



Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study
Bible Study Session 2
Colossians 1:3-8: Topic 02
"Thanks Be to God"

Study By
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Greek NT

3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι, 4 ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους 5 διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου 6 τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς, καθὼς καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον καθὼς καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀφ' ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐπέγνωτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ· 7 καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὃς ἐστὶν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 8 ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.

La Biblia de las Américas

3 Damos gracias a Dios, el Padre de nuestro Señor Jesucristo, orando siempre por vosotros, 4 al oír de vuestra fe en Cristo Jesús y del amor que tenéis por todos los santos, 5 a causa de la esperanza reservada para vosotros en los cielos, de la cual oísteis antes en la palabra de verdad, el evangelio, 6 que ha llegado hasta vosotros; así como en todo el mundo está dando fruto constantemente y creciendo, así lo ha estado haciendo también en vosotros, desde el día que oísteis y comprendisteis la gracia de Dios en verdad; 7 tal como lo aprendisteis de Epafras, nuestro amado consiervo, quien es fiel servidor de Cristo de parte nuestra, 8 el cual también nos informó acerca de vuestro amor en el Espíritu.

NRSV

3 In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is Christ's faithful minister on your behalf, 8 and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

NLT

3 We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 for we have heard that you trust in Christ Jesus and that you love all of God's people. 5 You do this because you are looking forward to the joys of heaven -- as you have been ever since you first heard the truth of the Good News. 6 This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is changing lives everywhere, just as it changed yours that very first day you heard and understood the truth about God's great kindness to sinners. 7 Epaphras, our much loved co-worker, was the one who brought you the Good News. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us in your place. 8 He is the one who told us about the great love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

In ancient letters the sender typically offered a prayer for his reader after setting up the introductory

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

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greeting between himself and his reader. This pattern reflects the highly religious orientation that characterized the ancient world, in contrast to modern western culture. In the adaptation of this form, the apostle Paul plays off another tradition with roots in his Jewish religious heritage. The Friday evening Sabbath service in the Jewish synagogue opened the worship service with a prayer, and closed with a prayer. With Paul's intention for his letters to be read in Christian worship services, he begins his letters with a prayer, labeled a Proem, and virtually always closes his letters with a prayer, a Benedictio. Early Christian worship especially in the beginning followed the synagogue model in its use of prayer for opening and closing the worship services. With Paul's letter imitating this pattern, the letter seemed a natural for public reading in Christian worship.

From this comes a number of intriguing questions for application of the text to Christian experience today. This study presents us with the opportunity to explore a number of them.

Historical Context:

The historical aspects of the text relate to how the passage was copied over the beginning centuries of Christian history (External History) and also to historical allusions contained inside the text as reflected directly by place and time markers. Occasionally the theme of the text raises historical issues that need to be treated as a background to the content of the passage.

External History. Over the first thousand years of copying this passage in the Greek language, the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament* (4th revised edition) lists two places where variations in the copying process are considered important for Bible translators to take note of in making their translations of this text.

In verse three the printed text² reading is τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (to God Father of our Lord Jesus Christ). Some manuscripts,³ however, add the connector καὶ between θεῷ and πατρὶ so that the alternative reading becomes τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ).⁴ With either reading of the text, the meaning remains the same.

In verse seven a shift in personal pronouns takes place between ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν (in your behalf) to ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (in our behalf).⁵ The difference in meaning is between asserting that Epaphras was a faithful servant of Christ in behalf of the Colossians (ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν) or a faithful servant in Paul's behalf (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν). The immediate context favors the first understanding, as does both the external and internal manuscript evidence.⁶ Again, little shift in meaning occurs regardless of the reading that is adopted.

The text apparatus of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th revised edition) is more detailed and contains eight places where variations of wording exist among the almost five thousand existing copies of the Greek text of this passage.⁷ The differences will reflect stylistic 'improvements' by later copyists



²The term "printed text" designates the reading of the scripture text considered by the editorial committee of a Greek text of the New Testament to be the most likely original wording of the passage when it was first written.

³"The reading adopted for the text, although it is rather narrowly supported (B C* 1739 Augustine), appears to account best for the origin of the other readings. In order to avoid the very unusual collocation of words, some copyists inserted τῷ (D* G 2005 Chrysostom) and others inserted καὶ (⋈ A C² D^c I K P Ψ 33 81 614 Byz Lect). (See also the comments on ver. 12 and 3.17.)" [Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 552.]

⁴This doesn't imply two separate deity references since τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ follows the standard Greek grammar construction for a twofold reference to a single entity: article + noun and + noun. The meaning is clearly "to the God who also is Father...".

⁵"Although on the basis of superior Greek evidence (P⁴⁶ and early Alexandrian and Western authorities) ἡμῶν might seem to be preferable, a majority of the Committee, impressed by the widespread currency of ὑμῶν in versional and patristic witnesses, considered it probable that copyists introduced the first person pronoun under the influence of the preceding ἡμῶν and the following ἡμῖν." [Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 552-53.]

⁶For those interested in learning more about how this evaluation of evidence is done, see the unit "Introduction to Textual Criticism, in the Greek 202 course that I taught at Gardner-Webb University: <http://cranfordville.com/g202TxtCritStdy.html#Wk1>.

⁷Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 523.

who sought to bring the Greek text in line with the more natural way it was written in subsequent centuries after the original writing in the first century.⁸

What can be concluded from this analysis? Primarily, that the wording of this passage of scripture remained stable over the first thousand years of it being copied. No existing variations in wording alter the meaning of the passage, and certainly do not impact the expression of religious ideas in the text.⁹

Internal History. The historical issues emerging from 1:3-8 center around the role of prayer in Christian worship, and how a letter *Proem* fits into such. How early Christians sought to communicate with the Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ is critical for understanding both the text and how it should apply to contemporary Christian experience.



Early Christian prayer. How did believers pray¹⁰ in the first Christian century? In the setting of the *Proem* of Col. 1:3-8 the question must be framed against the context of public praying as a part of Christian worship. Prayer clearly is possible by individual believers as a part of their personal devotion to Christ and can be done in private without the presence of others. But the New Testament is clear that communities of believers

Kolossar 1,3

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⁸One should remember that any ‘living’ language is constantly undergoing changes in spelling, pronunciation, and even grammar over time. This was certainly the case with Koine Greek in the ancient world. Add to this was the existence of well over a dozen distinct dialects of Koine Greek, each with their own system of spelling and pronunciation. These dynamics generate many of the variations in wording and spelling that surface in the copies of the Greek text of the New Testament in those early centuries.

⁹For scholars who work with the classical Greek and Roman philosophers and the writings of these ancient men, New Testament scholars in this field have a ‘dream world’ to work with, much to the envy of the classical scholars. For example, no largely complete Greek manuscript of any of Plato’s writings date back beyond the middle ages, some fifteen hundred years after they were written. Most all his writings have sections in which the wording of the original Greek has to be reconstructed artificially from centuries later translations in Latin and other ancient languages. But the New Testament scholar works with an over abundance of several thousand existing manuscripts, all of which have to be carefully examined in the process of getting back to the original wording of the writings. It should be noted that the vast majority of these manuscripts have been discovered in the last seventy or so years.

