

Colossians No. 2

“A Thankful, Generous Heart”

Colossians 1:1-14

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Now you will appreciate that it is possible to preach the entire Bible out of any part of the Bible. I could spend years preaching through Colossians and be able to justify every sermon as a legitimate exposition of this letter. I gave you a long sermon last Lord’s Day evening devoted to the letter’s first word, “Paul.” I could preach a sermon on the history and ministry of the apostles and how they laid the foundation of the church. I could preach a sermon or several sermons on the name Jesus and the title Christ. I could add a sermon or two on the life story of Timothy and its lessons for us today. Then a sermon or two on what it means to be a saint, a brother in Christ, then sermons on grace and sermons on the peace of God and finally a sermon series on the Fatherhood of God. In fact, I’m finishing up a book entirely devoted to the concept of union with Christ, what Paul describes typically with the phrase “in Christ” as we have it in v. 2. If a scholar can write hundreds of pages on what it means to be “in Christ,” I could certainly preach a dozen sermons or more on the same subject. We’d have consumed months or years of Sundays and would have only considered the first two verses of the letter. And I could do the same, only more so, with the next twelve verses!

I remember hearing of a man who had happened to hear Martyn Lloyd Jones deliver a sermon, part of his celebrated series of sermons on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, on the statement in 6:11 about Christians standing against the schemes of the Devil, “wiles of the Devil” as it reads in the King James Version. The same man happened to return to London some months later and went to worship at Westminster Chapel and that morning Lloyd Jones was treating the 18th scheme or “wile” of the Devil. In fact the great preacher gave twenty-five sermons on that one verse, verse 11 of Ephesians 6! You get my point. I could literally preach a year or more of sermons from verses 1-14 of Colossians chapter 1. As we read the verses you will see very easily how possible that would be.

But I won’t do that for several reasons. First, in the hands of anyone but a very great preacher that is likely to be a wearying way to make one’s way through a book of the Bible. But, more important, that isn’t being faithful to the nature of this book. Colossians was a letter, written to be read by a community of Christians just like you. The one who read the letter out to the congregation in Colossae didn’t stop on every word to explain in depth what each word meant, what lessons might be drawn from it, how it related to the other teaching of the Word of God, and so on. It didn’t take years to read the letter to the Colossian congregation! It was the argument of sentences and paragraphs and sections that the Christians in Colossae heard and understood. It was the argument as a whole, not its bits and pieces that helped them; it was the progress of Paul’s argument as he made it that impressed them. Colossians is not a treatise on Christian theology, though it has a lot of theology in it; it is not a wordbook or dictionary of Christian terms, though it is replete with distinctively Christian vocabulary. Colossians is a letter, such a letter as you might write to a friend, a letter that expresses your thoughts about a particular matter. It is *as a letter* that I propose to consider it. The first paragraph sounds quite *conventional* to a well-read Christian’s ear, but like all of Paul’s paragraphs it is packed with

truth of the most important kind. Still, the Colossians heard it all at once and it was its total impact that they would have considered.

And so we take the entire introduction of the letter at once tonight. This is how Paul began his letter, how he introduced himself to these believers, and how he won their attention to what he had to tell them. We want to hear it as they did, though I will make a few comments on the text to enable you to understand it as the Colossian Christians would have.

Scholars point out that the thanksgiving, typical of the opening of Paul's letters (indeed such a thanksgiving is lacking only in Galatians and Titus of the thirteen letters of Paul in the NT), is more elaborate in Colossians. Apparently Paul used the thanksgiving to make an important point in the historical context, namely that "adherence to the gospel of God's Son provides for all the spiritual blessing and power that they will ever need." [Moo, 74] They don't need whatever it was that the false teachers were "adding" to their faith and life.

Text Comment

- v.2 One significant fact about Colossae at this time was that there was a sizeable Jewish population in the city. Some of those, perhaps a good number of those who heard the letter read for the first time, were Jewish Christians. That fact will become significant as we examine the false teaching that was being given to the Christians there.
- v.3 The thanksgiving that begins the letter, as I said, is more elaborate than in Paul's other letters. But notice the theme of the whole paragraph. The first sentence begins with "thanks" and the last sentence, beginning in v. 11, includes the "giving thanks" in v. 12.
- v.5 Epaphras, the missionary who first evangelized Colossae had recently brought Paul a report of circumstances in the church there. In that report there was much that was good but some that was troubling. The Colossians, who knew Epaphras well, would have understood that Paul knew of their situation because Epaphras had told him. Paul, wise as he was, begins with praise and gratitude. He'll have some more controversial things to say as he proceeds but wins a hearing with his gracious introduction. Paul himself had apparently never been to Colossae or at least never been there since there was a Christian church in the city, as he seems to say in 2:1 and 5.

