Thankful for the Gospel

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[0:00] Our scripture reading is from the New Testament, from Paul's epistle, his letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, the first eight verses. And so if you'd like to turn there in a Bible, and this is God's holy word.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.
We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.
Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which 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, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.
[1:09] This is the word of the Lord. Well, as Corey intimated, we're beginning a new series in our evening services. We're looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, and so if you have a Bible, you may like to open it at that passage.

In the summer of 1933, a young German theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a series of lectures at the University of Berlin.
Adolf Hitler had just become chancellor and a time of great social, political upheaval loomed ahead for Germany and indeed for the world.
Bonhoeffer's lectures on that occasion were on the subject of the person and work of Jesus Christ, Christology. Bonhoeffer was executed in April 1945.
The original manuscript of those lectures was lost, but years later, it was partially reconstructed and published from some of the notes of his students.
[2:21] It was given the title, Christ the Center. And that's the name we've given to this evening series on Paul's letter to the Colossians.

For here is an epistle rich in Christology. Here is a letter that's very much focused on the centrality, the supremacy, and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.
And our plan over these next weeks is to move through the text fairly briskly, hopefully covering the letter, I think, in around 13 sermons.
Hopefully taking us to the end of November. But before we dive into the opening verses, it might be helpful to highlight one or two things by way of introduction.
The Colossian church to whom this letter was written was, interestingly, not one that Paul himself had planted or even likely visited. Its origin most probably lay in the ministry of Epaphras, who's mentioned here in these opening verses.
[3:28] And it's believed that he carried the gospel from Ephesus down through the Lycus Valley, places like Leodicea, Herapolis, and Colossae.

Some commentators suggest that may have taken place during the years when Paul himself was based in Ephesus. These are towns located in what we would now know as modern-day Turkey.
Colossae itself lay around 100 miles east of this great city of Ephesus. And you'll notice here in the opening two verses, Paul introduces himself, his co-worker Timothy, in very characteristic fashion.
Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ at Colossae. Grace to you and peace from God our Father.
So, Paul describes the recipients as saints, faithful brothers and sisters in Christ living in this city of Colossae. And he writes the letter because he desires that they would continue to be faithful

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servants of Jesus Christ in that town.
[4:42] It appears that Paul most likely had received worrying reports of problematic teaching that had begun to influence and shape the life and witness of the congregation.

It's most likely he heard that from Epaphras himself. And that particular brand of false teaching that occasioning the letter is often referred to by scholars simply as the Decolossian heresy.
Now, we're not entirely sure what this teaching was. Many different theories abound. It used to be believed it was some form of Gnostic thought.
Suggestions of pagan mystery cult. Jewish mystical asceticism. A syncretism of Jewish and pagan philosophy. That's just a few of the different theories.
And I think there have been almost 50 different views propounded over the last hundred years or so. And you'll be glad to know we're not going to investigate them all.
[5:54] The interesting thing for me is this. Not really so much the nature of the Colossian heresy. And we'll begin to find out a little bit about that as we work our way through the book.

But rather, it's Paul's response. The danger it presented was in effect, I think, the danger of all false teaching. Whatever we find it.
And that is to lead us away from the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. These teachers offered its belief what they claimed was a more fuller, a more complete, a kind of upgraded Christianity.
And by implication, they suggested that the gospel of Christ that the Colossians had received was in some way deficient or lacking.
And so, Paul's antidote to the problems and difficulties that this church was beginning to face was quite simply to give them a fresh vision of the Lord Jesus Christ.
[7:01] Here in Colossians, Paul seeks a spiritual renewal in their lives that is rooted in the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In other words, he wanted them to keep Jesus firmly at the center. Because Jesus is all-sufficient. He is all that His people need.
He is enough. Because the great temptation, and whether that is in first century Asia Minor, 21st century Scotland, is that we look away from Jesus.
We drift away from the Lord Jesus Christ. And we start looking elsewhere for meaning and purpose and satisfaction and life. Now, today we may not face anything like the so-called Colossian heresy. But we do face all manner of different views and teachings and ideas and philosophies that will lead us away from Jesus Christ. But if we lose sight of Him, we lose sight of what is most important.
[8:10] That was the great danger in Colossae, and I think it's a great danger still. Because, if I can put it this way, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system, a philosophy, a program, or a thing.