¹⁰See C.W.F. Smith, “Prayer,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach for a summation of the NT terminology for prayer:

The most generally used word (and the most frequent but not uniform LXX translation) is the noun προσευχή, with the middle deponent verb προσεύχομαι, found most often in Luke-Acts (see the Hebrew idiom in Jas. 5:17). It applies particularly to asking of God and is a more religious term than δεησις and δέομαι, which are also found often in Luke-Acts and the LXX, and which mean “a request” and “to ask,” but not necessarily of God. (On the absence of these terms from the Fourth Gospel, see § C4below.) For “prayer” the Fourth Gospel uses principally the verb αἰτέω, which may be used of asking man or God. It is used with προσεύχομαι in Mark 11:24, and the two are in apposition in Col. 1:9. Ἐντυγχάνω in the sense of “intercede” used of prayer in Rom. 8:27, 34; Heb. 7:25 only, but of a legal petition in Acts 25:24.

made extensive use of public praying as an integral part of their worship of God. And it is this aspect that is most relevant to our study.

In this context, then a number of relevant issues arise. Is public prayer to be strictly liturgical? Or, can public prayer be spontaneous? Are both patterns permitted? What is the proper content of public prayer? Does it differ from private prayer? What role should public prayer play in Christian worship? Answers to these and related questions will provide an important background for understanding Col. 1:3-8.

The biblical materials on prayer, particularly in relation to corporate prayer by God's people in public worship, are the sources of ancient understanding here. The orientation between the Old Testament Israelite worship of God and early Christian worship are very different from one another in many ways. Although many prayers by individuals are contained in the Old Testament, the book of Psalms along with other related texts underscore that once the temple was established by Solomon in the tenth century BCE Israelite prayer increasingly shifted toward the liturgical and the temple became the exclusive place for public prayer. Public prayer became strictly liturgical and *was limited to the reciting of one or more of the psalms* considered appropriate for the specific occasion of worship. Spontaneous praying in public worship disappeared, from all indications.

The emergence of the Jewish synagogue during the intertestamental era seems to have come about in major part because of the destruction of Solomon's temple by the Babylonians and subsequent dissatisfaction with the inferior quality of the rebuilt temple by Ezra and Nehemiah. Added to this was the displacement of many Jews during the captivity in Babylonia, with the majority of them continuing to live there after the return to Judea of some of the exiles under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some suggestion from much later Jewish sources points to the gathering of the priests not on duty at the temple by their section¹¹ in their villages to lead in prayers at the same time the same liturgy was being spoken in the temple. If accurate, then the synagogue emerges initially as a place of public prayer in Jewish settlements scattered not just over Palestine, but especially in Diaspora Judaism throughout the Mediterranean world. The prayers offered were also strictly liturgical and mimicked those offered in the temple. By the beginning of the Christian era, synagogue worship had evolved to include formal prayers, known as the Shemoneh Esreh, i.e., Eighteen Benedictions," and the reading of the Hebrew scriptures in a lectionary cycle pattern.¹²

In the sectarian Judaism of the ancient world, we can detect, primarily from the Essenes at Qumran (cf. Dead Sea Scrolls), a pattern somewhat similar to the synagogue. Prayer and the study of the Torah were the central elements of corporate worship. As with the synagogue, sectarian Judaism saw prayer as taking the place of animal sacrifice in the temple, particularly after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 by the Romans. Much emphasis upon confession and purification through repentance can be traced in the *Manual of Discipline* and the *Damascus Document*. The prayers were liturgical and recited mostly from the Psalms.



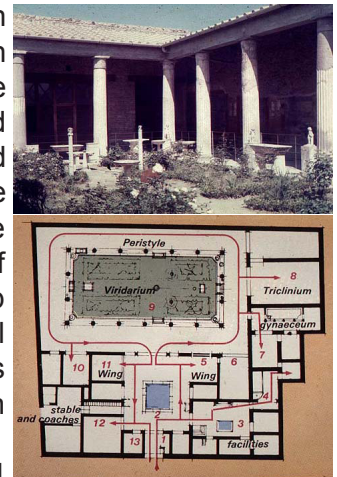
Public worship by Christians in the first century took place either in the synagogue / temple and/or in private homes. During the first two decades of the Christian movement, appx. AD 30 - 50, when most all Christians were Jewish, the synagogue pattern of worship was the model used by Christians. Added to the synagogue reading of the Hebrew scriptures¹³ and praying were distinctive Christian elements. Increasingly

¹¹The temple priesthood was divided into twelve sections, with each section being responsible for the temple worship one month out of the year. The exception to this schedule was the three major festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Yom Kippur when all twelve sections were on duty in order to handle the massive crowds of people worshipping in the temple.

¹²"The predominant note of the synagogue services in biblical times was thanksgiving. The basic elements in the service were the Shema framed in benedictions; the reading of Torah with appropriate praises and prayers for enlightenment; the doxologies of the Kaddish, honoring God's name and expecting his kingdom (see LORD'S PRAYER); and, centrally, the Tephillah or Amidah, the standing prayers. These consist, on the Sabbath, of six "benedictions," the first three praises and the last three thanksgivings, based on the temple ritual, and between them a benediction-prayer for the Sabbath or festival. On weekdays petition was included between the first and last three benedictions. At first this petition was free or extempore, but it later became fixed, until there developed twelve intervening sections forming the Shemoneh Esreh or "Eighteen Benedictions" (in Babylon, nineteen) which now constitute the Amidah." [C.W.F. Smith, "Prayer," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach]

¹³One would want to remember that in early Christian worship outside the Jewish synagogue the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, was read instead of the Hebrew language text. This was universally the case outside of Palestine and especially after non-Jews began coming into the communities of faith in large numbers. This is reflected in the fact that the overwhelming number of quotes of Old Testament texts that are found in the New Testament come from the LXX and not from a

the orally memorized words of Jesus would be recited. With the Pauline mission in the mid-first century, the Christian movement shifted from being a Jewish dominated religious group to a non-Jewish religious movement. With this came the increasing displacement of the Hebrew scriptures with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.¹⁴ Liturgical elements such as confessions of faith, hymns, memorized prayers etc. played increasingly important roles in the worship of Christians.¹⁵ The place of public worship in the second half of the first century shifted to private homes overwhelmingly, with lecture halls etc. occasionally rented for gatherings of believers (cf. Acts 19:9¹⁶). But from all indication, the content and style of worship remained essentially similar, only with the growing body of written and oral material that was distinctly Christian being incorporated along side the Hebrew scriptures as authoritative writings to be read and studied. Christian gatherings focused both on worshipping God and on edification of one another.¹⁷



Christian House Church
Dura Europos, Syria
appx. 230 AD

Not many prayers are recorded in the New Testament, in contrast to the Old Testament.¹⁸ But we see something of this in Acts, as C.W.F. Smith ["Prayer," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach] notes:

The author of Acts has reconstructed the practice of the primitive church and Paul's experience and gives us pictures of the first disciples at prayer in the temple (2:46; 3:1; cf. 22:17), in the Upper Room (1:12-14, 23-26; cf. 2:42; 4:23-31; 12:5), and at home in the "breaking of bread" (2:42, 46). The Holy Spirit comes to a praying church (2:1-4; cf. 4:31). By prayer with the laying on of hands it chooses (1:23-26) and appoints its ministers (6:6; 13:2-3; 14:23) and brings

Hebrew text source.

