

98-06-19a Colossians

As we prepare to study the Word of God together this evening, let's begin by going to the Lord in prayer. Father, we thank you for your preserving and sustaining grace. We thank you for all of the things that you do for us above and beyond that, in blessing us, providing for our needs, providing us challenges that stimulate our growth, and encourage us to make application of the things that we have learned from your Word.

We thank you for the fellowship that we enjoy with you through your Spirit. We thank you most of all for our Savior, Jesus Christ, and the standing that we have in Him, the opportunity to enjoy His presence and yours within our souls. We pray Paul's letter to the Colossians, that God the Holy Spirit will enlighten us, that we will perceive rightly the message that you have put there for us, and that having seen it, it will remain in our minds and become a part of the resources in our souls, and enable us to live in a way that pleases you and glorifies our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We ask these things in His name. Amen. We resume tonight our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians, and just by way of brief review, we have seen that in this Roman province of Asia, which used to be Phrygia, there is a valley that runs more or less east-west.

It's the Lycus River Valley. At the west end, which empties out into the ocean in there, you have Ephesus. And then as you travel eastward and just slightly northward, anywhere from 11 to 15 miles, at the other end of the valley, up shadowed by the mountains and so forth, you have three cities.

You have Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae. Hierapolis is the newest and youngest and most energetic of these towns. It's known for its hot springs and so forth.

You have Laodicea, which has been declared the capital of the province in that region, and it has a lot of thriving growth and a stimulated economy, and there's a lot going on there. Colossae is the oldest city. It used to be on the main passageway where the traffic would flow, and it, in centuries past, had been a great city, but it has declined.

It's now out of the way. When they built the new highway, it didn't run through Colossae, and so the median age of the population is older. The young people grow up and move away.

It seems to be sort of on its way out. The valley is plagued with earthquakes, and each time the destruction takes place from earthquakes, Laodicea and Hierapolis, lots of rich, young, energetic people, they rebuild. They, in some cases, even expand and do better out of the destruction.

But Colossae never quite recovers from each successive disaster. Right around the time that Paul writes this letter to the Colossians, there's going to be a really tremendous earthquake. We don't know if it was probably shortly after this because nothing is mentioned about it, but right around this same time, there is a devastating earthquake that pretty well finishes off the town.

It exists as a small village for a few years into the church age, but basically, just shortly after this letter is written, Colossae is going to cease to be a notable town at all. But there is a church in Colossae. There are a couple of people there that Paul knows.

He has some dear friends there, one of whom is Philemon. The church meets in his home. He has a wife and a son, and the pastor of the church, Epaphras, comes over there and teaches, and there's a small group from the community that comes over there and meets.

There's also a church over in Laodicea, a larger and younger and more energetic church, and Paul writes them a letter at the same time that he writes this letter to the Colossians. And looking at the two letters together, you really get a picture of what's on Paul's mind as he considers the news that comes to him as he's imprisoned in Rome from Epaphras because something has infiltrated the area, a new fad, a new wave of thinking. In fact, several waves of thinking are swirling around the valley, and it has engulfed the new, young towns, and it has also reached Colossae.

And Paul considers the believers in Colossae just as important, their spiritual growth and their opportunity to identify these errors for what they are and to cling to the faith and to advance and to bear fruit in God's plan. It's just as important to Paul for them as it is for the trendy towns and the believers who live there. So he writes this letter to the Colossians, and it's a wonderful encouragement to us because many times we think that we're not on the beaten track.

We're not on the fast track to ministry or to impact or to some sort of notoriety in God's plan. We think, well, I don't really seem to have opportunities to bear fruit. I don't seem to really have the contacts or the circumstances.

I'm tied down with this responsibility or this issue or this particular lifestyle or life circumstance, and I can't do the things that I see other people doing. And we start to sort of get a little bit of a spiritual inferiority complex. And what's really bad is when our fellow believers usually, and we'll say in a charitable way, unconsciously reinforce that feeling because a lot of times believers base their sense of growth and their sense of well-being spiritually on what they're doing.