Note the characteristically Pauline use of "hope" as a synonym for salvation, that is, here "hope" is salvation in its consummation in heaven which Christians *hope* for. And note that it is here made the foundation of their faith and love. The gospel is finally a message about the future. Its power in the present depends entirely upon the promise of things to come and a believer's confidence in the eventual fulfillment of that promise. Without heaven there is no gospel and no Christian life. It may be, as has so often been the case throughout history, that what was being offered to these saints was supposedly a Christian life that didn't require all the patient waiting that the Bible requires of believers. "You can have *now* what you have been taught you have to wait for!" [Lucas, 29] That "because" is important for believers today for whom, we must admit, the future has much less pull. The present is everything. In our media age the world is made so beguiling that

the unseen future seems pale in comparison, no matter how impossibly better the Bible says it will be.

- v.6 Paul is laying stress on the power of the gospel, power displayed in its triumphant advance throughout the world. Just remember how remarkable this was, that a message no one had heard before and was so alien to the thought world of the Greco-Roman world was taking that world by storm! Tertullian famously wrote to the pagans in the early 3rd century:

“We are but of yesterday, and yet we already fill your cities, islands, camps, you palace, senate, and forum. We have left you only your temples.”

The same thing might be said by a Christian letter writer to an unbeliever in China or in Black Africa today in our time where Christians are spreading over the continent in a remarkably fast and wonderful way.

- v.7 Paul seems to be saying that what they learned from Epaphras is what they would have heard from Paul himself and that there was nothing lacking in the message Epaphras brought them as the false teachers had apparently insinuated.
- v.9 At the beginning of his letters Paul characteristically moves from thanksgiving to petition. Here he prays that the Colossians might continue on the course they began when first they became followers of Christ. As will become clear as the argument proceeds, his point is that they don't need to take a new direction but rather to continue to follow the one they have been on from the beginning.

This is why the prayer meeting is so important and why we are constantly encouraging you to make it a part of your life. This sort of prayer, for the advancement of the kingdom of God, will simply not be done or not widely or well done if it is left to the individual Christian to do it in his private prayers. There is too much of personal interest to the Christian man or woman to find room to pray for the believers in faraway Colossae and yet this is a great deal of the prayer that we are introduced to in the pages of the NT!

- v.12 That's an interesting phrase unique to Paul in Colossians: God himself had *qualified them*. They need nothing more than that obviously! By the way, if you want a proof text against the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, v. 12 serves the need wonderfully! God in Christ has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints! He has already delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and already transferred us to the kingdom of his Son!
- v.14 It is worth a quick mention at this point that, while this is the same Paul who wrote Romans and Galatians, we are not going to find the same presentation here as we find there. Polemics shaped the way the apostle Paul taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. The problem Paul was facing in Colossae was not the same as the problem he addressed in Romans and Galatians. The language of justification by faith, for example, does not appear in Colossians. None of the words we associate with that argument and with that

doctrine can be found in the letter to the Colossians. The gospel can be described -- and is described -- in many different ways in the Bible and Paul himself described it in different ways. Here it is described as “redemption” -- that is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross to deliver us from bondage -- leading to “the forgiveness of sins.” Justification by faith describes the gospel from one vantage point: the granting to guilty sinners of a right standing before God on the basis of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to them. But there are other ways to look at and to describe salvation and the Bible emphasizes those other ways as well: as reconciliation with God, as adoption into his family, as the forgiveness of sins, as the transformation of our lives, and so on. It is too great a reality to be comprehended by one set of terms. As one NT scholar put it, the authors of the NT “debate from a single platform, but from different corners of it.” Paul himself uses the whole platform and fashions his argument and his account of salvation to the particular needs of his readers. [C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 167] It is, frankly, a fascinating question, probably without the possibility of an answer, whether a Colossian Christian would have known to explain the forgiveness of his sins in the language of justification by faith that Paul deploys in Romans and Galatians or whether he or she, unacquainted with that vocabulary, would have used more general terms as Paul uses here.