¹⁴Interestingly, the influence of Greek religious traditions, particularly in prayer, played no role in the first century Christian movement. Not until much later did the surrounding culture begin shaping patterns of Christian worship. For a summation of prayer in the Greek religious tradition see Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 788:

From Homer on, Greek prayer involved formulas that were intended to ensure that the god addressed would not be offended by an incorrect invocation. The hymn of Zeus in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus is introduced in this manner: "Zeus, whoever he is, if this name pleases him in invocation." Here the liturgical formula *hostis pot' estin*, "whoever he is" occurs (lines 160–61). An earlier example of this formula occurs in *Odyssey* 5.445: "Hear, Lord, whoever you are." In Plato *Cratylus* 400d-e, a distinction is made between the names which the gods use of themselves, which are unknown to humans, and the customary names which humans use in prayers since the true names of the gods are unknown. Prayers were uttered aloud in connection with great public sacrifices, at the beginning of public assemblies (Aristophanes *Thes.* 295–305) and before battle (Aeschylus *Sept. c. Theb.* 252–60; Thucydides *Hist.* 6.32)

¹⁵Over the past two hundred years of New Testament study the discipline of Form Criticism has been the center of analysis of literary forms (genres) that appear inside the pages of the New Testament. But in the closing decades of the twentieth century pioneering scholars such as E. Earle Ellis (at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, with his *The Making of the New Testament* volume in 1991) have moved into the newer Tradition Criticism of the New Testament with exploration of the "pre-formed Christian tradition" that surfaces inside the New Testament, especially in the letters of the New Testament. Rich insights have come out of this emerging field of study regarding prayer, worship, belief affirmation, baptism etc. among Christians in the first century.

¹⁶**Acts 19:9** (NRSV): "When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus." ὡς δὲ τινες ἐσκληρύνοντο καὶ ἠπειθοῦν κακολογοῦντες τὴν ὁδὸν ἐνώπιον τοῦ πλῆθους, ἀποστάς ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀφώρισεν τοὺς μαθητάς, καθ' ἡμέραν διαλεγόμενος ἐν τῇ σχολῇ Τυράννου.

¹⁷"As the word of Christ was ministered and received in the congregation, so the body of Christ was built up. Christ himself was encountered in and through the "edification" (*oikodomē*). And, it was in building up the congregation that God was worshiped and glorified. A wedge should not be driven, therefore, between Paul's understanding of the "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions of what took place in worship. Edification and worship, for example, were different sides of the same coin. Participating in the upbuilding of the church was an important expression of the believing community's devotion and service to God. It was, as Peterson puts it, an element of believers "engaging with God" (220). Therefore, one part of the meeting could not have been viewed as "worship time" (e.g., prayer and praise), and another part as "edification time," since the apostle's teaching encourages us to view the same activities from both points of view." [Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 130.]

¹⁸But in contrast with the OT, which preserves more than 250 prose and psalmic prayers, the NT contains relatively few recorded prayers: the prayers of Jesus (Matt. 11:25–27 = Luke 10:21–22; Matt. 26:39 = Mark 14:36 = Luke 22:42; Matt. 27:46 = Mark 15:34; Luke 23:34, 46; John 11:41–42; 12:27–28; 17:1–26); the prayers of Peter and the assembly (Acts 1:24–25) and of Peter and John (4:24–30); the prayer of Stephen (7:59–60)." [DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN, ALLEN C. MYERS AND ASTRID B. BECK, *EERDMANS DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE* (GRAND RAPIDS, MICH.: W.B. EERDMANS, 2000), 1077. S.v., "PRAYER," BY SAMUEL E. BALENTINE.]

strangers into communion (8:14-17). Prayer is offered for healing the sick and raising the dead (9:40; 28:8). Stephen prays at his martyrdom (7:55, 59-60), Paul and Silas in prison (16:25). The early church's all-night vigil culminating in the breaking of bread is described in 20:7-11. Further glimpses of the importance of prayer are given in 13:2 (with fasting), where it results in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in 20:32, 36. Frequently in Acts visions are the means by which God communicates with man (Paul: 9:3-8; 16:9; 22:17; 23:11; 27:23; Ananias: 9:10-16; Cornelius: 10:1-6; cf. vs. 30; Peter: 10:9-20).

Whether the early church prayed spontaneously or liturgically is an incorrect framing of the question, arising out of a modern history.¹⁹ The limited number of references makes an either/or conclusion impossible.

The posture taken while praying varies, both in public and private prayer; no particular posture is mandated in the Bible.²⁰ The specific prayers recorded in Acts include:

Acts 1:24-25 (NRSV): "24 Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.'"

24 καὶ προσευξάμενοι εἶπαν Σὺ κύριε καρδιογνώστα πάντων, ἀνάδειξον ὃν ἐξελέξω, ἐκ τούτων τῶν δύο ἕνα, 25 λαβεῖν τὸν τόπον τῆς διακονίας ταύτης καὶ ἀποστολῆς, ἀφ' ἧς παρέβη Ἰούδας πορευθῆναι εἰς τὸν τόπον τὸν ἴδιον.

Acts 4:24-30 (NRSV): "24 When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, 25 it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' 27 For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.'"

24 οἱ δὲ ἀκούσαντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἤραν φωνὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ εἶπαν· Δέσποτα, σὺ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς, 25 ὁ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου στόματος Δαυὶδ παιδὸς σου εἰπὼν· Ἰνατί ἐφρύαξαν ἔθνη καὶ λαοὶ ἐμελέτησαν κενά; 26 παρέστησαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες συνήχθησαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ. 27 συνήχθησαν γὰρ ἐπ' ἀληθείας ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ ἐπὶ τὸν ἅγιον παῖδά σου Ἰησοῦν, ὃν ἔχρισας, Ἡρώδης τε καὶ Πόντιος Πιλάτος σὺν ἔθνεσιν καὶ λαοῖς Ἰσραὴλ, 28 ποιῆσαι ὅσα ἡ χεὶρ σου καὶ ἡ βουλή προώρισεν γενέσθαι. 29 καὶ τὰ νῦν, κύριε, ἔπιδε ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπειλὰς αὐτῶν καὶ δὸς τοῖς δούλοις σου μετὰ παρρησίας πάσης λαλεῖν τὸν λόγον σου, 30 ἐν τῷ τῆν χεῖρά σου ἐκτείνειν σε εἰς ἴασις καὶ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα γίνεσθαι διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ ἁγίου παιδὸς σου Ἰησοῦ.

Acts 7:59-60 (NRSV): "59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died."

59 καὶ ἐλιθοβόλουν τὸν Στέφανον ἐπικαλούμενον καὶ λέγοντα· Κύριε Ἰησοῦ, δέξαι τὸ πνευμά μου· 60 θεὸς δὲ τὰ γόνατα ἔκραξεν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ· Κύριε, μὴ στήσης αὐτοῖς ταύτην τὴν ἁμαρτίαν· καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐκοιμήθη.