And so around holidays or family gatherings or at some other time when you're around other believers, maybe you go and attend a special event where there are a lot of believers. Maybe you've known them in the past and you see them again. Oh, let me tell you about this.

Let me tell you about that. We had such a wonderful time when we went here. Oh, you know, so many lives were changed when we did this and that and the other.

And we smile and we're happy for them and we can see that God has been at work perhaps and so forth. And when it's sort of our turn to speak up and the eyes turn expectantly there, we don't really have a lot to say. And then we start thinking, maybe I'm not really experiencing the fullness of the Christian life.

Maybe I'm kind of in a little backwater, a little byway. I don't seem to have those experiences. And people just seem to have so much going on.

Well, just picture the believers in Colossae because that was their experience every day. They're in the bypassed town. They're in the crumbling city.

They're the small church that meets in Philemon's living room. And they may not even have had a pianist or an organist. There might have just been a few.

And Epaphras, who is sort of a circuit riding preacher, he ministers in several different places in the valley. One of his stops and one of his favorite places is right there at the church that meets in Philemon's house. And when he realizes that if that weren't enough for the believers in Colossae to face, suddenly there are pressures from the outside to change the meaning of living as a Christian, to redefine what a healthy, growing, fruitful Christian life is.

These ideas are coming in from the outside from three or four different places. And Epaphras is teaching the Word of God that he learned under the Apostle Paul. And he teaches it.

And when he says these things, everyone agrees with him. He says, you know, it's faith in the Word of God that enables your growth. It's relationship with Jesus Christ that defines us as believers.

We have a great hope waiting for us in heaven. We have an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, waiting for us. And all of these people who are teaching here say, yes, absolutely, that's all correct.

That's just not quite enough. I mean, you've got a part of the picture there. And I'm sure your pastor, Epaphras, is a wonderful man.

And he's a very sort of plodding down the middle of the road student of the Word of God. But Epaphras doesn't get out much. There's a lot of other things happening in the church and in Christian life.

And here are some of these other things that if you get into this, this will really complete your Christian life. This is how you will experience the fullness. Well, it's a very tricky thing to identify.

It's deceptive because it seems so great. And as we have seen in the past few weeks of looking at Colossians, the first thing that we learn as believers, if you go look at the basic things in Hebrews chapter 6, for example, or other places in Corinthians and other places where the New Testament talks about here's the first things you learn as a believer. What do we first figure out? What's the first thing in the list that the author of Hebrews gives in chapter 6? He says, Let us therefore go on to maturity and not lay again the foundation of... What? What's the foundation? Change of mind away from dead works and faith toward God.

A lot of people think that's talking about salvation, but it's not. After we're saved, the first thing we have to learn is our life is not defined by works. Our life is defined by faith.

We walk by faith and not by sight. We live by faith. Faith is the step through the door of God's grace.

If you don't have faith, love and hope are not going to do you any good. Remember 1 Corinthians chapter 13, the love chapter? What does Paul say? If I have faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all of my goods to the poor and have not love, I am nothing.

So that giving... You say, Well, wait a minute. It sounds like giving your goods to the poor is love. I've taken all of my worldly possessions and sold them and turned it to cash and just went around and distributed it to the poor.

Isn't that love? What did we see last week when we looked at 1 Corinthians chapter 13? What is love? Well, maybe we ought to look at it again. Do you remember? Can you think of that section of 1 Corinthians 13? What does it say? Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 13. Because you can't understand faith until you understand love, because love is the goal of faith.

So look at 1 Corinthians 13. You've probably been through this passage just many times. But look at verse 4. Love gives all of its goods to the poor.

Love ministers to the sick and afflicted round about us. Love puts itself out on behalf of others, stays late, gets up early, works, does, ministers. It can do all of those things, but what is it at its core? What is the definition of love? Love suffers for a long time.

If you get in a situation where someone or something is causing you to suffer, if this love is in your soul, you can endure that for a long time and you don't change your character. You don't change your nature. You don't change the way you treat even the source of that pain or that suffering.