Taking the letter as whole, it appears that Paul used his customary introductory section of thanksgiving and petition to assure these Christians that they had been properly established in the truth of the gospel and that their place within the Christian community was well-known and an honored one. It was also his way of subtly reminding them that the gospel had already done its great work in them, they were themselves the evidence of its power, and, accordingly, they didn’t need the so-called “superior” wisdom of the teachers who had begun to tempt these Christians to believe that there was another doctrine and another spiritual life of which they had not been taught. No, says Paul in giving thanks for them, you have everything already because you have faith in Christ, the hope of heaven, and the life of love for God and for the saints. Faith, hope, and love are shorthand for the whole message of the gospel and a genuine response to it. [Lucas, 27]

But tonight I want to consider with you not the argument of this opening paragraph, the argument I have partly summarized for you with my comments on the text, so much as the spirit that Paul displays in it, a spirit that probably would have made the greatest impression on these believers as they heard the letter from the great apostle to the Gentiles read out in their church service one Sunday morning. What a way to begin a letter about serious things, a letter that is going to contain some warning and some perhaps difficult exhortation, a letter about the reception of which the apostle Paul couldn’t be precisely sure. It was a letter that was going to require his readers to think and to accept the authoritative voice of Christ’s apostle. What a way to commend what he is to say to his readers!

I came across this years ago in a book by Alexander Whyte.

“The size and the substance and the spirit of a man’s soul is at once seen by the spontaneity and the generosity and the exuberance and the warmth of his praises. Just as the smallness and the stinginess and the sullenness and the mulishness of another man’s

soul is all disclosed to us by his despicable ingratitude to all his benefactors. Almighty God himself inhabits the praises of Israel. And to praise, and with your whole heart, all those men and women and children who deserve praise at your hands; that already is a certain contribution toward your praise of God.” [*James Fraser of Brea*, 19]

And that is just the spirit of praise and appreciation and gratitude that we find everywhere in the writings of Paul. His was a generous and grateful heart. You see at the very outset of this letter. Paul...*and Timothy*... as if Timothy wrote this letter as much as did the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Timothy was with Paul in Rome and no doubt helped the great man in many ways, but you and I both know that Paul did not turn to Timothy and say, “Tim, I’m fresh out of good ideas. What do *you* think we ought to write to the Colossians?” No one can read Colossians and imagine Paul taking down Timothy’s dictation! I have a treasured gift on my book shelf, a collection of essays on the Reformed faith and its history by the Dutch scholar, the renowned Prof. Simon van der Linde of Utrecht. I once visited him in his home, itself a magnificent library of old Reformed theology, and he made a present of the book to me and inscribed it, “To Dr. Rayburn, a small present,” then signed the inscription, “S. van der Linde, co-pastor.” I felt like Timothy must have felt, having his small name attached to a name far greater than his own. Yet there is Timothy listed as a co-author of one of Paul’s letters. This is a window on the man’s spirit.

But surely Paul was right to include Timothy and to be so generous to include him in the opening of the letter. Behind great men is often an army of lesser men and women whose work is not so celebrated but just as necessary. Paul needed his Silases and Timothys and Trophimuses and in ways we cannot now describe they enabled the apostle to have a ministry as deep and wide as Paul’s proved to be. I read recently of Frances Whitehead, an early convert of John Stott’s at All Souls in London and soon thereafter chosen by Stott to be his secretary, a position she would hold for more than forty years. She became a fixture of his worldwide ministry, handling the day to day routine of his varied enterprises, from his correspondence to and from people all over the world, to managing the finances of various schemes of assistance for third world pastors and young scholars, to typing the manuscripts of his many books. Among insiders of that multi-faceted and wonderfully fruitful ministry she was known as “Frances the omnicompetent” or “Frances -- SOAK (Source of all Knowledge), and later, to generations of Langham Scholars who came to live and study with Stott and his associates, as John Stott himself was Uncle John, she was Aunty Frances. [Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, I, 318] One of the great books of the twentieth century was John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ*. It is dedicated to Frances Whitehead.

“But I reserve until last my heartfelt thanks to Frances Whitehead who in 1986 completes thirty years as my secretary. This book is the umpteenth she has typed. I cannot speak too highly of her efficiency, helpfulness, loyalty, and undiminished enthusiasm for the work of the Lord. With much gratitude I dedicate this book to her.”