¹⁹“Christians and churches have divided over the question of whether or not prayers must have a set, word-for-word form. There are those who have argued that the use of fixed liturgical forms makes for formalism, deadness, and inflexibility in the face of changing circumstances and sudden needs, and a “quenching of the Spirit.” Others have argued that fixed liturgical forms ensure that worship is truly communal, and that such forms minimize the risk of clumsy or eccentric leadership in worship. But the question ought not to be settled merely in terms of the expediencies of worship, much less of church custom and tradition. One question is whether the Bible *requires* such fixed prayers. An examination of the OT reveals mandatory strict liturgical patterns, while an examination of the NT reveals no such structure. Every example of prayer is of extempore prayers, with the possible exception of the Lord's Prayer. But even in the case of the Lord's Prayer it can be argued that the Lord was indicating a pattern for prayer, not providing a formal liturgy. A further and more fundamental question is: Is the authority of Scripture such that whatever is not expressly commanded is forbidden? The different answers that have been given to this question have implications not only for the practice of congregational prayer but for the doctrine of the church and indeed for the whole of theological discussion.

“Historically, the controversy between written versus extempore prayers has become most acute and vexing when fixed forms of prayer have been legally enacted, thus violating the consciences of many who, though perhaps agreeing that fixed prayers were occasionally permissible, could not agree that they were mandatory. The most famous and far reaching of these conflicts occurred in England in the 1660s. In 1662 hundreds of English ministers were ejected from their churches for refusing to agree to the legally imposed Book of Common Prayer. This event, together with the previous migration of Puritan congregations to America, has had far-reaching implications for the organization of prayer in public worship, as well as for much else.” [Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1745. S.v., “Prayer,” by Paul Helm]

²⁰The posture in praying is mentioned but never is a specific posture mandated:

“The posture assumed by people in prayer is frequently mentioned in the Bible, but never in such a way as to prescribe any particular position (e.g., kneeling with arms outstretched, 1 Kgs. 8:54; Ezra 9:5; head bowed and hands lifted, Neh. 8:6; cf. 1 Tim. 2:8; prostrate, Matt. 2:11; standing, 6:5; Luke 18:11, 13).” [Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Rev., Augm. Translation of: *Bijbelse Encyclopedie*. Rev. Ed. 1975. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 846.]

Clearly the first and third prayers are spontaneous, while the second prayer echoes more liturgical tones with its extensive use of language from the Psalms, in particular Ps. 2:1-2.

Although not recorded in any of the prayers in the New Testament, reference is given to acclamations to others praying by the congregation. Most frequent is the use of ‘amen’:²¹

“Amen” (Gk *amēn*) is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *āmēn*, which is derived from the root *mn*, meaning “firmness, certainty.” In the OT amen is an expression of affirmation of what has been said, whether in a solemn curse (Num 5:22; Jer 11:5) or in prayer and praise (1 Chron 16:36; Neh 8:6; Ps 41:13; 106:48). In early Judaism this usage of amen continued (Tob 3:3) and was so firmly established that in time it became a liturgical element in Jewish worship: the congregation responded with an “Amen” at the end of each prayer recited by the leader.

In Paul’s letters amen is used in two different ways. The first one is the common usage where it is placed at the end of benedictions (Rom 15:33; 1 Cor 16:24; Gal 6:18; Philem 25), doxologies (Rom 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; Gal 1:5; Eph 3:21; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim 4:18) and prayers of thanksgiving (cf. 1 Cor 14:16) as an affirmation of the prayer or thanksgiving of another person. But Paul does not use amen merely for liturgical purposes. In some instances it is intentionally mentioned to promote the unity of the congregation through their corporate utterance of “Amen” together (cf. Rom 15:33) or to lead the readers into a verbal affirmation of the doctrinal beliefs which they are in danger of abandoning (see Gal 1:3-5). This is indicated by the frequency of references to and the locations of amen in Paul’s letters.

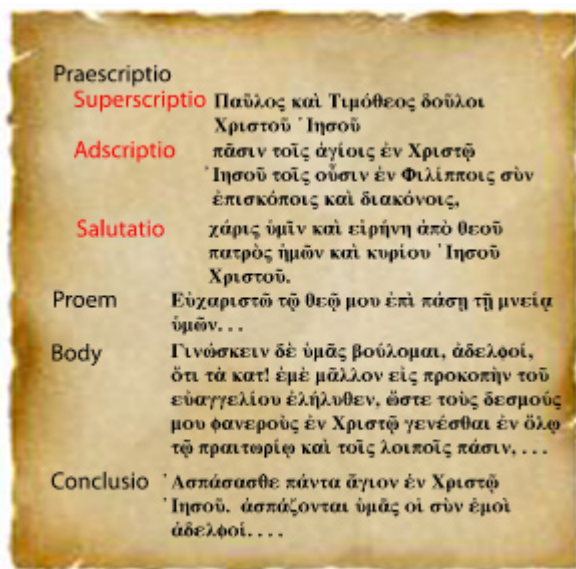
The second way of using amen by Paul is found in 2 Corinthians 1:20. In this context (2 Cor 1:15-22) there is no doxology or benediction. Instead, Paul is explaining to the Corinthians his change of traveling plans. In defending his personal integrity in the ministry of the gospel, Paul refers to God’s faithfulness (2 Cor 1:18), which is supported by Christ’s faithfulness in fulfilling God’s promises (1 Cor 1:19-20). Because Christ is faithful (not “yes” and “no”), God’s faithfulness in promising salvation to humanity is fulfilled. The amen in this context is not likely a substitution of “yes” (as Hahn proposes), nor a reference to its semitic meaning “firmness, certainty” (as van Unnik argues). Rather, it is invoked in its liturgical usage (i.e., expressed at the end of prayers) to underscore the faithfulness of Christ in fulfilling God’s promise of salvation which in turn creates the possibility for believers to utter together “Amen” in their corporate worship to the glory of God. Accordingly, Paul’s argument is: He (Paul) is faithful (or trustworthy) just as God is faithful. God is faithful because his son Jesus Christ is faithful in fulfilling his promises. In this light amen is used in 2 Corinthians 1:20 not only directly to affirm Christ’s faithfulness, but also indirectly to support Paul’s argument for his own trustworthiness. Here we see an example of Paul’s creative use of a liturgical acclamation with its familiar meaning for the strengthening of his argument.

Although different kinds of prayers were given,²² most dominate are thanksgiving and intercession prayers. This reflects the synagogue heritage and is built upon the pattern established in the Hebrew scriptures.

Out of this one can better understand the liturgical role of the letter Proem. These prayers of Paul in his letters will focus on thanksgiving always and often also on intercession.²³ The apostle uses well established patterns of prayer in his letters as an important vehicle of communication to his readers.

