

“Thank God For My Church Family” | Colossians 1:3-6

When you are a missionary at heart, and you are under arrest and tied to a guard day and night, what do you do with your time?

That was the Apostle Paul’s dilemma. He had been arrested in Jerusalem because of the jealousy of the Jewish leaders there, and when he discovered that he was not going to get a fair trial in Judea, he appealed to Caesar, asking that his case be taken to Rome. So Paul was taken by ship from Judea to Rome where he was to appear before Caesar. In the eyes of Rome, Paul was a very insignificant person, and there was no political gain in dealing with his case quickly, so he remained in Rome for many months awaiting his trial.

So what do you do when you are an imprisoned missionary? You write letters to encourage the churches! And that is exactly what the Apostle Paul did.

While the Apostle was imprisoned in Rome he wrote letters to the churches in Ephesus, Philippi and Colosse. Though we do not have a copy of it, there was also a letter to Laodicea, which Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16.

The Apostle Paul had received a report on the life and health of the church in Colosse from its founding pastor, a man by the name of Epaphras. Paul never visited this church, but still he felt a love for the people there and wanted to send them this letter.

This is the background of the letter to the Colossians, and over the next few weeks we will look at this letter through the lens of Thanksgiving. Even though Paul has been wrongfully arrested, and has already spent nearly five years imprisoned, he is able to give thanks to God for many things.

This morning, we notice at the start of the letter, Paul is grateful for the church.

Read with me verses 3-6 in chapter 1.

It is hard to miss the note of thanksgiving here at the start of the letter. He says “We always thank God...”

You may have noted that Paul did not write, “I” but instead said “We.” Timothy is with Paul in Rome, and though not under arrest, he will not leave Paul. Some have suggested that Timothy may even have been the one who penned this letter as Paul dictated, for there are indications in other letters that Paul had problems with his vision. It may be that on his journeys he contracted malaria and as a result of his fevered bouts with the disease his eyes were affected. Remember, Paul lives long before there were vaccinations and Ivermectin.

Before we get to what Paul is grateful for, who does Paul (and Timothy) direct their thanksgiving to?

If we continue reading verse 3 it says, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”

Paul directs his thanksgiving to God, knowing that everything good finds its source in Him. And Paul makes sure we understand we are praying not to just any god, but to the one true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you serve a god that is not Jesus, then you are not serving the true God.

This week we were introduced to a new holiday called National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It is meant to be a day when we reflect on the mistreatment of First Nations peoples, and mourn the deaths that happened at the residential schools. We are called upon to know and appreciate the culture of the First Nations people who first inhabited the lands that became Canada.

One of the issues is the destruction of the religion of the indigenous peoples, replacing it with a white man’s religion called Christianity. Indigenous peoples have their own way to relate to the spiritual world, complete with creation stories and myths to explain life around them. Society wants us to encourage them to go back to their old religions, their old ways.

On Thursday I did not attend the gatherings in the park, but I did listen to First Nation pastors explain their culture and religion through the eyes of a Christian. It was very interesting. These pastors agreed that God was revealing himself to the First Nations people before the white men came, and what the missionaries needed do was to show them how their beliefs could point them to Jesus. They also concluded that what will bring healing to our land is when we can show the First Nations people the true Jesus.

The Apostle Paul agree. He would never agree with the idea that all religions are the same, and that all paths lead to God, no matter what faith you practice. Paul would point people back to the words of Jesus who said, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father (God) except through me.” (John 14:6)

The Apostle Paul saw that those he wrote to in Colosse knew and worshipped the one true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is Paul thankful for, and what does he give thanks to God for as he prays?

If you look with me to verse 4 you will see there are two things that characterize the religion of the church in Colosse.

1. They have put their faith in Christ Jesus
2. They love the people of God.

The Gospel message tells us that ““Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) That one name is Jesus. Apart from him, we cannot find salvation.

