

Lesson 2 – Colossians 1:3-8

Randy Thompson
Valley Bible Church
www.valleybible.net

Review

After nearly 20 years of ministry including four journeys across the eastern Mediterranean, the apostle Paul is imprisoned in Rome. Here he writes his “prison epistles”. One to the church at Colossae—a church he does not know and one that is facing heretical attacks on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This heresy would later become known as Gnosticism, emphasizing an elite, special knowledge (gnosis), and denying the deity and saving work of Jesus. Paul greets the church in his standard fashion and will now pray for them, first with the giving of thanks, then with supplication.

Introduction – Prayer

So, what is prayer? Here are some definitions.

Prayer is personal communication with God. (Wayne Grudem in Systematic Theology – An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine)

Prayer is the act of pouring out your heart to your creator in repentance, confession, and brokenness; adoration and praise; thankfulness; and supplication. (Me)

The Westminster Catechism (Question 178) defines prayer this way: Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God^a, in the name of Christ^b, by the help of his Spirit^c, with confession of our sins^d, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies^e. (^aPsa 62:8; ^bJohn 16:23b; ^cRom 8:26; ^dPsa 32:5-6; Dan 9:4a; ^ePhil 4:6)

Prayer is a discipline of dependence on God, and as such, is the life breath of every disciple of Jesus. (Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable – Luke 11)

So, why pray? There are many reasons. God uses prayer a means to accomplish His sovereign plan (a topic for another day but see examples from Jer 25:11-12 and Dan 9:19; Ezek 36:37; Gen 20:1-7, 17; and Job 42:7-9). God commands us to pray (Luke 18:1; 1 Thess 5:17; Col 4:2) so out of love for Christ (John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 1:6) we should yield to this command. God uses prayer to bless the one praying with good gifts (Matt 7:11; James 4:3), peace (Phil 4:6-7), joy (John 16:24), encouragement (Luke 18:1), fruit (John 15:7-8), and mercy and grace in time of need (Heb 4:16). But the biggest reason is that God is glorified in our prayers. The glory of God is the believer’s ultimate purpose, so each believer should strive to maximize glorifying God. Through dependence on His grace, mercy, and power in prayer He is glorified.

¹⁵**Call upon Me** in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and **you will honor** (glorify–ESV) Me.” (Psa 50:15)

¹³**Whatever you ask in My name**, that will I do, so that **the Father may be glorified in the Son**. (John 14:13)

Jesus was a pray-er and He clearly expects prayer to be a part of His disciples' lives.

⁵"When you pray, ... (Matt 6:5)

⁶"But you, when you pray, ... (Matt 6:6)

⁷"And when you are praying, ... (Matt 6:7)

⁹"Pray, then, in this way:... (Matt 6:9)

Paul was a pray-er because he patterned his life after his Lord. Jesus prayed often and fervently. See Luke's gospel especially for examples of Jesus praying and also for significant teaching on prayer.

³⁵**In the early morning, while it was still dark**, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. (Mark 1:35)

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and **while He was praying**, heaven was opened, (Luke 3:21)

¹⁶But Jesus Himself would **often** slip away to the wilderness and pray. (Luke 5:16)

¹²It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and **He spent the whole night in prayer to God**. (Luke 6:12)

¹⁸And it happened that **while He was praying alone**, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, "Who do the people say that I am?" (Luke 9:18)

²⁸Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and **went up on the mountain to pray**. (Luke 9:28)

¹It happened that **while Jesus was praying in a certain place**, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

⁴⁴And **being in agony He was praying very fervently**; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. (Luke 22:44)

Does God "hear" every prayer? Yes, God is omniscient and knows and hears everything. But, does God have regard for every prayer? To many people's chagrin (both believer and unbeliever), He does not. There are barriers to prayer. There are many examples in the Scriptures, but the key point is that sin causes a barrier between us and God. God does not regard the prayers of the believer walking in unrepentant sin. Here are some examples:

Unrepentant sin

¹⁶Come *and* hear, all who fear God, And I will tell of what He has done for my soul. ¹⁷I cried to Him with my mouth, And He was extolled with my tongue. ¹⁸If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear; ¹⁹But certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer. ²⁰Blessed be God, Who has not turned away my prayer Nor His lovingkindness from me. (Psa 66:16-20)

¹⁵"So when you spread out your hands *in prayer*, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. (Isa 1:15)

Living with disregard for God's Word (which is sin)

⁹He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, Even his prayer is an abomination. (Prov 28:9)

