

Colossians 1:1-12. When Paul wrote this short letter to the Colossians, he was more than 2,000 miles away in prison. He received an update, which was a mixture of good and bad news. How did Paul respond? Graciously, lovingly, not heavy-handed. Starting on a positive note, he expressed how often he thanks God for this church.

It's been said that Rome wasn't built in a day. What started as small settlements on the Seven Hills bonded to form a city that would eventually dominate the Italian Peninsula, the Mediterranean, and the entire Western Hemisphere. For 900 years the Eternal City grew to reach its zenith in the late 2nd century. Rome could then boast of roads paved 50,000 miles that served nearly a quarter of the world's population.

Safe passage throughout the empire encouraged travel, and a long peace cultivated trade. Though we're about to embark on a study of Colossians, you can't get around Rome. Rome is everywhere in the backdrop of this short letter. How so? Because this letter was written to a church in a significant area of the Roman Empire, Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey.

Roman peace plus a network of roads brought more than goods and services to the empire. Each caravan from the Far East brought new philosophies and religious ideas that mixed with the old. In fact, no place in the first-century was more of a melting pot than the eastern side of the Roman Empire, Asia Minor. It's where the East met the West, and it's where we find the small town of Colossae.

The Colossian church had believed the gospel and then mixed it with a few other beliefs. They added a little bit of Judaism with a pinch of mysticism. Like adding copper and nickel to gold, you don't increase its value. The gold of the gospel was still cherished in Colossae, but error had somewhat mixed into the message.

It's hard to say if Paul had ever visited Colossae. He wasn't anywhere near the city when he wrote this letter. He was in Rome, under arrest when he heard an update (Col 4:18). One of the church's members, Epaphras, traveled some 2,000 miles to visit (Col 1:7-8). Such a long journey tells us he was very concerned about his church. And not wanting to see it fall further into the culture's melting pot, Epaphras sought an apostle for help.

It's hard to hold onto an anchor when the rapids are swift. Such was the plight of those ancient churches in Asia Minor. The Colossians

hadn't let go of God's Word, but there was slack in the line. Would they hold fast to Christ, or would they drift along with the culture? The same question confronts churches today.

Before delving into the problems, Paul starts on a positive note. He doesn't know any of these believers in Colossae, but he's heard a good update about them. They're like spiritual grandchildren to him. He had taught Epaphras about Christ, and Epaphras had taught the Colossians. It's exciting news.

As Paul was imprisoned far away in Rome, he's welled up with joy. He's been praying for his brothers and sisters in Colossae. He shares why he prays for them so often (v. 3-8) and then what he asks God to do for them (v. 9-12).

THE CHURCH IN COLOSSAE

COLOSSIANS 1:3-8

Colossians 1:3 — "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you."

Have you ever been to a perfect church? Me neither. I haven't been anywhere perfect, but I have enjoyed many good churches with people who love one another, apply Scripture to their lives, and live today in light of tomorrow.

Paul saw Colossae as a city with this kind of church. Though it's easy to focus on all that's imperfect, Paul didn't. He was thankful for all the good and constantly thanked God when he thought of these believers.

So, what is a good church? This isn't an exhaustive answer, but Paul says a good church is filled with faith, hope, and love...

- 1) A faith that's built upon God's Word.
- 2) A love that's evident throughout the church.
- 3) A hope that's set upon heaven.

The Colossians' faith was in Christ, but who or what is Christ? Some in the late first century taught that "Christ" is a spirit-being who descended upon a man named Jesus. Sure, they had faith. Everyone in every religion has faith, and the Colossians had faith. The faith of this little church in Colossae, however, rested upon "the word of truth" (v. 5). They didn't have the New Testament as we do, but they did have the Old Testament Scriptures and the apostles' teachings. These informed their faith in Jesus.

A Prayer for a Good Church

It matters what you believe, because “Jesus” isn’t an empty basket to be filled with new ideas. He’s God come to earth (John 1:14). He died for the sins of His people, was raised to life, and is seated in Heaven. The Colossians understood this, had turned from much of the surrounding culture, and had believed.

Anyone can check a few boxes and say, “Yep, I believe in Jesus!” But what else did Epaphras tell Paul about this church? That in Colossae was a group of Christians whose faith proved itself in their love for one another (v. 4). The gospel was bearing fruit in this city as it did in many other cities (v. 6). Far from being a dead orthodoxy, here was a people with a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. A good church lives out its faith in Christ.

John makes a strong connection between faith and love. It isn’t that a connection *might* be present—it must be. He says, “whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21). Why? Because God is love (1 John 4:8). If church is just organized religion to you, and you don’t really like to be around Christians... I’m afraid you might want to question if you know Christ. The Colossians loved like Christ, because they believed in Christ. Love for one another is fruit of true belief.

1 John 4:11 — “If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

The Colossians didn’t view Jesus as a great teacher of old who was dead but worth studying. No, they eagerly anticipated the day they would see Him face-to-face (v. 5).

Think of the things you hope will come to pass. You might hope for a solid return on investment, a successful job interview, good news concerning a friend’s illness, or hope to improve your marriage. We hope for many things to happen. Some will; others won’t. But what is the Christian’s great hope that transcends all of life? It is that no matter what comes to pass, Christ has prepared a place for me to be with Him and His people forever (John 14:1-3). That’s a sure hope, and that hope characterized the believers in Colossae.

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

COLOSSIANS 1:9-12

Paul thanked God for all the good in Colossae and then asked God to fill these believers with knowledge (v. 9). If you’re accustomed to asking for things or for healing, this might sound odd. Here’s an apostle thanking God for friends afar and then asking they would grow in their studies. He says “we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will” (v. 9). *We want you to be saturated with the things you know about God.*

The only way you and I can know anything right about God is if God has decided to tell us. We know Him only because He spoke and had it written down for our benefit. This means the Bible is not a book about God—it is the Word of God Himself.

To be filled with the knowledge of God, as Paul prayed for the Colossians, involves knowing and applying a book. To know God and His will for your life, know what He’s said. Make time to read the Bible. Determine to study it (Ezr 7:10). Pour over its pages. Meditate upon it (Psa 119:15), and learn how to apply this book to your life (Jas 1:22).

Paul wanted the Colossians to be “People of the Book” that they might “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (v. 10). The psalmist said such a person is peacefully prospering “like a tree planted by streams of water” (Psa 1:3). Who wouldn’t want to live like this? With roots deep in the streams of God’s Word, Paul describes the fruit of such a life:

- 1) Abounding in good works.
- 2) Growing evermore in the knowledge of God.
- 3) Experiencing God’s strength to endure the trials of life.
- 4) Thanking God even in the midst of trials.

Jesus said that “the tree is known by its fruit” (Matt 12:33). Apple trees produce... apricots? They can’t, because the tree and the fruit go together. You need a different tree if you’d like apricots, or if you’ve got bad apples, your tree might have a disease. Something isn’t right.

Paul’s list of fruit comes from a believer who is saturated with God’s Word. When we saturate ourselves with lesser things, we shouldn’t expect to produce the best fruit. Maybe anxiety has filled your heart, wrong thoughts about a person, fear about some part of the future, or you’re mired in grief?

If the knowledge of God and His will are so important for producing good fruit, then right thinking is critical. Paul had said to the Romans and Ephesians to keep renewing their minds (Rom 12:2, Eph 4:23). God is good, isn’t He? It’s one thing to state it, it’s quite another to keep this fact central in your mind when life is hard.

Proverbs says “the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov 4:18). This is what Paul wanted for this little church in Colossae. Knowledge, studying God’s Word and rightly applying it, is the key.