You continue to be gracious. You continue to return good for evil. You continue to pray for those who spitefully use you.

Well, how many of us can, by an act of will, produce that attitude in our hearts? You can want it, just like skinny people can want to be muscled up and people that have neglected their exercise can want to look great on the beach in the summertime, but wanting it doesn't make it happen, does it? And for some of us, even all the work in the world isn't going to make us into somebody they're going to photograph and put on the front of a magazine. And I am in that group and most of us are in that group. Most of the human race is in that group.

Wanting, and even working, cannot produce certain things. There are certain things that come from an outside source. And this kind of love, if you just look at the first characteristic, it suffers long.

It suffers and it keeps on suffering. And when suffering comes the next day and the next day and the next day, it just keeps on going and it doesn't change. It continues to return good.

It continues to pray. It continues to feel charitable and feel sorrow over this miserable person who is radiating out all of this pain and all of this misery to others. Well, we don't have that and we can't manufacture it.

We can't just decide to have it and it's there. We can't work and sweat and strain and get it. This love comes from a different source.

This love is kind even after all that suffering. It's just as kind after the suffering. It's just as kind during the suffering as it was before.

It's kindness. It never changes. This love does not envy.

This love doesn't look over and say, look how bad I'm suffering. Look at my miserable state. Look at the unique nature of my problems that are like no one else's problems that I know.

All of these other people don't have my problem. It doesn't envy. That's what envy is.

If you look around and think other people have it better than I do, that's envy because you're wishing, why can't I be like them? I have mentioned before and I believe that it's a principle supportable from scripture that everybody's row to hoe in life is just about the same. If you look at someone, you may not see their challenge. You may not see their pain.

You may not see their demons and their thorns in the flesh because some of us have them in very visible places where it's just right there. You see it. You look at this person.

Oh, wow. What a burden. Somebody in a wheelchair.

Somebody with big health problems. Somebody with big family problems. Somebody in the midst of an alcoholic situation or a drug abuse situation or a crime situation or whatever.

You look and you say, oh, wow. Someone who is bereaved and loses a child or loses a spouse or loses someone very dear to them. You look and you say, oh, boy.

That's some real pain. Other people can have just as much pressure, just as much temptation, just as much sorrow. In some area that is invisible.

And you all know that in your lives you have had things go on that people could not comprehend, even people that know you, had no idea the kind of challenge that it is in your soul and it may go on for a long time. But if you stop and think about it, God is fair, God is just, and God is loving. All of us, we have our ups, we have our downs, we have our good times, we have our bad times, but there isn't anybody in the human race that has an extraordinary level of pressure that's above and

beyond what everyone else has.

We all, it's just in different areas. And you could be, in my circumstances, in the things that just oppress me and put pressure on me and tempt me and cause me to fail and mess me all up, you would look at that and say, this is nothing, this doesn't affect me at all, but your soul isn't weak where my soul is. I could be put in your circumstances and things that trip you up and cause you to fail and are a constant challenge day by day, I would look at it and say, phew, it's not a problem.

But within, God knows. He knows the way our souls are built, He knows where the cracks in our, you know, they used to call people that have problems psychoceramics, like cracked pots, because we all have our cracks, we all have our flaws, and we all have the weak areas, and God ensures that no one is tested above what they're able to bear. So all of us, whatever our, you know, does a guy who can bench press 600 pounds, and he's there struggling with that 600 pounds, is it any less difficult or any less miserable for him than somebody who can only bench press 150 pounds, but that's their max.

If you look at the two of them, here's a big muscly guy with 600 pounds, here's a shrimpy guy with 150 pounds, but if both of them are struggling to the maximum of their ability just to push that bar up and lock their elbows, the level of pressure on them is the same. The level of pain they feel in their muscles is the same. And you look at somebody and say, well, this guy's problem is much bigger.

600 pounds compared to 150, that's nothing. So you get the idea. Love suffers a long time.