So the church in Colosse is orthodox. Orthodox simply means it has the right doctrine. This was very important then, and just as important today. We must know what we believe, and who we believe in, or we may be chasing after a false god. Why do we hold Bible Studies, and provide you with tools like Right Now Media, and hold classes for the children and teens? It is so we will know what we believe, and what we believe must be grounded in the Word of God. If our doctrine comes from any place other than the Bible, then it is a false doctrine.

The Church in Colosse got it right when it came to doctrine. But we can have all our “i’s” dotted and all our theological “t’s” crossed but still not truly experience the life Christ came to bring us. There is a second side to that coin: we also must learn to love others.

Jesus said all the law and the prophets can be summed up in this command: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and all your strength. And love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Jesus was constantly trying to show the religious leaders this balance. When a woman was dragged before Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery, the religious leaders knew what proper doctrine said: stone her. But Jesus challenged them to demonstrate the other side of the coin: love for your neighbour. When the religious leaders slipped away after Jesus challenged them to deal with their own sin before they condemned another, he told the woman in love, “I do not accuse you. Go and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

Right doctrine and right practice. Truth and mercy.

The saints (cf. verse 2) or holy ones of Colosse got it right. They knew Jesus was the heart of the faith, and that their faith called them to love each other.

Paul is sure that this faith and love will keep the Christians strong no matter what they have to face. He speaks of the fact that they have a hope, and from that hope springs forth their faith and love. That hope, he says, is stored up for them in heaven.

Paul is certain that there is a heaven, the place Jesus will take us to when our journey is complete here, or Jesus returns to take us home. No matter how bad life can get on earth – and truly it does get bad at times – we always have this great hope, that there is an eternal home where there will be no more pain and suffering. Jesus is the way to that home. And when it gets hard to love, when we get tired of doing good to other people who do not appreciate what you do for them, when even the good you do is misinterpreted and you are persecuted, you will keep on loving because you know there is a place for you in heaven where all the injustices will be made right.

The source of our faith and love is the hope that we have in Jesus.

Paul is so thankful that this faith, hope and love that is evident in the Christians of Colosse is bearing fruit – as the Gospel does wherever it is shared. Yes, the Gospel is spread throughout

the whole world, and everywhere it goes it bears good fruit. If there is bad fruit – like Residential Schools – that was not the Gospel. That was not the true work of the church.

The Apostle Paul has heard about the church in Colosse and he gives thanks for the church family. Even though he has never met them, they are his family because they are all believers in Christ Jesus. What brings encouragement and thanksgiving to the heart of the Apostle was the family of God.

Are you grateful for your church family? Do you thank God for your church family? Not because it is perfect, not because it is the only church, but because it is your church family?

We are not talking about the church building, though we do thank God for that. We discovered over the last two years that you can take the building away and we still have the church. When we could not gather in this building we were still family, and we found any and every way we could to connect and continue our worship and service together.

The family of God is composed of those people you worship with week after week. It is made up of imperfect people like you and me, who simply worship Jesus and love one another.

I cannot imagine my life without the family of God. Since I was a baby I have been embraced by a church family. I have been taught the scriptures, taught the songs of faith, taught how to serve others, taught how to forgive and be patient through the family of God. My family, Lise, myself and our children, have been embraced by the family of God when we came as strangers to be their pastoral family in three different locations: Claresholm, Kelowna and Nanaimo.

I am blessed to have two sisters, and their families, and my mother and step-father are still living. Lise has her mom and two sisters plus a brother, and their families. We love our families, though we are spread out all across Canada.

Yet in many ways, we are closer to you, our church family. When you hurt, we hurt. When you rejoice, we rejoice. When a student from the church graduates from High School we celebrate as if it was our child. When the children put on a play or sing, we celebrate what they have done with a joyful pride as if they were our children. When someone's family is suffering, like Juanita, Pedro, Lem and Nona's family is today, we hurt with you.

Lise and I join with the Apostle as he says,

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you because we {know} of your faith and your love for all God's people.”

And my prayer for you is that you also will come to love your church family, and give thanks to God for the privilege of being a part of His Family.

I am so glad I'm a part of the family of God....