Praying with wrong motives (which is sin)

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:3)

¹⁴This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1 John 5:14-15)

Living with an idolatrous heart (which is sin)

³"Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity Should I be consulted by them at all? (Ezek 14:3)

Living in hypocrisy (which is sin)

⁵"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (Matt 6:5)

Walking in anger (which is sin)

⁸Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. (1 Tim 2:8)

Living selfishly (indifferent to the needs of poor) (which is sin)

¹³He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be answered. (Prov 21:13)

Living with an unforgiving spirit (which is sin)

²⁵"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. (Mark 11:25)

Living with inconsideration towards wife (or disregard for marital responsibilities in general) (which is sin)

⁷You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. (1 Pet 3:7)

Conversely, God will have regard for the prayer of a believer who is in unbroken fellowship with Him (i.e. the one who is walking in the Spirit).

⁷In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and **He was heard because of His piety.** (Heb 5:7)

¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. **The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.** (James 5:16)

❖ **Are you walking in such a way that God has regard for your prayers?**

Introduction – Thankfulness

In our passage today, we will see Paul being thankful for the Colossians. Thanklessness to their Creator is a defining characteristic of the unbeliever.

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹For even though they knew God, **they did not honor Him as God or give thanks**, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Rom 1:18-23)

Conversely, thankfulness flows from the born again (regenerated) heart that walks in the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 22-23; Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:16-17). Paul will address this in detail later in his letter.

⁶Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, ⁷**having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith**, just as you were instructed, **and overflowing with gratitude**. (Col 2:6-7)

¹⁶**Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you** (i.e. “be kept being filled with the Spirit” from Eph 5:18-19), with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks through Him to God the Father**. (Col 3:16-17)

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives a specific command regarding thankfulness.

¹⁶Rejoice always; ¹⁷pray without ceasing; ¹⁸**in everything give thanks**; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit; (1 Thess 5:16-19)

In all the struggles, difficulties, trials, disappointments, etc. of this life, the believer is to give thanks. This is graciously possible as the life of Christ flows through the believer (Gal 2:20) as they are not quenching the Spirit. MacArthur says it well in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, “It is spiritually abnormal for Christians to be unthankful.”

If you struggle with being thankful, here are some passages and points to ponder.

1. Pondering God’s faithfulness and sovereignty should result in thankfulness.

¹O LORD, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; **For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness**. (Isa 25:1)

¹It is good to give thanks to the LORD And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; ²**To declare** Your lovingkindness in the morning And **Your faithfulness by night**, (Psa 92:1-2)

2. The Lord's lovingkindness (His benevolent goodness) toward you should result in thankfulness.

¹Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting.** (Psa 106:1)

¹¹Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name. ¹²**I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And will glorify Your name forever.** ¹³For Your lovingkindness toward me is great, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. (Psa 86:11-13)

3. Contemplating God's works should result in thanksgiving.

⁸There is no one like You among the gods, O Lord, Nor are there any works like Yours. ⁹All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, And **they shall glorify Your name.** ¹⁰For You are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God. ... ¹²I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And **will glorify Your name forever.** (Psa 86:8-10; 12)

A worshipful believer is a thankful believer. "Praise" means giving joyful, verbal praise to God. The praise of God is declaring His attributes to be true. Praise gives glory to Him. Praising God is part of our worship. It should be continual and produces the giving of thanks to Him (Heb 13.15).

¹⁵Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, **the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.** (Heb 13:15)

❖ **Are you characterized by thankfulness? If not, what needs to change?**

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)

Paul moves from greeting to prayer. He begins with thanksgiving for the believers at Colossae before moving to intercession for them. Paul gives thanks for the recipients in 10 of his 13 letters (1 Thess 1:2-10; 2 Thess 1:3-4, 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Rom 1:8-10; Eph 1:15-23; Col 1:3-8; Philemon 4-6; Phil 1:3-5; 1 Tim 1:12-17; 2 Tim 1:3-4). He does not give thanks for the rebellious Corinthians in 2 Corinthians, for the quickly deserting Galatians, and his son in the faith on a mission in Titus (presumably because Titus already knows).

Paul is giving thanks for God's work in the believers at Colossae. God's work in people's lives, "the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God".

¹⁵For all things *are* for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. (2 Cor 4:15)

Paul is giving thanks, not only because he is thankful to the Lord for His work in the recipients of the letter, but to remind the recipients (and us) that God through Christ has done an amazing work in salvation. Remembering this salvation work is great preventative and restorative medicine for abandoning devotion to Christ alone.