Whatever your particular area of suffering is, it is this love that will not fail. It's this love that will not be extinguished. It's this type of kindness that won't leave no matter what the pressure is.

You won't be envious. You won't be looking over the fence saying, I wish I wasn't in the, you know, God went to great, if you think about your life, if you get sort of an egocentric history and you think all of the events of history, the Mongols and the Angles and the Saxons and everything have all boiled down to me being born from all of the, you know, 64,000 different ancestors that I have in this time, in this place, with these relatives, with this job, with this set of pressures, God has boiled all of human history down to this moment and here I am facing this test. And if you start saying, I don't want to be here.

I don't think I deserve this. This isn't my rightful place. You're saying that all of human history that God has orchestrated was a big mistake.

This is exactly what God has worked very hard to produce in each of our lives. Even the bad things, even the pressures, even the miseries are exactly tailor-made just for your soul and just for my soul. It's not too much.

It's not too little. You're built just right. You have just the right divine resources at this point in time to deal with if you want to and if you care about.

So, love does not envy. Love doesn't say, I wish I wasn't here. I wish I was over there where that person is.

Love does not parade itself. Boy, there's a challenge. It's so easy to let something slip in our conversation, isn't it? Well, you know, I was used by God in a great way the other day.

Love is not puffed up. We can't avoid these pitfalls in our soul. Love does not rejoice in iniquity.

There are times when we are glad that something bad happens to someone else. Love rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, not just some things.

It believes all things. It hopes all things and endures all things. Love never fails.

So, where do we get this love? If we can't just choose it, if we can't develop it by working for it, how do we get it? Well, this is what goes back to walking through the door of God's grace because this love is an expression of God's grace. This love is a divine love and it comes from a divine source. How do we make sure that this love from a divine source finds us as a recipient? It's by faith.

If we look at our lives and we say, you know, when I read these verses here, verses 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 of 1 Corinthians 13, I don't think that I have fully experienced this love and I would like to. I know that that's God's will. It glorifies God.

It pleases God. It reflects the character of our Savior. That's what I want for myself.

That's my goal. How do I do it? Well, this is where most of the time the sermon ends or the lesson is over or the radio station says, you know, write in for our book or whatever. We get great descriptions of how we ought to be, but we don't often get, well, here is the how.

Well, this is the how. The how for having this kind of love is faith. Well, what is faith? As we have seen in the past, faith is trust in a proposition.

It's not just an abstract sort of hoping, scrunching up and waiting for the bad times to be over. Faith is a conscious decision to believe facts, to believe propositions, statements of truth. In order to have faith, you have to be aware of those statements of truth.

You have to be aware of divine promises. You have to be aware of the nature of God's character and His purpose in His plan. We have to know where we fit into God's plan and what promises we can legitimately claim and under what circumstances.

And that requires consistent, diligent study in the Word of God because that provides us with the

object for our faith. We trust God. We trust the things that He says.

What God has said, He will do. He never fails. He never forgets.

It doesn't slip His mind. He doesn't overlook us. But we have to know those things and make them the object of our faith.

When we do that enough, it changes our perspective because now we have realities in our soul that are not based on what we see. We have invisible realities in our soul that are put there by faith. We say, well, it doesn't look like this circumstance is going to turn out well.

It looks like I'm going to lose my job. It looks like I'm going to be disliked and misunderstood and badmouthed by this group of people. It looks like I'm going to be unhappy in the future because this is not going to turn out well.

However, that's what it looks like from the evidence of my senses. God says because I know that I am asking and seeking and knocking. I've put this before Him.

I'm doing what I believe to be God's will. I've asked God, if it's not His will, to please hit me in the head and let me know. I have been diligent in pursuing the study of His Word and an understanding and meditation on His Word.

I'm taking this course because I believe it pleases God and therefore, it's going to turn out the way God wants it to. And so, whatever anybody else says, whatever experience says, I trust that what God says is what's actually going to come about. Well, that's faith.

That's an invisible reality in our soul. That reality in our soul changes our perspective. We are no longer going to worry about the things that we would when we didn't have that in our soul.

