

THANKING GOD AND PRAYING FOR YOU

Is there some kind of magic to studying and going through one of Paul's letters in a personal way – that is, with every intention of paying attention to what Paul is saying, and how he is approaching things – and with the further intention of applying that to our own approaches as a Christian church in our own time? Well, I don't believe much in magic, but I do believe in mystery. It also seems clear to me that Paul was very connected to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that there was a dynamism and authenticity to the churches he was starting – so much so that, small as they were in the beginning, they were also growing and thriving as spiritual communities, and the individuals in these communities (at least many of them) were also growing and thriving as authentic followers of Jesus. It seems obvious that if this were not the case, we would not be here, the church would not have survived, and we would never have heard of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Why, then, is it still a rare thing for Christians to study and go through one of Paul's letters slowly, thoughtfully, and with every intention of taking it all to heart? Well, that's just another mystery, I suppose. But instead of pondering that, let us be busy doing it ourselves.

What is going on here? Is the opening of this letter just introductory rhetoric? We are getting a window into what was important to one of the early Christian communities. Which brings up questions some of you have asked me: Why do we spend so much time and put so much emphasis on the Apostle Paul? Why not concentrate entirely on Jesus?

I don't know if I can answer that question for you. I can answer it for me. To concentrate on Paul *is* to concentrate on Jesus. Let me explain. I love the records we have about Jesus' earthly life among us. I think they are more reliable and closer to the historical reality than most preachers and teachers in the liberal-Christian camp today. Nevertheless, these records are all secondhand at best, and later than any of the writings of Paul. But they tell us the available information we have about Jesus' earthly life. Whether we like it or not, we do have to deal with available information. All of us wish we had more information, but wishful thinking doesn't help. And those who make things up – and there are lots of them – hinder far more than they help.

Even so, the records of Jesus' life tell us about what He did and said, and what happened to Him. I want to know such things. But I also want to know what happened to those who believed in Jesus and tried to follow Him. If I also want to be a follower, that is critical and precious information to me. And all the primary, firsthand information on this subject comes from Paul. Paul encountered the Risen Jesus on the Damascus Road. It changed his life forever. He spent the rest of his life, to the best of his ability, praying to and obeying his Risen Lord. To concentrate on Paul is to concentrate on Jesus. I cannot *be* Paul, nor can Paul answer all of my questions, nor can studying Paul be any substitute for my own prayers and my own obedience. But checking my experience against Paul's experience is often the best shot I have for getting perspective and clarity about being a follower of Jesus. Again, we need to deal with available information. Lots of folk are "making it up as they go," but I don't like to be misled, and so I don't like to mislead others.

Back to our letter: We hear Paul claiming that he thanks God for those in the Christian community at Colossae. Do you imagine that this is just some cursory PR babble? A nice comment to put them at ease? Kind of like, "Hi everybody, how are you?" That is, I suppose, what most people assume, because they read right on by it without paying much attention.

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints [believers] – the faith and love that springs 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 that has come to you." This is a very short letter, and I suggest that Paul is putting some very important things in the very beginning.

Paul lives in a world that has barely begun to hear about Jesus, the Resurrection, or Pentecost, and all that this implies for those of us who live in this very difficult, partial, and treacherous place. But there is this little pocket of people in Colossae who have heard the Gospel, and who are believing it, and who are changing their lives to match the hope and faith and love that have opened up for them. Paul is genuinely grateful for this new pocket of believers. He knows that the Message will spread because of them. So he thanks God for them. And he prays for

them. We will get some clear hints of the manner in which he prays for them in just a few verses.

But for the moment, please pay attention to what we are hearing. Paul thanks God for these people, and he prays for them. Does Paul also thank God for all their foibles? For all their character defects? For all their attitudes, prejudices, jealousies, angers, and unforgiven sins? How many times I have stood in the chancel of a church and looked down a row of people standing there willing and ready to join the church. They are dressed so nicely, and all clean and sparkling. And we ask important questions, and they answer them correctly. And we extend the right hand of fellowship, and then the congregation greets them, joyfully and sincerely, as new members of that particular church. But do you know what I am saying inside myself? “Please Lord, may some of these people be coming into our fellowship to help build the church. I know you have sent some of them because of their needs. And some of them will cost far more time than I know how to come up with. Some of them will cause more trouble than we can fix, and not all of it for Your Kingdom. Some of them we will hardly ever see again. But please, are You sending some of them to help with the mission and the purpose for which we are here?”