Verses 3-8 form one long sentence in the Greek. Paul connects all these thoughts as he gives thanks.

1. Praying for them always with thanksgiving (v3)

³We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
(ESV)

“We” – Not just Paul is praying always for the Colossians. Timothy and all that are with him ministering to him in his imprisonment in Rome are praying for them also (including Timothy, Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, John Mark, Luke, and Demas – see 4:7+). Ministry is a team effort. Just like the Christian life is not lived alone, it is lived in community, so ministry is a team effort. The entire team was committed to the work at hand of making disciples which includes the “work of prayer”.

²⁸We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. ²⁹For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. (Col 1:28-29)

“Give thanks” is in the present tense (continuous action) as is “praying”.

“Praying always” is literally “always for you continually (present tense) praying”. Paul emphasizes the frequency of his prayers for the Colossians by adding the adverb “always” to the present tense verb. Paul’s prayers for them were without exception, on every occasion, every time, without end, repeatedly, unceasingly. The opposite is hardly or hardly ever or once in a while or on rare occasions.

Paul is practicing what he teaches. He commands the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Paul and his team are just like us. They converse, sleep, work, eat, study, minister, serve, etc. at which times they are pre-occupied with the task at hand. But the Colossians were always on the team’s minds, on their prayer lists. And when they thought of them or had times of dedicated prayed, they prayed for the Colossians. The team was continual turning their thoughts of the Colossians into prayers for the Colossians.

❖ **Who is on your list for whom to thank the Lord? Are you giving thanks “in everything” (1 Thess 5:18)? Are you turning your thoughts into prayers?**

An interesting observation here is to whom is Paul praying. In other places, Paul thanked “Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tim 1:12) because Jesus strengthened him for service. He was thanking the one who did the action. Here, Paul is praying correctly theologically. It is the Father who decrees. The Father sovereignly plans and brings about all things according to His own purpose and grace (Psa 145:8-9; 1 Cor 8:6). He has decreed for His own glory all things that come to pass (Eph 1:11). He continually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and events (1 Chron 29:11). He is thanking the One who chose the Colossians for salvation.

❖ **Is your mind so saturated with God’s Word and seeking to understand it that your prayers are theologically correct?**

2. Thanks is given because of the evidence of their salvation (v4-5a)

⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; ^{5a}because of the hope laid up for you in heaven,

⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ^{5a}because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. (ESV)

Paul and his team began to give thanks for them since they had heard from Epaphras that they had been called into a relationship with the Father and exercised the gift of true saving faith. That relationship was evident because they persevered in faith, had love for the brethren, and had a hope that was an anchor for their soul (Heb 6:19).

Paul had used the three evidences before (1 Thess 1:3). None of the worldly philosophies that the Colossians were entertaining could do what the Father did through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

❖ **Do you have a persevering faith, an active love, and a stabilizing hope?**

The acceptance of the Gospel causes people to take notice. This happened with Paul also.

²²I was *still* unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; ²³but only, they kept hearing, “He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” ²⁴**And they were glorifying God because of me.** (Gal 1:22-24)

Every Christian has the potential to cause those around to take notice – either for good or for bad. People can either notice your difference, love, peace, etc. or they can notice your hypocrisy. Your life can either show the greatness of God as you yield yourself to Him and He changes you; OR your life can bring dishonor to the One who paid your penalty.

¹⁶They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed. (Titus 1:16)

²Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; (2 Pet 2:2)

❖ **Does the evidence of your life convict you of being a follower of Christ?**

The Colossians had “faith” in Christ Jesus. But that faith was not mere intellectual assent or a nebulous trust or an acceptance of the truths of the gospel. The Scriptures present a grand picture of the definition of true saving faith. The reason is clear, God wants to make sure people (including ourselves) do not delude themselves into thinking they have exercised saving faith when they had not. Remember that both grace and faith are a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9).

A complete picture of true saving faith then encompasses repentance (John 3:16; Luke 24:46-47; Mark 1:14-15; Acts 20:20-21; Acts 26:19-20; 2 Cor 12:21; Rev 9:20-21; 16:11; Heb 6:1), self-denial and following Jesus (Luke 9:23-26; John 10:27-28), forsaking all (Luke 14:15-33), and confessing Jesus as Lord (Luke 6:45; Rom 10:8-10) with a commitment to obey Him (John 3:36; Heb 5:8-9).

