealth, recreation, and paganism (starting to sound familiar?). Such an atmosphere bred a self-centered, self-pleasing attitude among people. But once the Colossians heard the gospel, they found their whole life attitude changed. Now they had a love for one another. They were no longer wrapped up in themselves, but delighted in sacrificially caring for their fellow-believers.

The power of the gospel caused them to truly love one another. And we need the same fruit of the gospel to be manifested in us. For is it not just as true today as it was when Paul wrote this letter that when people are focused upon wealth they normally have little time for others, particularly if those people are not an asset to them? Such people live for the power and materialism gained through wealth. And likewise, for those who are pleasure-oriented, who indulge themselves in their own recreation, these too can have little interest in others, except when those others help in their own recreation. Personal recreation thinks of self rather than sacrificing time to help others. And finally, paganism itself is a man-made, man-centered religion that focuses on how to maintain oneself by worshipping the right idols or deities.

This is the climate that the gospel penetrated with power in the first century. And so dramatic, so visible was the love, the compassion, the service to one another among the Christians that one of the proverbs of the pagan that became well know just a few years later was “See how these Christians love one another!” Bruce Shelley, a Christian historian, in commenting upon the reasons for the rapid spread of the gospel in the first centuries of the church's existence, pointed out “the practical expression of Christian love was probably among the most powerful causes of Christian success” [Church History in Plain Language, 35]. Do you truly love the saints?

How can we love like this? We might note down in verse 8 that Paul adds that their love was a “*love in the Spirit*.” This kind of self-sacrificing love is not humanly sustainable for any time. It is only as we love in and by the power of God’s Spirit that we begin to see how to serve others rather than ourselves. Beloved, such a love is not natural and so when it is expressed and experienced, it out to be a powerful testimony to one another and the world of the working of God and the working of His gospel in us.

A favorite author of mine, Gardiner Spring, captured the idea of love here so well. He wrote, “Those who love Christ love those who are like Him and those who are beloved by Him. Here all distinctions vanish. Name and nation, rank and party, are lost in the common character of believers, the common name of Christ. Jew and Gentile, bond and free, rich and poor, are one in Christ Jesus....Actuated by the same principles, cherishing the same hopes, animated by the

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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same prospects, laboring under the same discouragements, having the same enemies to encounter, and the same temptations to resist, the same hell to shun, and the same heaven to enjoy, it is not strange that they should love one another sincerely and often with a pure heart fervently. There is a unity of design, a common interest in the objects of their pursuit which lays the foundation for mutual friendship and which cannot fail to excite the "harmony of souls." The glory of God is the grand object which commands their highest affections and which necessarily makes the interest of the whole the interest of each part, and the interest of each part the interest of the whole" [The Distinguishing Traits of Christian Character, 56]. This love is such at we have a concern for one other.

### 3. Hope of heaven

*...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven*

The third fruit of the gospel at work in us is “hope.” In our text we read that hope is the very reason for the faith and love of these believers. The hope of heaven is at the very core of these believers’ hearts and attitudes. While people speak of “hope” today, we know that very few people truly have “hope”. They wish for something to happen that they have no real reason or power to see come about. In short, without Christ, people are hopeless. The Scriptures remind us that apart from Christ all are hopeless. In Ephesians 2:11-12 we read,

***11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands — 12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.***

As people are changed by the power of the gospel, they move from being hopeless to hopeful. When Paul speaks of believers having faith and love because of the ***“hope laid up for [them] in heaven,”*** he is saying that they were living, behaving, and acting as citizens of heaven even though their present address was on earth. Hope keeps our eyes off the temporary and fixes them on what is ours in Christ in glory. Hope is the “totality of blessing that awaits the Christian in the life to come.”<sup>1</sup> For the Colossians who were faced with the teaching that caused them to wonder if Christ could supply their every spiritual need, this reminder of their present experience of faith and love rested upon the sure foundation of what God had promised and committed to do for them in the future. It was this hope of heaven, this view of the future, that caused them to love one other and live by faith in Christ. Oh that we would live more and more in such hope.

C.S. Lewis said it well and challenges our hearts when he wrote, ***"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.*** [they had hope] The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their

<sup>1</sup> Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 85

## Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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minds were occupied with Heaven. ***It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.*** (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity-Hope*, pg. 118). In order to see the power of the gospel at work in us we must be a people of such hope, looking at everything from the perspective of heaven.

Notice that this hope is “laid up for you in heaven”. The verb “laid up” is a banking term that spoke of putting something aside or away for safe keeping. Nothing could rob the Colossian believer’s of their hope. Hear how one preacher put it, *“Bank calamities make business men very careful where they lay up their treasures, but there is no room for anxiety for what God takes under His charge. “Laid up,” hidden in a safe place. We find it hard to lay up our valuables safely.”* But there is no question of what God keeps. This statement was not made by a preacher today in light of all the bank failures, but by Charles Spurgeon in the mid 1800’s.

Where is your hope laid up? Hopefully not to over do the song, but our simple confession out to be, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness.” Do you have such a hope? Is your mind dwelling on the promises of heaven and your future residence? Does such a hope cause you to lay aside some of your own pursuits to pursue the highest good of others regardless of the cost? Do you truly love the brethren? How are you expressing that love? And do you have faith in Christ Jesus, not just a faith that looks back as says, “He saved me on such and such a date, but a faith that causes you to see the Lord as all the more holy and yourself as in just as much need today of His grace and mercy as when you first came to know Him? And are you thankful for seeing the proofs of fervent faith, real love and anticipating hope in the lives of these with whom you worship? These are the signs of the power of the gospel at work in us. May they become more and more evident to the glory of God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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