Literary Aspects:

The literary function of 1:3-8 is also important to proper understanding of these verses. The form and setting of 1:3-8 is highly significant. As previously discussed, the ancient letter was a ‘substitute presence’ of an individual and represented communication that would have been given in person if possible. Certainly this was true of all of Paul’s letters. The circumstantial nature of the letter shapes the contents and dominant emphases found in the letter, since it attempts to



Ancient Letter on papyrus

²¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 557-560. S.V., “Liturgical Elements,” J. L. Wu. Discussed also are “Abba, Father” and “Maranatha.”

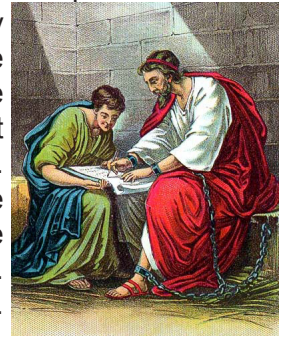
²²Cf. **1 Tim. 2:1-4** (NRSV): “1 First of all, then, I urge that **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings** be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

2.1 Παρακαλῶ οὖν πρῶτον πάντων ποιεῖσθαι **δεήσεις, προσευχάς, ἐντεύξεις, εὐχαριστίας**, ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, 2 ὑπὲρ βασιλέων καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐν ὑπεροχῇ ὄντων, ἵνα ἡρεμον καὶ ἡσύχιον βίον διάγωμεν ἐν πάσῃ εὐσεβείᾳ καὶ σεμνότητι. 3 τοῦτο καλὸν καὶ ἀπόδεκτον ἐνώπιον τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν θεοῦ, 4 ὃς πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι καὶ εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας ἔλθειν.

²³For a listing of the English translation text of all of the Proems in the letters of Paul see my “Epistolary Divisions in the Letters of Paul” at cranfordville.com. The listing of the Greek text of these is also available at cranfordville.com.

address real problems present among real groups of believers in a specified geographical spot.

This has implications for the interpretation of the contents of the letter. The originally intended meaning of the words of the letter sender must be interpreted against the backdrop of the situations being addressed among the initial letter recipients. Once that has been grasped satisfactorily, then the Bible study must determine how that meaning comes across the two thousand year old bridge of time to apply to our day. Fundamentally, when a modern circumstance matches the ancient circumstance the application is relatively simple. But when no modern circumstance compares to the ancient situation addressed by the letter, the application is more difficult and tentative. The interpretative conclusions drawn then must be put forth as possible but not certain. This is no time for dogmatism!



Literary Form:

As mentioned in the above discussion of the historical aspects of the text, Col. 1:3-8 constitutes the *Proem* of the letter. The *Proem* of ancient letters essentially was a prayer wish from the sender for the recipients of the letters. In the Pauline pattern the prayer wish begins with an expression of thanksgiving to God for his readers. Quite often then he will move to a prayer of intercession asking God to bless his readers in specific ways.

The Colossians *Proem* in vv. 3-8 contains the standardized Pauline prayer of thanksgiving that has something of an introductory formula nature to it: Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι.²⁴ The thanksgiving expression extends through verse eight. In the original Greek text this forms but a single sentence. Verses 9-12 shift in the direction of intercession while retaining some of the thanksgiving language. But the transition between thanksgiving and intercession in Colossians is not a clean shift that can be clearly detected, as is the case normally in this part of Paul's letters. This issue will be explored in greater detail in the next study.

Literary Setting:

The context of Col. 1:3-8 is determined by its literary form. The letter *Proem* comes after the letter *Praescriptio* and before the body of the letter, as the outline on the right indicates.

The one uncertainty here is the terminus point of the *Proem*. Clearly it begins with the typical Pauline formula introductory statement in verse 3. Verses 9-12 contain similar prayer language and so are often included in the *Proem*. But verses 13-20 continue the long sentence begun in verse 9, so that verses 9-20 actually form a single sentence in the original Greek text. Verses 13-20 reflect a traditional *Christus Hymnus* confession of faith in Jesus Christ as an extension of the prayer language of verses 9-12. The typical transitional language from the *Proem* to the beginning of the body of the letter is not present at any of the potential starting points in verses 9, 13, or 21. Consequently the shift from the *Proem* to the body of the letter in Colossians is vague and less clearly defined, as is the case normally in the letters of Paul. Consequently, a variety of differing assessments of this will surface in the commentaries, particularly the more recent ones that seek to address literary aspects of the biblical text.

Outline of Colossians

Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2
Superscriptio: 1:1
Adscriptio: 1:2a
Salutatio: 1:2b

Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

Body

Intercession: 1:9-12
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

Christian Legalism: 2:20-23
Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4
Christian Behavior: 3:5-11
Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1
Husband/Wife: 3:18-19
Father/Children: 3:20-21
Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9
Greetings: 4:10-17
Closing: 4:18
Letter Validation: 4:18a
Prayer Request: 4:18b
Benedictio: 4:19c

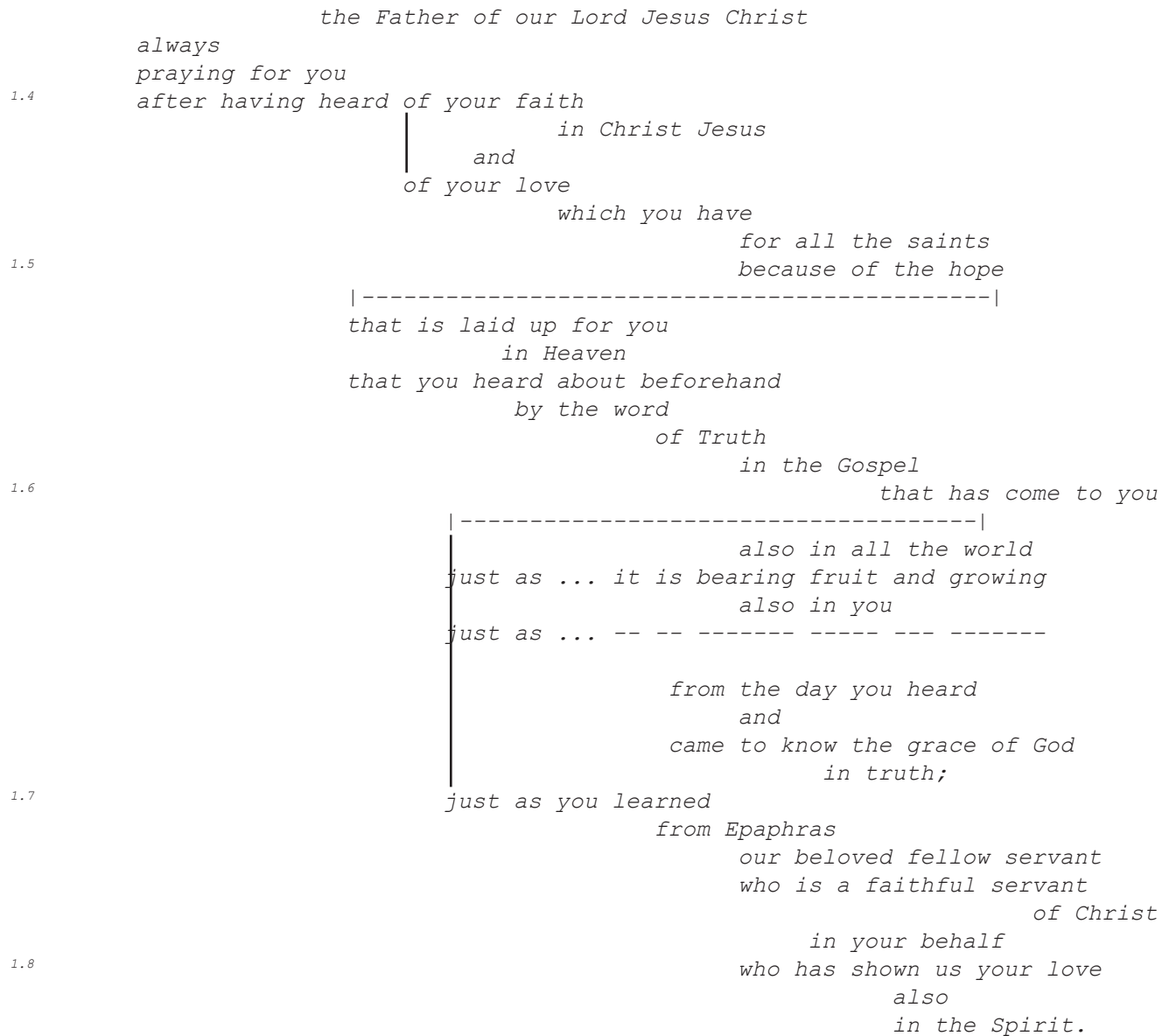
²⁴“In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,”