We don't worry about the things that unbelievers worry about. We don't worry about the things that immature or apathetic believers worry about because we have a different reality in our soul. If I told you that I was contacted shortly before class by Ed McMahon and that your magazine subscription had turned up a winner and you're about to get a check for a million dollars at the break, that knowledge and that expectation would shift your perspective and change your attitude between now and then.

If I told you that the person you love and cherish the most, living or dead, is about to come back and visit you in the near future, it shifts your perspective. It changes the way you look at things. Things that were important suddenly shift into the background.

They're not as important because I've got this great expectation. Well, that's the other thing that faith does for us. It creates in us hope because we have a confident expectation.

We realize that when God does do what He says He's going to do, there are great things coming.

We're living in the kingdom of the Son of His love. We're living in the kingdom of light.

There are things beyond understanding that are coming our way and there is glory to be reflected. There is the glory of Jesus Christ that is on the line and it goes beyond just us and how well our lives turn out. So what are we talking about here? Three things.

Faith, hope, and love. This is a triad of Christian virtues that seems to have been commonly used to help early Christians understand the Christian life. Paul talks about it.

The author of Hebrews talks about it. John talks about them. Jesus Himself in so many words addresses these virtues and they are often grouped together as you find them at the end of this chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

Now, abide, faith, hope, love these three, but the greatest of these is love. Why? Because love is the culmination. We start with faith.

Faith is something we can choose to do. We can't choose to love. I've told you before many times other people and even I occasionally wished I could just choose to love someone.

It would be so much easier and would be so much less of a problem if, if, you know, you find this out in your dating life. Everybody that's dated, you know, you think, I wish that this dating phase, at least I used to, maybe I'm alone in this, I used to wish the dating phase was over. It's just complicated.

It's uncertain. It's tricky. It's risky.

It can be embarrassing. It's, and it just, it's the means to an end. You want to identify the person that God has designed for you.

You want to click and mesh and be one with that person and just go through the rest of your life. You don't want to go through this shopping around identifying process. And while it's going on, it's just, and so you, you find somebody and you're like two-thirds of the way there.

I mean, they're a believer. They seem to love the Word of God. Your family likes them.

Their family can put up with you and that sort of thing. You think, well, you know, this is a reasonably good fit. But for some reason that spark of intuition and knowledge that this is the person God has built to be your opposite number and vice versa isn't there.

And you say, oh, you know, why don't I just love this person? They don't have any bad attributes at all. Why don't I just love them and then this whole thing will be over with? But you can't decide to love. And even when you know you should, you can't decide it.

It's something that God puts in our hearts. Romans chapter five verses one through five, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And if you read the first four verses, you

find out that that is the end result of faith.

You start with faith which you can choose. You can choose to know what God says. You can choose to trust it.

You can choose to meditate on it and figure out how does it apply to my circumstance today. This is one of the big steps that we've missed in the, whatever you want to call our strand of Christianity that emphasizes the teaching of the word of God. We've correctly identified how important it is to study the word of God.

We have not always gone all the way forward to remembering that after you hear a tape or after you hear a Bible class, that's information you've got to do something with. We need to bring it back up. Two and a half hours later, can you actually remember anything that was in the class? Can you figure out whether or not it makes any difference at all in your current circumstances? Because if it doesn't, what was the point? What's the point of going to Bible class if it doesn't put something in your sleep that can be the object of faith? Faith walks us through the door of God's grace.

Hope and love develop in our souls. Faith we can choose. Faith we can decide to have.

Faith is the key that unlocks the door of God's plan, God's grace, and the inheritance that we expect that's a part of our hope. So this is why we came last week and looked at 1 Corinthians 13 because this is the goal. The goal is love.

When you look back at Colossians, you find that when Paul, after the introduction in verse 3, he says, we give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ praying always for you. And we found out that the always actually goes up with we give thanks. We give thanks always to God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ praying for you ever since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.

