

Colossians 1:3-4

Author: Jeremiah Mhlanga

© 2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

Form and structure

- ❖ 1:3-4 constitutes part of Paul's prayer for the Colossians.
- ❖ Though it makes sense to take verses 3-5a together, attention will be given here to verses 3-4 because of the elaboration of the text on verse 5. Focusing on verses 3-4 is not being fair to the flow of the text, however for exegetical reasons we limit the context to verses 3-4.
- ❖ Textually verse 3 comes before verse 4, historically verse 4 comes before verse 3. Meaning verse 3 is a reaction to verse 4. Paul first heard the news about the Colossians, and he prayed. This is important for seeing the beauty of the flow of this text.

Exposition

Verse 3: *We thank God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ always in our prayers*

- ❖ The logic of this verse flows as follows: a) there is a thanksgiving prayer; b) we are told who receives the thanksgiving - it is God; c) then there is an elaboration of who this God is - He is the Father of Jesus Christ; d) but who is this Jesus Christ - He is our Lord; e) we are told when this thanksgiving is given - it is given whenever Paul prays.
- ❖ **We thank...** (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν) This word carries the meaning of expressing gratitude for benefits or blessings;ⁱ this is what is implied by the idea of thanksgiving. We give thanks for the things that we have received or benefited. The concept in this context is that there are things which the believers in Colossae have received which obliges Paul to give thanks for those things they received.
- ❖ This word is in the plural; does it imply that there are people who are praying together with Paul for the Colossians? Some commentators take this to be an indication that though Paul writes this letter, Timothy is also acknowledged in this plurality.ⁱⁱ Though this may be true, it is also possible that the plurality does not only include Paul and

Timothy as the only voices raised in giving thanks. Chapter 4:7-13 indicates some people who were with Paul and who were concerned about the Colossians. So it is possible that they were together with Paul in giving thanks to God. We also know that Epaphras, who was with Paul, prayed for the Colossians as we read in 4:12. Being together with Paul, it is possible that they observed time together to pray for the believers in Colossae, maybe even following the Jewish practice of praying three times a day.

- ❖ The fact that Paul often starts his letters by giving thanks is not unique to Paul. It is also noted that it was the custom in Paul's days that unbelievers when writing a letter would also acknowledge their gods and start by giving thanks. Such a letter will give thanks to deities for blessings received and misfortunes averted.ⁱⁱⁱ This shows us something of Paul's approach to the church. Though he may be following the common practice of his times, what is unique is the person who receives this thanksgiving. He has filled this custom with Christian content. It is God who receives the thanksgiving.
- ❖ **... God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Paul tells us that the object of this thanksgiving is God. What Paul is saying is that what we have heard about you, Colossians (v4), what has happened to you, has aroused in us gratitude to God, for we acknowledge that God is the one who was responsible for producing and giving you what you have.

However, what is different here from Paul's thanksgiving is that in his other letters Paul would thank God and Jesus Christ. However in this case he gives thanks to God and the Lord Jesus Christ is used to qualify who this God is. This difference can be due to a variety in Paul's writing. It can also be due to the fact that Paul has made this difference deliberate so that from the start he can point to the reality that to understand Jesus Christ truly and rightly, He must be viewed in his relationship to the Father. The place that Christ receives in this letter warrants such a reading.^{iv}

In pointing to God being the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is showing the Colossians how they should think about God. In a sense, Paul is saying God is the Father of Him who purchased us by his blood, and the one who is our Sovereign Master, the one who was anointed to be our Saviour. If God is the Father our Lord and they are in Christ (v2), it is proper to conclude that because they are in Christ, God is their Father also. If this is the case, then it is proper that God should be the one receiving the thanksgiving.^v This is proper because pointing to God being the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a way of pointing not just to what God has done in history through the coming of Christ, but what He has decreed from eternity. In other words, the signs of spiritual life that He has seen in this congregation point back ultimately to what God has purposed in salvation from before the beginning of time.^{vi}

- ❖ **...always in our praying.** There is disagreement among commentators whether textually the word that is translated with *always* should be taken to qualify the thanksgiving as rendered by the NIV and ESV (reading - We always thank God) or should it be taken to

qualify prayer as rendered by the KJV (reading - praying always for you). Wherever this word is placed does not really change the meaning of the text. The essence of what Paul is saying is that this thanksgiving is done in prayer. This act of praying is something he always does. This is in line with what Paul encouraged Christians to do, that they should always pray (4:2). Therefore, we opt for it to qualify prayer. The role that prayer played in the life of Paul cannot be overemphasized. Not only is he praying, he wants the church to know that he is praying for them. What it means is that which Paul encouraged the church to do, that they should always pray, Paul also did the same.