Literary Structure:

The internal arrangement of the ideas is visually clarified by a block diagram of the Greek text that is reflected in English translation.

Proem

1^{1.3} **We give thanks to God**



As the above diagram illustrates, this single sentence has **the foundational affirmation** that is expanded extensively by numerous words, phrases, and clauses. In technical analysis of ancient Greek sentence patterns, this reflects what is called a ‘running’ sentence. This kind of ancient Greek sentence lacks the metrical balance found in more formal sentence structure. It indicates an orally dictated sentence by the letter sender to the writing secretary, who was putting the ideas into written expression. The letter sender simply tossed out orally a core idea, and then proceeded to expand it extensively by adding subsidiary elements to the foundational idea. Such patterns are commonly found in ancient classical and Koine Greek, particularly in the more formal letters. The longer sentences often pose interpretation difficulties, largely by the uncertainty of ‘what modifies what’ when the sentence gets into the fifth or sixth level of embedding ideas inside one another. Such is the case here in this sentence, which is relatively short in comparison to the standard Pauline pattern.

The core expression is simply “We give thanks to God,” Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ. Two directions of expansion then follow. First the reference to God is expanded by “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” πατρὶ τοῦ

κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ This adjectival expansion is followed by three adverbial expansions of the core verb, 'give thanks': 'always,' 'praying for you,' and 'after having heard of your faith and love.' These reflect a Greek adverb, πάντοτε, and two Greek adverbial participles, περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι, and ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην. The tense of these two participles is significant, and will be discussed below.

With the second of these participles, the expansion elements explode in number and complexity as they continue to the end of the sentence in verse eight.²⁵ The learning about the faith of the Colossians prompted the apostle to give thanks to God. The details of that discovery occupy his thoughts in the numerous expansion elements in verses four through eight. Faith, love, and hope are the three spiritual expressions that he stresses -- a triad found elsewhere in his writings (cf. 1 Cor. 13; 1 Thess. 1:2-3 et als.). The role of Epaphras in the Colossian spiritual growth is identified, as perhaps the founder of the church and also as the church's messenger to Paul.

Exegesis of the Text:

Giving thanks to God, v. 3: "In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι).

The use of the verb εὐχαριστέω is standard Pauline expression of thanksgiving in the *Proema* of his letters.²⁶ The apostle notes to the Colossians that in his prayers he constantly gives thanks to God²⁷ for them. Paul doesn't brag on the Colossians directly by telling them how great they are. His Christian orientation pushes him a different direction. Instead, his gratitude for the Colossians is directed to God. He realized that the good that was taking place at Colossae wasn't due to human efforts. Rather, it was the result of God being active in the lives of the believers there. And thus praise to God is entirely appropriate. The principle behind the apostle's thanksgiving was set forth by Jesus in Matthew 5:16:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

The witness of the Colossian church was authentic and Paul understood who should receive the credit for it; God, not the Colossians. Thus the apostle underscores the repeated expressions of thanksgiving for the Colossians as he was praying concerning them.²⁸ Every time they came up in his prayers, the first thing he mentioned to God was his gratitude for what God was doing in the church. The present tense participle προσευχόμενοι matches the present tense verb Εὐχαριστοῦμεν, thus suggesting that thanksgiving and praying for the Colossians was a continuing concern of Paul. This was not a random, seldom occurring matter for Paul. During the days of his two plus year imprisonment in Caesarea Philippi, he spent much time reflecting on the believers in the churches connected to his ministry. Abundant opportunity to pray for them came to him. When news about them would arrive, he found renewed impetus to lift the believers up to God for His blessing. Being confined in jail meant that he could only pray for and write to a letter to them.

²⁵A number of commentators propose an informal chiasmus structure on vv. 3-8 or vv. 3-12. But to do so ignores completely the syntactical structure of these two Greek sentences, and -- in my estimation -- reflects more modern hunting for literary forms than an identification of existing forms in the text.

²⁶Cf. 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 1:3 (adjective used, εὐχαριστός); Rom. 1:8; Philm 4; Col. 1:3; Eph. 1:3 (adjective used, εὐχαριστός); Phil. 1:3. Only 1 and 2 Timothy differ with a similar expression, χάριν ἔχω.... Note the connection between **χάρις** and εὐχαριστέω. Neither Galatians nor Titus has a Proem section.

²⁷Note that Paul depicts God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). The point of this seems to be to stress the monotheistic belief of the Jews in one God. It will lay an important foundation for the subsequent emphasis upon the deity of Christ that will come in the body of the letter. Believers remain monotheistic and do not adopt the polytheism of the pagan Gentile world.

²⁸Whether the adverb 'always' modifies "we give thanks" or "as we pray" is unclear in the Greek. Technically πάντοτε can go either direction. N.T. Wright (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, p. 53) adopts the latter with this note:

"Though NIV and RSV both take *always* with *we thank God*, it goes more naturally in the Greek with *when we pray for you*: Paul is continually praying about the church in Colossae, and whenever he does so he thanks God. It is likely that the word 'always' indicates regularity, not that such prayers occupied all Paul's waking hours; he does not pray haphazardly or only when the mood takes him, but keeps regular hours of prayer (probably morning, noon and evening), and the church in Colossae is always mentioned. In this discipline of thanksgiving and intercession he was simply continuing a practice ingrained since his childhood—though of course (he would say) filling that practice with new content."

These things he gladly did in acknowledging the leadership of God over his life. Ministry was limited, but not terminated.

Interestingly, Paul uses the more frequent phrase *περὶ ὑμῶν* (“concerning you”), rather than the alternative *περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν* (“concerning all of you”).²⁹ The emphasis upon all the congregation comes only in the two letters where Paul has virtually nothing negative to say to them. Perhaps one can conclude from this that Paul’s gratitude to God was for those believers in Colossae who were authentically serving Christ; those who had strayed off into false teaching were not objects of his thanksgiving.