And we went to the introduction of each one of these epistles of Paul. He always mentions faith first when it's present, doesn't he? And we saw that in the Corinthians case, he couldn't find anything to commend him for and give thanks for, so he gives thanks to God for God's great grace and for God's great plan. He always finds something to be thankful for.

But when the believers are on the road, when they are growing and bearing fruit, faith is the first thing Paul mentions because it has the priority. We thank him ever since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints because your faith has borne fruit. Your faith has taken you through into the realm of God's grace where the Holy Spirit can pour out that love that you can't generate and that you can't create in and of yourself.

But you understand the role of faith and now you've got that love for all the saints. Now, this is the hardest thing and I share, I understand and share Epaphras' frustration and I would love to go to

Rome and talk to Paul because I also struggle with trying to find the words to explain what Paul is going to say in this letter and we'll just go through and let Paul say it and I won't have to struggle. But, as soon as we get into this and we talk about love for the saints, what do you think of if I gave you a piece of paper and said, write down five things that express love for the saints, what are the first things that come to your mind? Isn't it always doing something? We say, well, I've heard of your love for the saints.

We say, well, they must be cooking meals for the sick and they must be babysitting the kids and they must be coming in and taking care of things and ministering and they've heard that there's a poor saint and they've taken them some clothes. It's what we always think in terms of deeds. This is why it's so important to remember 1 Corinthians 13 because love is what goes on in your soul.

It is expressed in what you do but there is a subtle and yet profound difference because you can emulate the expression. You can't emulate or create the attitude behind the expression. All of these things are wonderful.

Ministry and care and outpourings of effort on behalf of people are wonderful but anybody can do those. The worst Pharisee that ever lived can cook a meal, clothe someone who's without clothes, visit someone who's in prison, donate, be there, show up, express, smile, whatever. You don't have to have the attitude to have the expression in its outward form.

And what Paul is talking about here when he says, I have heard from Epaphras about your love for the saints, he's not talking about what they do. He's talking about 1 Corinthians 13. He's talking about, I've heard about how you're able to suffer long.

I've heard about how even when you're in these terrible circumstances in Colossae, you're not envious. You're not all running down the road to Laodicea or to Hierapolis or all the way down to Ephesus because this is a dead town and nothing's happening and no opportunities and my talents are wasted here and I'm going somewhere else. Paul understands their attitude because their pastor has come and told him about their love.

And this is the internal quality of love, not the external expressions of love that he's talking about. This is what counts. You may or may not have opportunities to express love in ways that other people can see and hear about.

But all of us have the opportunity to have that fruit of the Spirit within us. And if you look closely and carefully, the Bible spends the bulk of its time, especially in the New Testament, talking about the nature of our thought life much more than what we do. Paul doesn't say we thank God for you and pray always for you.

Every time we heard about the great new orphan ministry that you started. Every time we hear about the great inner city ministry that you started. Every time we hear about the great stadium full of people waving their hands that we heard about that you had in Colossae.

Every time you see Paul commending believers in a church, he's commending them for the transformation that they have allowed God to make in their souls. This is the great message that is missed when these outsiders come in and start telling Epaphra's congregations, you all don't have the fullness. You're not really there yet because you're not doing these other things.

And that's what's happening around us today. You look around at all of the different programs. We've mentioned a few of them by name in the past, but you've got enthusiasm, you've got organization, you've got books, you've got seminars, you've got retreats, you've got special speakers, you've got videos and books, you've got angels, you've got all kinds of different things floating around saying here's the thing that's lacking in your life.

This is the missing piece that you don't have because you're just sitting there listening to the Word of God and meditating on the Word of God. If you just get into this impact in the community thing, now you're going to feel the fullness. If you'll just get into this discipling thing, if you'll just get into this mentoring thing, if you'll just get into this personal relationship thing where we sort of bear our souls and have accountability, if you'll come down with me to the stadium and cheer and listen to the music and get revved up and get down flat on your face in the grass for a while and be on national TV and so forth, now you're going to get the fullness.