Of course it isn't all clear and simple like that. People are mixtures – mixed motives, mixed gifts, mixed up – and not always clear themselves about who they are or why they are coming. Many times, those who cost the most also end up contributing the very things we need the most. And often they themselves do not realize it. Concurrently, those who are stalwart and faithful servants from the beginning do also, at times, stumble and fall and cause huge problems they never intended to cause. So more and more we learn to thank God for all who come. It is the Spirit's job to sort them out and to help and heal them – not mine. Some of them will contribute the most precisely through their flaws, and sometimes through their pain.

Does Paul also thank God for *all* the citizens of Colossae, not just the people who have come into the church? Does Paul pray for everyone who lives at Colossae? That would certainly be more politically correct, from today's perspective – much more “Christian,” many would say. That is what most people today think Paul should have been doing. “All are welcome!” *Of course* they are. All are invited. And no doubt everybody in Colossae was welcome to come into the church if they

wanted to – if they showed any interest, or responded in any way to the Message. But the way we speak about it (and usually do it) today, it only dilutes things down to meaningless generalities.

Did you “catch it” in verse three? “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Paul is being very specific. There are a lot of gods “out there” in Greco/Roman culture. Paul wants to make sure nobody gets confused – that nobody is going to be “inclusive” in the way we mean it. The Christian God is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Paul isn’t interested in the other gods, and he doesn’t want any of the people in Christian churches to be dependent on or obedient to just any god. The source of all things (at least for Christians) is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in Colossae at the time, it is very important to make and keep this clear distinction. Some of us suspect it may be necessary to make and keep this distinction clear again, in our own time. But I also suspect that there are not many who would agree with this.

Paul is grateful and prayerful with regard to those who are responding to the Gospel so far – to those who are, at this moment, participants in the church (the *ecclesia*) at Colossae. So if we hear it, what does that mean to us? It means we start out thanking God for those who have already decided to participate in *The New Church*. We pray for them also. This has nothing to do with not caring about or with writing-off anybody else; the future is not yet known.

But let us not be naive. It takes intention, time, energy, and focus to be grateful for those who are already part of us. It takes attention and energy to pray for them. So if we are to hear this part of Colossians, it is asking a lot of us. We will have to start getting to know each other better. The emails or phone calls or whatever will begin to fly. We will start to get behind the generalities and the formalities. We will begin to take down the shields and the masks. We will begin to ask questions, and also to answer them as openly and honestly as we can. Some of you, I hope, will want to get into “Disciple Bands” – into study groups with each other. In short, we will begin to build the bonds between us – to know each other, and to really care for and about each other.

Did Paul really care about any of the individuals involved? I am often dumbfounded that some people do not know how warm and personal Paul was. How many names of specific individuals do we associate with this letter? Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Philemon, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Luke, Demas, Nympha, Archippus. And

most scholars will tell you Paul had never been to Colossae, and had nothing to do with founding the church there? I consider that careless and highly questionable, even though Paul gives most of the credit to Epaphras for founding and nurturing the church at Colossae. The fact is, you cannot have a church without individuals. And you cannot have a church without individuals who are interested in relationships – with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, with each other. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Paul, like Jesus before him, took individual relationships very seriously. In most cases, more seriously than any of us do. And both Jesus and Paul were enormously interested in and concerned about the quality of relationships that existed between the followers. As Paul once stated rather clearly: if we get all the theology and theory quite correct but have no love for God, or for one another, we are nothing – just a lot of noise with no meaning (an empty gong, a clanging cymbal). Only, Paul assumed that in the church, our relationships would always have the love of Jesus at their center. The love of Jesus is always the source of our own love and caring.

It seems clear to me, by the way, that Paul had a pretty strong relationship with Philemon. We can invent unlikely explanations, but the probability is that Paul met Philemon in Colossae. Paul did not found the church there. He was intent on getting to Ephesus at the time. So he did not want to get seriously involved – sidetracked – with founding a new church at Colossae. But Paul may still have spent several days or weeks as he came through Colossae, perhaps even stopping to make some canvas goods to get a little money for provisions. Perhaps the same thing happened at Laodicea. Walking across Turkey (as we call it) is not the same as taking a bus. And sometime you might want to look at a map of ancient Turkey. Then explain to me what the scholars never do: How did Paul get from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus without going through Colossae and Laodicea? Why would Paul want to walk weeks out of his way to avoid Colossae, just to support scholars two thousand years later, who study Greek but never look at a map?