As the *Proem* of a letter intended to be publicly read before the congregation in worship, one can easily imagine the positive reaction of the Colossians when this letter was read to them. The revered apostle noted his gratitude to God for them. Although he had not seen them personally, he none the less paid tribute to their commitment to Christ through the gospel. That had to be encouraging to them. Additionally, this positive word would make them more open to hearing the later critique in the body of the letter against some of the things taking place at Colossae. Indeed, the apostle makes effective use of the *proem* to establish a bond of friendship between himself and them. This extends the purpose of the *Salutatio* in verse 2b for connecting the sender and the reader of the letter.

The faith and love of the Colossians, vv. 4-8: “4 for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.” (4 ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους 5 διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου 6 τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς, καθὼς καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον καθὼς καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀφ’ ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐπέγνυτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ· 7 καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὅς ἐστιν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 8 ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.)

This major expansion of the core expression of thanksgiving in verse three builds off Paul’s reference to having heard about the faith and love of the Colossian believers. The base is the participle phrase “after having heard of your faith and love...” (ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν...καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην). This provides the starting point for adding expansions of additional ideas. Note that Paul “had heard” about their faith and love; by not ever having been in the church he did not know these things first hand for his own observation. Verse seven strongly implies that it was from Epaphras that he had learned about the faith and love of the Colossians.

Their faith was focused ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“in Christ Jesus”). This expression is not the usual one for Paul; normally it is τὴν πίστιν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν. This has occasioned numerous comments by scholars over the years. But James Dunn offers helpful insight here:³⁰

One of the most interesting divergences from normal Pauline usage comes in the phrase *πίστις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* (“faith in Christ Jesus”). For Paul never so speaks. Normally he uses the noun phrase in the form *πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* or an equivalent (Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Phil. 3:9; see also 2:12). Some take this in the sense “the faith (fullness) of Jesus Christ,” but almost certainly it denotes “faith in Jesus Christ” (see my “*Pistis Christou*” and *Galatians* 138–39). He also uses the verbal form *πιστεύειν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν* (“believe in Christ Jesus,” Gal. 2:16; so also Rom. 10:14; Phil. 1:29; see also 2:5). But nowhere does he use *ἐν* with the dative, as here (Gal. 3:26 is not an exception since the two prepositional phrases there are independent of each other, as is generally agreed).³¹ In contrast the letters more frequently accepted as post-Pauline use phrases similar to what we have here in 1:4 a number of times (Eph. 1:15; 1 Tim. 3:13; 2 Tim. 1:13; 3:15; also *1 Clement* 22:1; 43:1). Here then is another suggestion that with Colossians we are already moving beyond Paul’s own usage. There is,

²⁹For *περὶ ὑμῶν* see 1 Cor. 1:4; Philm. 4 (σου); Col. 1:3; Eph. 1:3 (ἡμᾶς); 2 Cor. 1:4 (ἡμᾶς). For *περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν* see Rom. 1:8; Phil. 1:4.

³⁰James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in the New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 55.

³¹Despite strong support (e.g., Lightfoot 131; Dibelius, *Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon* 5; Moule 49; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 16; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 41; Wall 44–45; cf. Masson 90 and n. 2), it is unlikely that *ἐν Χριστῷ* should be taken as referring to the sphere rather than the object of “your faith.” Where Paul uses nouns with “in Christ” (as in Rom. 6:23; 8:39; 1 Cor. 1:4; Gal. 2:4; 3:14), he has in mind the blessing that derives from Christ and is given “in Christ,” not faith directed to Christ; and the parallels in Ephesians and the Pastorals indicate clearly enough late Pauline or post-Pauline usage (cf. Mark 1:15).

however, no significant difference in meaning (if anything, the ἐν formulation is more static), and the thought is otherwise wholly Pauline in character and emphasis.

Faith is focused on Jesus Christ unquestionably. The additional aspect underscored here by ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ is that such faith provides the ‘atmosphere’, i.e., the context, in which the believer lives and serves God. Everything done in life as a disciple is done in and through the faith commitment. Paul acknowledges that the Colossians are living this out authentically.

But they were **also showing love for fellow believers**. Importantly, however, this love was not expressed just toward fellow believers inside the Christian community at Colossae. Paul underscores that this was a love “for all the saints” (ἦν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους). The Colossians had caught the vision of belonging to a much larger community of believers in Christ that extended far beyond the boundaries of their town. No provincialism was present at Colossae in the Christian community. Given the smallness of Colossae, this is rather amazing. Although living in a small town well inland from major seaports, these believers developed a compassion for believers elsewhere.

This love -- and also faith -- was based upon hope: διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἦν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς. Christian hope is the expectation of God’s eternal blessing in final judgment. Unusually, Paul here makes hope the basis of faith and love.³² But the subsequent qualification of hope stresses the eschatological focus.

Hope is, **first**, “laid up for you in heaven” (τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). The meaning of hope shifts somewhat to what we expect, rather than just expectation. The plural form for Heaven, τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, reflects the Jewish background as the place of highest dwelling of God above the location of the demonic in the sky above the earth. The certainty of God’s blessing lay far above the reach of Satan and his hosts of demons who would destroy it if they could.

Second, hope came to them earlier in the preaching of the Gospel message at Colossae, presumably by Epaphras (cf. vv. 5b-6, 7-8). This faithful servant of Christ taught (ἐμάθετε³³ ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ) the Colossians the message of God’s grace based upon hope in His eternal blessing. From the time of their initial faith response to the preaching of the Gospel, the Colossians had been fruitful in spiritual growth and service to Christ. The key was that Epaphras had presented to them “the word of truth, the gospel” (τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). How much prior to the writing of this letter this missionary work had been done is unclear; perhaps it came about in the mid-50s during Paul’s lengthy ministry in Ephesus, as described in study one under **Historical Aspects**. But the expansion of the gospel in Colossae was fruitful and in line with elsewhere in the Mediterranean world of Paul. In addition to Epaphras helping the Colossians, he had also carried news from Colossae to Paul in prison: “and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit” (ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.). Through Epaphras, the apostle had become aware of their love for him, this in spite of never having seen him personally. This brought encouragement to Paul and prompted him to write the letter to them.

Third, the gospel that Epaphras brought to them was bearing the same kind of fruit in Colossae as it was elsewhere in the rest of the world: the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God (τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς, καθὼς καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον καθὼς καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀφ’ ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐπέγνωτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ).

With this emphasis Paul stresses that the message the Colossians had accepted was not some strange,

³²“The connection with v. 4, however, is slightly puzzling — “on account of the hope...” NEB/REB (and NIV similarly) resolve the puzzle by translating: “both [faith and love] spring from the/that hope...” And that is probably a fair rendering, since the preposition must be taken to indicate that the faith and love are in some sense a response to, derived from, or in some way dependent on the hope. In which case, unusually in Paul, the hope is being presented as the basis for the faith and love, somewhat in contrast to 1 Cor. 13:13 and Gal. 5:5–6 (hope in God as the basis for faith in Christ and love to all). At all events, the formulation here serves to underline the eschatological and forward-looking character of the gospel message that called forth the Colossians’ faith and stimulated their love for their fellow saints (cf. Wolter 52–53).” [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in the New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 57.]