It is Jesus Christ. And if we lose sight of Him, we lose sight of everything that's important. If you're tonight and you're not a Christian believer, and you want to understand the Christian faith, then you must look at Jesus Christ and who He is and what He's done.
Many years ago, the Anglican theologian, W.H. Griffith Thomas, wrote a little small book, an introduction to Christianity, and he entitled it, Christianity is Christ.
T.H.L. Parker has a short biographical portrait of John Calvin. And in it, he says this, that keeping Christ in clear view was John Calvin's theological program.
And he cites a passage from Calvin's commentary on Colossians. And I'm going to read just a little excerpt of that. This is what he says, Calvin.
[9:31] For how comes it that we are carried about with so many strange doctrines? But because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us. For Christ alone makes all other things suddenly vanish.

Hence, there is nothing that Satan so much endeavors to accomplish as to bring on mists with the view of obscuring Christ. Because he knows that by this means, the way is opened up for every kind of falsehood.
This, therefore, is the only means of retaining as well as restoring pure doctrine. To place Christ before the view, such as he is with all his blessings, that his excellence may be truly perceived.
You see, the great antidote that Paul lays out before us in Colossians is none other than Jesus himself. In this letter, Paul spreads out before his readers something of the glory and the splendor of Jesus Christ.

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He wants them to see who Jesus really is. He wants their faith to be rooted in Jesus. He wants their minds to be taken up with Jesus. He wants them to remember that Christ is the center of all things. [10:52] His great claim, really, is that Christ is the center, not just of the Christian faith, that he's the center of all reality. Now, as Paul writes this letter, I think we do well to remember that he actually writes as someone who is a prisoner and in chains.

He references that in chapter 4. It may well be that he was under house arrest in Rome on the occasion we read about back in Acts chapter 28.
Sometime probably around AD 62. And yet, his opening words, you'll notice here, are words full of thanksgiving to God. Verses 3 through 8 are, in fact, I think just one long sentence in the original language.
And it's the characteristic way in which Paul opens so many of his letters. He begins by giving thanks for the church and for all that God is and has been doing amongst his people.
Despite the church's many faults and flaws and failures, he does not omit thanksgiving. When it came to the church, Paul had a mindset of gratitude towards God.
[12:09] And it's something that we would do well to emulate. Far too many of us are quick to criticize, to be negative. And yes, there's much sometimes in our churches that we can criticize.

But are we giving thanks to God for his work amongst his people? And so, as Paul begins this letter, he's clearly excited and animated.
Despite the dangers that have begun to emerge in Colossae, his heart is full of thanksgiving for what God has done in the lives of these believers. And what I want to do this evening briefly is to try and unpack these opening words a little.
And I want to highlight three things that we see Paul being thankful for here. And the first is, I think, we see thankfulness for what we'll call the work of the gospel.
We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.
[13:22] Paul wants them to know that he is giving thanks to God for what has happened to them. Their reception of the gospel is cause for celebration and praise.

He's giving thanks for the fruit that has already been made evident in their lives. And in verses 4 and 5, you'll notice he mentions that well-known, well-loved trinity triad of Christian graces.
Faith, love, and hope. And if we're at all familiar with Paul's writings in the New Testament, we will not be surprised at this. It's very, very common. What are the hallmarks of authentic Christianity? What are we to look for? We're to look for faith and love and hope. These qualities are the product of the Holy Spirit's living presence amongst his people.
Where the gospel of Christ makes an impact in people's lives, these three things are always to be witnessed. If faith and hope and love are not to be seen, then whatever it might be, it's not Christianity.
[14:31] Maybe something moral or religious. Maybe something full of ceremony and ritual. But without faith, hope, and love, it's not authentically Christian. Notice that these three virtues do not exist in isolation.