Paul had visited Colossae. He did not formally start a church there – he did not go through the usual confrontation and animosity with the synagogue in Colossae. But Paul did talk to some people there, and he made some friends there, and he sowed the seeds with some people there who, with the encouragement of Epaphras, later blossomed into a fledgling Christian community.

And so Paul was indeed personally grateful for what was happening, even in tiny little Colossae. And now, with the issue over his new friend, the runaway slave Onesimus – also of Colossae – Paul is doubly thankful that there is a Christian community to appeal to in support of his concern and love for Onesimus.

What kind of flavor do the prayers of Paul carry for the Christians at Colossae? Paul, in prison at Ephesus, has heard from Epaphras about how the church at Colossae is doing. He is delighted with most that he hears. He has some concerns too, but we will get to them a little later (not today).

Paul prays that the Colossian Christians will be filled with the knowledge of God's will for them, and that they will be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding. (We don't know how many of them had college degrees, but apparently that didn't much matter to Paul.) Paul prays that they will live lives worthy of the Lord, and that they will please Jesus in every way – bearing fruit for the Kingdom, and growing in the knowledge of God. Paul prays that they will be strengthened by the power and presence of Christ, and that this will give them great endurance, patience, joy, and thankfulness.

Are those things you can and will pray for when you pray for each other in *The New Church*, today and in the days ahead? If so, do you believe our prayers will be answered? If not, how can we even hope to become a true church? I know that many of you have been praying for my sister lately, and I am very grateful. I just left her yesterday, and, if she is any illustration, you are a very powerful prayer community indeed. But I get the impression from Colossians – don't you? – that Paul is not just talking about emergencies or surgery. He means all the time. A Christian community is aware that everything about the New Life is grounded and shaped by prayer. Some of us keep forgetting that merely being alive in a place as estranged from God as this place is a constant emergency.

Dear friends, I know that at the present, most of you do not have time enough or peace enough or patience enough for the kind of gratitude or prayers that Paul is talking about. We read Paul's letters and go about our Christian journey at about the same pace we travel the freeways. The intentions may be good, but Satan still controls most of our calendars and still designs most of our schedules. Satan, as we have said many times, is always in a hurry. And he knows that if he can get us to go

fast enough, if he can get us to want to accomplish more than is really possible, if he can get us to try to care about more people in general and fewer people in particular – then no matter how good our hearts and no matter how spiritual our intentions, there will be no possibility of enough quality in our lives, in our caring, or in our love ... to reveal any of the real love of God in Christ Jesus, or to redeem or change anything that truly matters.

Slow down. Offload some of your responsibilities and goals. Make more time in your life for the Holy Spirit. If you want to be the church, you must also consecrate and protect more time in your schedule – more time on your calendars – for being the church in reality, and not just in theory. Pruning is one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines we ever encounter. But pruning, as Jesus often taught us, is absolutely essential for those of us who want to bear fruit.

Colossians has given us some very big, very important hints about the Path we want to be on. We must be grateful for each other. We must pray for each other. And not just in a fast, offhand, thirty-seconds kind of way. We must begin to know each other more deeply, to care about each other more genuinely. It will be no small miracle if, in time, we bear more fruit for the Kingdom, have more knowledge of the Spirit's will for us, and have greater endurance, greater patience, and more joy and gratitude in God. It will be no small miracle if, more and more, we begin to share these things because we have been praying for them, and praying for them as we pray for each other. If we do that, who knows what will come of it – in this world or in the next.

Having said that, please, may I remind you: *The New Church*, at this very moment, in all likelihood, has at least as many members as the church at Colossae had when it received this letter from Paul. If we are indeed to grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding, we must keep learning to pay less and less attention to outer statistics, and more and more attention to the inner truth and to the inner Life. What we trust is the Holy Spirit, not the ways, goals, or evaluations of the world around us.

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”