If you'll come to this new speaker that's got this new book and this new tape deal that you can get for only \$120, then you'll have the fullness. We are surrounded by the very same things that concerned Epaphras and that drove him all the way to Rome to share Paul's imprisonment and that motivated Paul to write these letters and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to point these things out. So, I want to sensitize us when we see these words, faith and hope and love, because they're going to recur throughout the book.

Remember, don't just get that knee-jerk traditional church definition for love. Don't get that knee-jerk traditional definition for faith. Faith is not coming to Bible class and love is not going out and doing something.

Faith is knowing what God has said and believing it, making it an invisible reality in your soul. This is now one of the concrete pillars in my universe and it affects the way I walk. It affects my direction.

I don't go that way because this is an absolute truth of the Word of God. I'm going this way because that way is paved with the absolute unshakable promises of God. I know that it doesn't matter what people think.

It matters what God thinks and I'm going this way and let the chips fall where they may. It has to be real. It has to make a difference or we're wasting our time and we're wasting our opportunity.

We're wasting all the grace that God has bestowed on us to bring us to this place. We have to understand what faith really is. We have to understand where love comes from.

We have to understand the content and the concrete nature of that hope that motivates us and that causes that three cycle, that three element engine to move and bear fruit in our soul. We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ praying always for you. As I said before, I keep reading the New King James that put the always in the wrong place.

Ever since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints, not just some of the saints, not just an abused category of saints, all the saints, because that love is something you carry around with you and it affects everybody you come in contact with. Because of the hope, there's a reason why this love is active among you. There's a reason why your faith is bearing fruit.

You're motivated by the knowledge that God sees, that God knows, that God evaluates, that your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly, that your inheritance is secure, that you're going to have the privilege of reflecting the glory of Jesus Christ because you understand and act on these things. Because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the Gospel. How did this whole faith, hope, and love thing happen in Colossae? They heard about it.

Somebody told them about it. Somebody said, listen, this whole Greek culture thing, this Roman government, all the stuff we've got going on here, these crumbling walls, the earthquakes and all that, that's not the reality. The reality is what God has said.

The reality is the God-man, Jesus Christ, who has come and saved you and has given you the opportunity for relationship and fellowship with God the Father and a bright future in all of eternity to come. And so that hope that they heard about in the word of the truth of the Gospel is not just something that got them to take it out of their lake of fire. It's something that conditions and affects their day.

They live in a different way. They think in a different way. They choose differently.

They treat each other differently because that hope is a living, breathing reality in their soul. You heard before in the word of the truth of the Gospel and that's why a lot of us come from a background where we stress the hearing of the word of God. Where does faith come from? Faith comes by hearing.

Hearing the word. That gives you something to point your faith at and to latch on to. And this word of truth of the Gospel, verse 6, has come to you as it has also in all the world and is bringing forth fruit.

What is it that's bringing forth the fruit that pleases Paul and causes him to raise his hands in thanksgiving to God? It's the word of the truth of the Gospel. It's bringing forth fruit in all the world and also among you ever since the day you heard and knew. And that second verb there is very important.

It doesn't say it started bearing fruit ever since you heard it. A lot of us hear the word of God. I was guilty of hearing the word of God for a long time before I knew it.

It just kind of wafted over me. It was an entertaining speaker, well organized, pleasant sounding, captivating, interesting. And I heard the word of truth.

I heard a lot of these things, but I didn't know it until I stopped short and started realizing, wait a minute, these are real things. If this is true, what does that mean about how I live? I shouldn't be living the way I'm living in these certain areas of my life because look at this truth. I've been hearing this truth all this time and it never dawned on me that it's so real that it ought to change my life.

That's the point where we start to know where our faith starts bearing fruit. You heard in the word of truth. You heard and knew the grace of God in truth.

Notice the ending of verse 5 and the ending of verse 6. There is a stress laid on hearing the word of truth. And we don't want to emphasize one thing and lose the other. Meditation is important, but you do have to hear it.

And we have to make that an issue. We have to make it a priority. You heard the word of the truth of the gospel.