³³Note the discipleship emphasis of Epaphras’ ministry at Colossae. He was concerned with making disciples, not gaining converts when he preached the Gospel at Colossae.

limited word that only very few people had access to.³⁴ The spread of the Gospel was a part of the grand design of God for all humanity, and the Colossians were adopting it along with many others in that world. The initial acceptance of the Gospel is designated here by Paul as ἀφ’ ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐπέγνωτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ (from the very day you heard it and grasped the grace of God genuinely). Paul affirms here what he had written to the Roman Christians years before: So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the words of Christ (ἄρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ; Rom. 10:17). The preaching of the Gospel message to those outside Christ is essential to them being able to respond in faith commitment to Christ. From the preaching of Epaphras to them, the Colossians came to understand that in Christ the God of this universe has shown His favor to sinful humanity, i.e., τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ. The phrase ἐν ἀληθείᾳ stresses the sincerity and genuineness of their response to the Gospel message, although it could also emphasize the truthfulness of the Gospel message brought to them.³⁵

From the time of its reception by the Colossians it began bearing fruit and growing in their lives: ἐστὶν καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον. This was in line with its impact elsewhere: καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ. Although the two images of a plant bearing fruit and growing have been taken here to allude to the spread of the Gospel in an expanding number of converts, verse ten provides contextually a clear signal to Paul’s intended meaning: as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God (ἐν παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ καρποφοροῦντες καὶ αὐξανόμενοι τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ). Paul thus paints a graphic picture of proper response to the preaching of the Gospel: hear it preached and respond in faith commitment that experiences the grace of God. Then begin a life long process of fruitful living and deepening of one’s life in that experience of God’s grace. Anything less is not the response that God requires to the preaching of salvation in Christ.

The key person in getting this Gospel message to the Colossians and then in bringing word to Paul about the Colossians was Epaphras.³⁶ He is mentioned but three times by name in the pages of the New Testament:

Col. 1:7-8. 7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

7 καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὃς ἐστὶν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 8 ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι.

Col. 4:12-13. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. 13 For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Philm. 23. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,

Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

Both Colossians and Philemon were destined to be carried to Colossae to be read in the house church

³⁴“This ‘word of truth of the gospel’ (λόγος τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου) also came to the Colossian community and, remaining there,⁵³ it gained its sure place in their lives.⁵⁴ However, not only did this word come to Colossae, but it was proclaimed in all places. The reference to the catholic character of the message, as added by the ‘just as’ (καθὼς), is also found in the introductory thanksgivings of other Pauline letters.⁵⁵ Paul greets the community in Corinth with the words ‘with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours’ (σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐπικαλουμένοις τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ αὐτῶν καὶ ἡμῶν 1 Cor 1:2), and he praises the communities in Thessalonica and Rome that their faith is known to all.⁵⁶ The gospel is bearing fruit in all the world; its growth is unfolding.⁵⁷” [Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Hermeneia—a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 19.]

³⁵One should also note that ἐν ἀληθείᾳ denotes not some abstract principle of correctness. Rather, truth in the New Testament is that which corresponds to God and His being. Epaphras had indeed brought them a message from God, and they had responded to it exactly as God intended. This emphasis will be important later in the letter when Paul addresses the growing impact of false teachers at Colossae who brought a different message that had no connection to God and thus generated a wrong response contrary to God’s will.

³⁶We don’t know much about Epaphras. He is mentioned three times in the New Testament: Col. 1:7, 4:12, and Philemon 23. “**EPAPHRAS.** In Col. 1:7; 4:12; Phm. 23, one of Paul’s friends and associates, called by him his ‘fellow slave’ and ‘fellow prisoner’. The name is abbreviated from Epaphroditus, but Epaphras is probably not to be identified with the Epaphroditus of Phil. 2:25; 4:18 (as he is by T. R. Glover, *Paul of Tarsus*, 1925, p. 179). We gather that Epaphras evangelized the cities of the Lycus valley in Phrygia under Paul’s direction during the latter’s Ephesian ministry, and founded the churches of Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. Later he visited Paul during his Roman captivity, and it was his news of conditions in the churches of the Lycus valley that moved Paul to write the Epistle to the Colossians.” [F.F. Bruce, “Epaphras,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 325–326.]

groups located there and in the nearby churches as well (cf. Col. 4:16). The brief picture that emerges is that he was the one who preached the Gospel initially not only in Colossae but in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. Most likely that came about some years earlier during the lengthy three year ministry of Paul at Ephesus. In the picture that emerges from these two letters, Epaphras is identified as a ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν ([our beloved fellow servant](#)), as one who had faithfully represented the Colossian church to Paul (ὅς ἐστιν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ). He worked hard in behalf of the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and those in Hierapolis (ἔχει πολὺν πόνον ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ τῶν ἐν Ἱεραπόλει), while with Paul he spent much time praying for the Colossians (πάντοτε ἀγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς) that they might become mature believers (ἵνα σταθῆτε τέλειοι καὶ πεπληροφορημένοι ἐν παντὶ θελήματι τοῦ θεοῦ). Paul clearly indicates that Epaphras came from Colossae (ὁ ἐξ ὑμῶν). In addition to be called a διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Col. 1:7), he is also called a δοῦλος Χριστοῦ (Col. 4:12) and a τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν (Col. 1:7), as well as a συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (Phil. 23; fellow prisoner with Paul). In addition to knowing the Colossian believers, he also knew Philemon who lived in Colossae.

Although these references are brief, they provide important insight into this native of Colossae. He had brought the Gospel to his hometown (ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ, Col. 1:7). He continued serving them and, even when he traveled away to where Paul was in prison, he continued to be deeply concerned about their spiritual welfare (Col. 4:12). The numerous labels of servant (διάκονος, δοῦλος) focus on his commitment to Christ, and συνδούλου, συναιχμάλωτός ([fellow servant](#), [fellow prisoner](#)) underscore his working with Paul and the others for the advancement of the Gospel. We have here a portrait of a faithful missionary pastor whose ministry calling centered on the people he grew up with. He worked closely with Paul as a connecting link of the apostle to the Lycus Valley communities of believers that he had established, even though this landed him in prison as well as Paul. Out of this link came a close friendship of Paul with one of the members, Philemon, whom Paul hoped to visit after being released from prison (Phil. 22). There is no historical indication that the apostle was able to realize this desire.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

The most obvious areas of application of 1:3-8 are in the areas of prayer, especially public prayer in church worship, compassionate concern by leaders for believers and devotion of believers to beloved leaders, and the example of faithful service by servants like Epaphras.

- 1) How thankful are you for other believers in Christ? How often do you express it to God?
- 2) Are you willing to voice prayer publicly during church worship services? How should you pray such prayers?
- 3) How well do you put faith, hope, and love together as foundations of your religious experience?
- 4) How concerned have you been for the spiritual welfare of people in your hometown?