As with Timothy in Colossians 1:1, Frances Whitehead’s name, otherwise unknown and inconsequential, will live on for centuries because it will be found in the dedication of that great book, a book, I’m sure, will be read with pleasure and profit by generations of Christians to come.

And we see still more of that same spirit in Paul's mention of Epaphras. He could have simply mentioned his name, but instead we have "our beloved fellow-servant, Epaphras, a faithful minister of Christ." There is Paul placing himself on Epaphras' level and raising Epaphras to his own. And then he adds so much in praise and commendation of these Christians in Colossae, believers Paul knew only by reputation. A person can fake a spirit of gratitude and appreciation for a time, but not for long. What is in the heart sooner or later is reflected in what is communicated by the tongue or the pen and there is gratitude and appreciation and thanksgiving everywhere in Paul's letters.

You, no doubt, have heard or read this paragraph from C.S. Lewis's great book, *Reflections on the Psalms*. Together with his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, it is one of the most often cited pieces of Lewis prose. I remember very well the tremendous impression it made on me the first time I read it. Lewis is speaking about the praise of God in particular, something the Psalms of course are full of, and he is addressing the question that often occurs to readers of the Bible. Why does God seem to think we ought to praise him? Is God vain? Does he need his children to give him strokes so that he can feel good about himself? We don't ask other people to praise us because it would sound vain.

"But the most obvious fact about praise -- whether of God or anything -- strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise -- lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game -- praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. ...praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed." [93-95]

Well so it was with the Apostle Paul. He was always praising God for his great salvation and his mighty love but in the spirit of God's gracious self-giving, generosity, and appreciation Paul was always praising others, acknowledging them, and drawing attention to what they had

accomplished for the kingdom of God. He obviously loved to do this. He found tremendous satisfaction in doing it. That is what God does in his Word, after all. He's always acknowledging what his children were and did. Abraham was "his friend," David was "a man after God's own heart," Peter was "a rock," John was "the disciple he loved," and so on. And Paul took his cue from God himself. Epaphras was a beloved fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ and the Colossians were well known to him for their faith, hope, and love, Christians who are bearing fruit and growing.

It is so much easier to take counsel from a man who is grateful *for you*, a man who wants to thank you for who you are and what you have done, and from a man who does not hesitate to say how grateful he is for you. praises you and what you have done, and a man who does not hesitate to *say so!* This is the way Paul characteristically began his letters and even more so this letter. Gratitude, appreciation, and praise were the foundation of his letters and of his relationship with his churches, even those he did not know personally.

This may seem obvious to us, but, then, if it is, why don't we do this ourselves more often and more enthusiastically than we do? Why are we not always praising God and doing so in the presence of others and urging others to join us in praising God for this or for that? And why are we not always praising others for what they have done that is pleasing to God and to any thoughtful Christian? Why are we not regularly thanking them for what they have contributed to our lives and the life of the kingdom of God? Why are we not always praising others as we praise God? Why are others not regularly hearing us commend them and thank them for what they are and what they have done? There is a lot in Paul's introduction that is boilerplate Christian expression, but, then in those words is a universe of the most wonderful meaning if only these words are read thoughtfully and with feeling and conviction. The entire spirit of this introduction is conventional in one way, but when grasped as the true spirit of a Christian soul it is a window on what the Christian heart should be and should feel and how the Christian should speak of others. And words being as important as they are, this introduction is as much as a lesson in how to have and to keep and to build firm, happy, and holy relationships of love and loyalty in the church of God. Praise, generous acknowledgement, thanksgiving warmly expressed: these are the key. It's very hard to get sideways with somebody who is always thanking you for who you are and what you've done.