They are inextricably linked together. Through the gospel and by the Holy Spirit, God brings men and women to faith. That is, into a living relationship of trust and dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ.
And this faith in Christ Jesus is not something purely of the mind. It's not something purely intellectual. It's something that involves our whole selves being cast upon the Lord Jesus.
Because in the New Testament, faith is always directional. It's faith in. It's faith into. It's faith towards. It's faith upon the Lord Jesus Christ. And a right standing, a right relationship with God comes to us only through the vehicle of faith.
We were hearing about that this morning. Not by works. Not by a good life. Not by moral achievements. Not by sacraments. Not by religious activities. But by faith alone.
[15:50] It's not enough for us to hear the gospel. Or listen to the gospel. Or admire the gospel. Or even read the gospel. Not enough to analyze it or study it.

We must believe it. It's not enough for us to admire Jesus Christ. We must put our faith into Him. We must lean on Him.

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And this is what these Colossian Christians had done. And accompanying this faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, there was also this love for all the saints.
One follows the other as night follows day. Faith in Jesus Christ goes hand in hand with a love for Christ's people.
Faith in Jesus brings with it a connection to and a care for His church. Faith in Jesus.
[16:47] Faith in Jesus. Followers of Jesus are bound together in a community of Christian love and affection. Church is not simply a place that we go.

It is a community to which we belong. The New Testament knows nothing of that kind of rabid individualism that is all too common among some Christians today.
To be a Christian involves us being connected to God's people. And you'll notice here what Paul says.
It's a love for all the saints. Interesting. Not just for some of them. Well, we need to be realistic about this. Perhaps not idealistic.
The saints are not always the most likable or lovable of people. Sometimes, I know this will come as a shock to many of you, Christians can be quite hard and difficult.
[17:47] After 37 years in pastoral ministry, I could regale you with many stories of, quite frankly, objectionable Christians. And to be fair, at times, I can be quite objectionable myself.

Just ask Allison. Nonetheless, as believers, we're called to have a love for all the saints. That's a key mark of genuine Christianity.
Like faith, love is to be seen. It's not a hidden thing. It's not just about feelings and emotions. It's about service. It's about servanthood. About caring for others. Putting them first.
Not just looking after ourselves. And according to Paul, what drives this faith and love is the hope that is set aside for us in heaven.
Without this hope, faith and love would not survive for long. Hope is key. And in the New Testament, hope doesn't refer to some vague possibility that might lie in the future.
[18:52] It's not just kind of optimism. It's not something uncertain and unsure. It refers to something that will certainly take place. Now, of course, the time of hope's realization may well be uncertain.

But the content is absolutely sure. And that certainty arises out of the fact that this hope is centered on the Lord Jesus. He is our hope.
Our hope is tied to the person and work of Jesus Christ. And so, it's utterly safe and secure. Can't be snatched away from us.
Can't be ruined. Can't be stolen. Can't be destroyed. It's laid up for us in heaven. Remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6?
Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth. Where moth and rust destroy. Where thieves break in and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Where neither moth nor rust destroys.
[20:00] Where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Where is our treasure this evening?

Where is your hope? Is it laid up for you in heaven? Do you ever think about that? You see, the certainty and security of our hope sets us free to believe, to live in faith, and to live with love.
It frees us up to do God's will. And even to endure hardships and trials. In one of his books, Dale Ralph Davis tells the story of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.
Constructed, I think, way back in the 1930s. It took around four years to build. But tragically, a number of workers died after falling from the bridge into the waters below.
So dangerous was it that they created safety nets. At that time, at a huge cost, I think $100,000. And these nets were placed directly below where the men were working.
[21:22] And one of the interesting consequences of constructing these safety nets was not just that the lives of a good number of men were saved, but also that more work was accomplished by the men on the bridge.

Once the nets were in place, the men worked much faster. They accomplished so much more. They calculated about 25 percent more work was done because of the presence of these great safety nets.
In other words, because there was a greater sense of safety and security, the men had the confidence to work harder. Their safety was assured. They were encouraged to get on with their work because of the security and peace created by these nets.