You heard and knew the grace of God in that truth. That truth bears the message of the grace of God. You also learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf or on our behalf, depending on which manuscript tradition you choose.

I think both are true. He is a proxy of Paul. He is carrying the teaching that Paul gave to him, just like Timothy and Titus and a lot of other young pastors are doing.

And it is, of course, on behalf of the listeners. So, it may be that God wanted to say both things and that's why the manuscript evidence is split right down the middle. And Epaphras, in verse 8, declared to us your love in the Spirit.

And that's a very important verse. And don't miss the significance of it. Epaphras, their pastor, who knows them, who spends time with them, he is not an observer from the outside who says, well, I saw that new house they built for the poor people or I saw these works that they did.

Epaphras knows their hearts because he's their shepherd. He is their teacher. He spends time with them in fellowship in the Word of God.

And he declared to Paul their love in the Spirit. Reminds you of Romans 5.5, doesn't it? Where does that love come from? We qualify for it. We enter into the realm of God's grace where we get it through faith.

But that love is not a creation of ours. It's not a choice of ours directly. It is shed abroad in our hearts by God the Holy Spirit, Romans 5.5. And this love that they have, Epaphras has said, this is the love that comes from the Holy Spirit.

I have seen people persevere under trial. I have seen people cheerful under crushing circumstances. This is the love of God.

It isn't what they do. It's how they think. It's the way they view life.

Now, that section that we have just reviewed in verses 3-8 is what you might call the account of Paul's thanksgiving. He says, when I pray, these are the things that I thank God for. Have you ever found in Paul's writings when he talks about what he prays for people, and he does it in nearly every letter, does he ever say, I heard about the things that you did? Once in a while he does, doesn't he? He talked about the gifts that some churches gave to other churches.

Here's a poor church that doesn't have very much, but they heard that the saints in Jerusalem were starving. They gathered up even of what they didn't have and sent it to Jerusalem. But when he says those things, it's always toward the end of the letter.

When he gives thanks at the beginning of a letter, in the greeting, it's always, without exception, their inner nature, the transforming power of God at work in their souls. And you can check this out. I'm thankful for you because you gave even when you didn't have.

It's at the end of the letter, after he's been able to talk about faith and love and hope. Same thing here. He gives thanks for their faith.

Doesn't mention a single thing that they've done. No ministries, no community impact, no mentoring, none of the things that are so characteristic of our traditional church today. It's what God has done in their souls.

Now, in verses 9-14, he's going to tell them about his intercession. He says, when I pray for you, I do two things. I give thanks to God, and these are the things I'm thankful for.

And I also pray on your behalf, and these are the things I pray for you. What a fascinating section to study. If you can imagine the Apostle Paul, if you only had five minutes with the Apostle Paul, and he's going to be here, it's like the Mount of Transfiguration, he's going to be here, you can talk with him a little bit, and he's going away.

Just stop and think for a minute. What would you ask the Apostle Paul? If he was going to be here on the break, five minutes only, had to go elsewhere, see other people, what would you ask the Apostle Paul? Well, I know what I would ask him. I would say, Paul, in the entire five minutes that you have with us, give us the encapsulized, condensed version, what do we need to be doing? Give me the essence of the Christian life, 500 words or less, this five minutes that you've

got here, just give me the short form of everything you put, and all the questions you didn't answer, that I haven't figured out in the New Testament, just give it all to me.

Tell me how I can live in a way that pleases God. What is the priority in the circumstances that I'm in? Well, guess what? That's what we've got right here in verses 9-14. Because this is what Paul tells God, this is what Paul prays on behalf of believers who want to grow, who have already learned the essentials of faith and hope and love.

Paul says, this is what I pray for you, this is what I think the goal is for you, and I've asked God to make this happen in your life. So it's a fascinating thing to study, because this is Paul, in five minutes, telling us the essentials of the Christian life. We're going to pause and take our break, and when we come back, we're going to look at this section, and hear Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, tell us how we ought to live, what our goal is as Christians.

Let's pause and take a break.