The fact is gratitude and praise are not natural to us, to our flesh. I have often said to you men in the congregation that you have an extraordinary power over the heart of your wives. You can lift them up with just a few words, a few sentences of love, appreciation and celebration. And yet, while you have that power and you know you have that power, how often do you actually use that power. You have this extraordinary power over the soul, the heart of another human being and you don't speak, you don't utter the words that you know very well you ought to be always uttering. Our raging self-love is diametrically opposed to a generous, other-centered spirit of praise and thanksgiving. What is more, much of what we have to thank God for most, and even to thank others for most, cannot be seen by the eye of the body. So much of what is most valuable in God's gifts to us and in the work of others on behalf of the kingdom is invisible to the eye. It will not be seen for what it is and was until the great day. It can be appreciated only by faith and our faith is often weak. We don't see it so we don't notice it and so we don't comment on it. We thank God for our food religiously three times a day, but, then, we always have enough

food to eat. It is hard to be thankful, truly thankful for what is so easy to take for granted. But heaven is another matter altogether. Far more wonderful, so utterly a free gift that we might not have received, but invisible, yet unseen. And then it is hard for us to be grateful and full of praise because the gifts we enjoy and the blessing that others are to us are mixed together with trial and sorrow. It is not easy for us to be mourning and grateful at the same time, no matter that we can easily enough understand why we ought to be and no matter that we are fully aware that if we were we would live a happier and more fruitful Christian life. Our savior, the night of his betrayal -- have you thought about this, read through those passages in John 14-15 and in the Synoptic Gospels -- knowing full well what was to come in just a few hours, nevertheless gave thanks to his Father for a number of things that night in the Upper Room.

There is so much we ought to be thankful for, both thankful to God and thankful to others. We ought to be thankful, of course, first and foremost, for the grace of God lavished on us in Christ and our hope of the world to come. But we ought, if we have any true Christian love in our hearts, to be thankful for that grace given to others, as Paul was here for the Colossians. We ought to be thankful to the advancement of the kingdom of God anywhere and everywhere. Paul was sitting in prison, but was full of gladness and praise because the gospel was surging forward everywhere. Are you thrilled, as you should be, about the thousands of people every day being added to the church of God in China and Africa? It is glorious beyond words when you think about it. And good men and women, of whom the world is not worthy, are spearheading that work, some of whom it is our privilege to know. Have you thanked God for *that* recently? It will do your heart good to thank him for his kingdom and for its progress in the world. It will give you a right perspective on life. Thank God for what he is doing in the lives of others all over the world and not just for you breakfast or lunch or dinner.

You remember from your school days the poem, *A New Colossus*, which is engraved in stone at the foot of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore...

Such were you and I, and such were multitudes of others we know or know about. We were bond slaves in the kingdom of darkness and death and were ready to make that kingdom our eternal and miserable home, until Christ said,

Send please, your homeless, tempest tossed to me;
I lift my lamp above the golden door.

And you and I and multitudes of others, by divine grace and by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, *and by nothing else*, walked out of that death camp and breathtakingly grand that it cannot be adequately described in any words that are known to us. We walked through that door by the grace of God but also because others helped us to do so -- *there* is something to thank people for! -- and continue to walk toward that future because others are continuing to help us -- beloved fellow servants like Epaphras -- someone else to thank and praise generously. Children as you are growing up, has it ever occurred to you to say to your

father and mother in a birthday card, Christmas card, a personal letter how grateful you are to God for them and how wonderful it has been to grow up in their family because in that family you met the Lord Jesus Christ who became your Lord and Savior as he was theirs. And as with us so with so many others all over the world, and surely we can praise them for their good work, so much like the work that was done on our behalf. We belong to a great family, the saints, and all the good done for them ought to be the cause of praise and thanksgiving on our part.

There is so much to be thankful for. No one can deny that! But if so, then surely praise and thanksgiving, for God and for man, should be in our hearts and on our lips *constantly*! I remember being arrested by a remark of “Rabbi” Duncan’s, the 19th century Free Church of Scotland saint, missionary, theologian, and professor.

“Did you ever thank God,” he asked, “for Abel’s five thousand years in heaven?”

Well, whether it was 5,000 years or more, Abel has been in heaven longer than any other human being and it occurred to Duncan to think that, if in the body of Christ one member rejoices in the blessings of another, we ought to give thanks for Abel’s being in heaven so long. What struck me when I first read that remark for the first time was that it never occurred to me to thank God for Abel’s being in heaven longer than anyone else, but I wish I were such a man to whom it would have occurred because such a man who thinks of those things must be thinking all the time of things to give thanks and praise to God for and to others for and it must be a happy heart that is so often thinking of wonderful things to commend to others. There are so many things to be grateful for, if you are a Christian, if only you will remember them and then speak your gratitude. Remember Lewis’ point: “the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.”

Paul has given us a lot of wonderful truth in this opening paragraph, but he has also shown us very beautifully how to think about that truth and in particular how to talk about it, especially to others!