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They weren't so anxious. They weren't so fearful. They weren't so afraid. They weren't so nervous. Friends, as Christians, we have a hope that is steadfast and certain, a hope laid up for us in heaven.
And so we can live our lives in the here and now with confidence and assurance. Be thankful for the work of the gospel, for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, for love for all the saints, and for that hope that has been laid up for us in heaven by our Lord Jesus Christ.
[22:51] So that's the first thing I want you to notice here. Thankfulness for the work of the gospel. Secondly, what I've called thankfulness for the power of the gospel. Of this you have heard.

Verse 5, Before in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it's bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.
Paul's second note of thanksgiving here, I think, is for the way in which the gospel, the word of truth, was growing, increasing, and bearing fruit, not only in their own lives, but across the world.
And Paul mentions here two elements of the gospel that I think are essential to its power. He speaks here of grace and truth. The Colossians had heard and understood the grace of God in truth.
And just as grace and truth were characteristic of the Lord Jesus, so they are equally characteristic of the good news preached about Him. Everything in the Christian life is rooted here in the grace and truth of the gospel.
[23:58] That's how the Colossians became Christians. They came to have their eyes opened and to understand something of the grace and the mercy of God towards them. In all its wonderful truth, they had their eyes opened to a God of grace.

And as we will see through this letter, this is how they are to continue in the Christian life, by growing in their understanding of God's grace towards them.
And these Colossian believers were not alone in their understanding and of this fruit that was being produced. Paul reminds them they were part of something far bigger and far greater, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing or increasing.
Imagine how those words must have made them feel. They were part of something much bigger, something great, something wonderful, something global.
For this gospel was spreading all over the known world. And friends, that is as true today as it was then. And we do well to remember it.
[25:08] All over the world, the gospel is bearing fruit. Sometimes here in the West, we are apt to forget that.

When things get tough and are difficult, our perspective gets skewed. Our horizons become limited. Patrick Johnson's book a number of years ago was, The Church is Bigger Than You Think.
Friends, today the gospel is growing. It's growing in the same way as it did in Colossae. It's being preached and it's being taught to others. The gospel works this way in every age and generation and in every part of the world.
It is an unstoppable message. It's been bearing fruit and growing for some 2,000 years. If you think of the last words of Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles, and in Acts 28, he closes his book there with Paul's imprisonment in Rome.
And he says this in verse 30 and 31 of Paul, He lived there to hold years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.
[26:35] Literally, unhinderedly. Though Paul may have been imprisoned, though he may have been under house arrest, though he may have been chained up, the message of the gospel wasn't.

And Luke tells us there in Acts 28 that the victorious word of the gospel could not be silenced, couldn't be stopped, bearing fruit even at the very center of the Roman Empire.
The gospel of Jesus Christ oozes its way into all sorts of places. It cannot be kept out.
It keeps on bearing fruit. Think of those sometimes received letters from a brother in the Lord, Adam, that tells of the fruit of the gospel in a land in which the Christian faith is all but outlawed.
And yet some of the stories are amazing in such a harsh and hostile environment. Yet even so, men and women are coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
[27:41] The gospel is bearing fruit. And that should be an encouragement to us today. It should be an encouragement to us as a church here at the top of the Royal Mile in this great city of

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Edinburgh.

Maybe we have loved ones or family members who are unconverted, caught up in the thinking of this world, living their lives with really no thought of God. What do we make of their indifference or even their hostility?
Perhaps they won't listen to us. Maybe they get quite angry or annoyed if we bring up the subject of the gospel. What's going on there? Sometimes I think it's because they're afraid.
Because if the gospel can so change our lives, might it not also do the same in theirs? I mean, who is safe from the power of Jesus Christ?
So there is hope for some that we pray for. And that hope is in the power of the gospel. Well, thankfulness for the work of the gospel.
[28:52] Thankfulness for the power of the gospel. Time is disappearing. Thankfulness, thirdly, for the servants of the gospel. Just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant, he is a faithful minister of Christ in your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