❖ **Have you surrendered to the King of Glory and exercised true saving faith?**

When you present the gospel, do you present the biblical picture of saving faith?

3. Which they heard in the life changing gospel (v5b-6)

^{5b}of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶which 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;

^{5b}Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, (ESV)

The means through which the decree of God came to fruition is the word of truth, the gospel. The only place that the hope of heaven is found is in the word of truth, the gospel. The Colossians had received the gospel. Just like everywhere else that the gospel is received, the resulting proof of acceptance is present. There is fruit – personal sanctification as well as spreading.

❖ **Do you see evidence in your life if God’s bearing of fruit through you?**

Since this constantly bearing fruit and increasing has been occurring at Colossae, it is evidence that they had “understood” the gospel. “Understood” is “epignosko” in the Greek. It means to recognize something for what it really is and in the present context indicates that the Colossians had personally come to know the grace of the gospel fully and experientially (they had experienced the power of the gospel in their lives). The noun form is used four times in the letter (Col 1:9, 10, Col 2:2, Col 3:10). In Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving, he begins to refute the gnostic false teaching that is present at Colossae. There is no hidden, elitist knowledge. The Colossians have heard and received the true knowledge, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

❖ **Do you seek to hold to a pure gospel or do you attempt to integrate it with worldly philosophies?**

“Grace of God in truth” is a magnificent description of the gospel. Again, it is truth opposed to the lies that Paul will be refuting later in the letter.

4. Which they learned from Paul’s fellow slave and faithful servant (v7-8)

⁷just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. (ESV)

“Learned” means to be instructed. This is the same root word for a learner, a pupil, one who follows the teaching of someone else, i.e. a disciple. Epaphras was a disciple maker. He was committed to the mission that the Lord had given him (Matt 28:19-20).

“Beloved” refers to a feeling of love based on the preciousness of the object loved.

“Fellow bond-servant” is literally “fellow slave” and describes a slave who is intimately associated with another slave by virtue of the fact that they belong to the same master. Unfortunately, English translations translate the Greek “doulos” as “servant” instead of the actual word “slave”.

Jesus Christ is the believer’s only “master and Lord” (Jude 4). “Master” (despotes) means one who possesses undisputed ownership and absolute, unrestricted, unchallenged power or authority over another. The Greeks refused the title to any but the gods. “Lord” describes the supreme one, one who is sovereign and possesses absolute authority, absolute ownership and uncontested power. It is used of the One to Whom a person or thing belongs, over which He has absolute power. Jesus was clear that He was our only master. We cannot have another master.

²⁴“**No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.** You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt 6:24)

❖ **Do you have any other masters?**

The believer is Christ’s “slave” (doulos) not “servant”. Doulos is the most servile person in the culture of Paul’s day. A doulos wholly surrenders their will to the master’s will and is devoted to their master, even to the disregard of their own interests and/or desires.

Doulos depicts a slave, a person deprived of all personal freedom and totally under the control of his master. Absolute obedience and loyalty to his master (who provided him with food, clothing, and housing) was required of every doulos. In contrast to the andrapodon, who was made a slave, the doulos was born a slave. James had become a doulos by his new birth through faith in Jesus Christ. (MacArthur NT Commentary – James)

❖ **Do you consider yourself a “slave” of Christ?**

Epaphras was also “faithful servant”. “Faithful” means that he was trustworthy, dependable, reliable, faithful in the discharge of his duties. “Servant” is “diakonos” expressing the idea of service in general. He was a man who served Paul faithfully.

❖ **Do you faithfully serve the body of Christ?**

Epaphras was the one who informed Paul of the Colossians’ consistent walk in the Spirit that flowed outward in love (agape). This is another demonstration of surrendering to the lordship of Christ in salvation.

❖ **Are you consistently walking in the Spirit?**

Conclusion

Paul prays for the church that he has not personally met. He begins with thanking God for His work in the individuals at Colossae. The Colossians are people of faith, love, and hope. God brought them into a relationship with Himself by bringing the word of truth, the gospel, to them. It is evident they are saved because they are bearing fruit and increasing.

Additional Study

1. As you come before the Lord in prayer, do you first beseech the Lord to examine your heart and reveal any sin so that you may repent and remove any sin-barriers to effective prayer?

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

²⁴And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. (Psa 139:23-24)

2. As you come before the Lord in prayer, do you seek to pray only truth biblical truth?
3. Do you exhibit faith, love, and hope and are you bearing fruit as evidences that you have been born again?
4. Are you a slave of Christ? Have you given over everything to follow Him?