So in these verses, Paul speaks of his fellow servant, Epaphras. There's no hint here of envy or jealousy or rivalry from the apostle. He's happy to celebrate and give thanks for his colleague's fruitful ministry in the city.
Paul is concerned for the events of the gospel, you see, not for his own name or his own status. By way of aside, I would simply say, beware those who are always decrying other believers or putting down other ministries.
It's often the sign of an impoverished and insecure faith. So yes, the power of the gospel was being felt across the world, but it was also being made known in Colossae because of this man, Epaphras.
It's likely, as I mentioned earlier, that Epaphras took the gospel from Ephesus, where he'd heard that message and he himself had come to faith. He then returned to Colossae to share the good news with the folks back home.
[30:10] He no doubt spoke to his family, his friends, his neighbors of the Lord Jesus. He didn't keep the message to himself. He taught it to others. And friends, that is how the gospel grows.

That's how the church grows. It grows as the message is passed on. It grows as the good news is shared with others. Some of you know this illustration.
The River Jordan has along its course two seas, or to be more precise, two landlocked lakes. We know them as the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. And there are significant dissimilarities between these two.
They are not at all alike, very different. Sea of Galilee has an inlet and an outlet. It's a comma on the long neck of the River Jordan. The water flowing in pauses as it continues south.
The water flows through it. As a result, the Sea of Galilee teems with marine life. It's a living, vibrant ecosystem. On the other hand, the Dead Sea is only an inlet.
[31:17] It's the full stop in the Jordan River. None of the water ever finds its way into the ocean. And the result is that the Dead Sea is just that, dead, lifeless. Such is the high concentration of dissolved minerals that the water there is not even fit to drink.

And what is true of those two expanses of water on the Jordan River is also true of us in the church. A Christianity that is only in pipes is designed, destined rather, to become stale and stagnant and lifeless and dead.
It doesn't matter how good the teaching is. How great the preaching. It doesn't matter how sound the theological literature we read is. It doesn't matter how warm the fellowship is. If it doesn't flow out in Christian witness to the world around, then all it's going to do is make us sterile and stagnant and lifeless and dead.
Friends, this is what it means to be a faithful servant and God and minister of Christ. It means that we pass on the gospel to others. We let it flow through our lives to touch the lives of other people. We share the love of the Spirit. That's what Epaphras did. He was that vital link in the chain of events that brought these Colossians to faith in Jesus Christ. I wonder who has been your Epaphras.
[32:41] Perhaps a Christian friend, associate at work, fellow student, father, mother, grandparent. Servants of Christ that brought the gospel to us.

Maybe they are unknown, unheralded. But they were a vital link in bringing us to faith in Jesus. Their love and friendship and willingness to share the gospel made all the difference in the world.

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And now if someone has been an Epaphras to you, let me ask you, who are you being an Epaphras to today? Remember years ago hearing the testimony of a Japanese student come to faith.
She said this, My English friend built a bridge of friendship into my heart. And over that bridge walked Jesus. Are we building bridges with others?
We need to be praying that God would make us a link to someone else, so that this gospel would continue to grow and bear fruit in our own day and generation. The opening question and answer of the famous Heidelberg Catechism is this, What is your only comfort in life and death?
[34:01] That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. The second question is perhaps less well known.

How many things are necessary for you to know that in this comfort you may live and die happily? Three things. First, the greatness of my sin and misery.
Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. And then third, how I am to be thankful to God for such a redemption.
Thankfulness is, as we will see, one of the great themes of Colossians. It's a fundamental characteristic of the Christian life.
A mark of Christian maturity. A feature of those whose lives are centered on Jesus. Is that where your life is centered this evening?
[35:07] So what do we see here in these opening verses of Colossians? We see thankfulness for the work of the gospel. Thankfulness for the power of the gospel. Thankfulness for the servants of the gospel.

May God grant us all thankful hearts that together we would be a people with our lives truly centered on the Lord Jesus Christ.
Let's pray together. Lord, make us, by your Holy Spirit, a thankful people.
Thankful for Jesus Christ. Thankful for your grace. Thankful for your gospel. And we pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

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