Verse 4: Since we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints

- ❖ What should be noted is that while in some of his letters Paul mentions faith, hope and love, here he mentions hope, but the manner in which he deals with hope is different. Here in verse 5 hope is mentioned as the ground for faith and hope. We will look at this next time.
- ❖ Bearing in mind the connection of verse 4 to verse 3, the logic of verse 4 is this: Paul together with his partners are thanking God for the faith the Colossians have, since this faith is faith in Christ Jesus. Secondly, he thanks God for the love they have for the saints.
- ❖ **Since we have heard...** As we are told in verse 7 that the gospel reached the Colossians through Epaphras, and at the time of writing, Paul was with him, it is through Epaphras that Paul learned about the Colossians. What is it that he heard about the Colossians?
- ❖ **Your faith** in Christ Jesus...the word faith should be understood to mean trust. Faith in the Christian sense is not a leap; it is not faith in faith. It is trust, which is based on knowledge. As noted, it is an abiding trust in and personal surrender to the Anointed Saviour^{vii}.

Simply put, this is how it works: these people did not know anything about Christ, and now they are told about Him; then they come to see Christ for who He is, and then they believe in Him. They put their trust in Him. Therefore, what Paul is saying is that he thanks God for the faith that they have in Christ Jesus. By thanking God for this faith, it means that he acknowledges that God is the one who worked this faith in them. He is not giving credit to them, he gives credit to God.^{viii}

- ❖ Your faith **in Christ Jesus**... the phrase in Christ Jesus can be understood to mean that Christ Jesus is not the object of their faith, but the 'living environment within which their faith is exercised; that is to say, the faith of which the apostle speaks is the faith which they have as men and women who are in Christ Jesus.'^{ix} Though there may be some truth in this, it will be proper to take this statement to refer to Christ as the object of faith. Paul uses this phrase and ones similar to it to indicate the general idea of a faith that has Jesus Christ as its ultimate reference point.^x

- ❖ As trust, faith always needs an object. Think of it in this way: in Africa it is still a common practice for people to send money back home to rural areas when they are in the city. They normally ask someone who is going to their village to bring the money for them. Imagine that you have two people you can ask, and of the two, you are told that the one was given money three times to take it home. The first time when the money was given, R100 was missing, the second time half of the money was missing, and the third time the money did not reach the intended receiver. The second person was also given money three times, and of all three times the money was delivered as given to him and on time. Who will you trust with your money when you have to choose between the two? The more believers see Christ for who He is, what He has done, why He did it, how He did it, the more their faith will grow and be strengthened.
- ❖ What this implies is that since Christ is the object of the Christian faith, faith can only grow when Christ is preached truly and completely.
- ❖ What is also clear is the fact that Paul personalizes this faith. It is **your** faith in Christ Jesus. The plurality of this personal pronoun points to the reality of the faith being personal but also corporate.
- ❖ The question that must still be asked is this: why did faith in Christ Jesus cause Paul to give thanks to God? Piper gives six reasons why, on hearing about faith in Christ Jesus, Paul gave thanks to God:^{xi}
 - Paul is thankful for the faith of the church because Christ is the one they have faith in. Faith in Christ Jesus means that the believer is justified before God. This can only be in Christ. This is what gave Paul joy so that he thanks God for the believers' faith in Christ Jesus – Gal 2:26.
 - Paul is thankful for the faith of the church because he had a passion and a calling to see the name of Christ exalted among the nations. Paul has seen Jesus Christ, knows him, loves him, and has a passion to see others know and love and exalt him. So when it happens, he is thankful. This was his life and his calling and his mission. Let everything be done for the sake of the name. Let every plan we frame and every choice we make have this aim: to make much of Jesus Christ, to show that He is the greatest person and the greatest treasure in the world.
 - Paul is thankful for the famous faith of the church because Christian faith is well founded. Faith in Christ Jesus is not the same as giving people an opium. It is not giving people a mechanism to cope. The name Christ Jesus points to the reality of life. Jesus Christ is real; He truly lived on this earth. Therefore, faith in Christ Jesus is being grounded in reality. It is truly coming to the truth of life.
 - Paul is thankful for the faith of the church because faith in Christ shows that Christ is trustworthy and valuable. The Christian faith does not just believe *that* Christ will save. It is a certain gladness or satisfaction that

Christ *is* that salvation. In other words, we do not trust Christ merely to get something besides Christ. Our trust in Christ means receiving Him as our treasure. This is why we trust Him. When we trust Him, we get what is best. And what is best is Christ Himself. Therefore when faith spreads, what spreads is not only the trustworthiness of Christ with regard to what He can do, but the value and worth of Christ with regard to what He is in Himself to satisfy our hearts forever.

- Paul is thankful for the faith of the church because faith produces visible acts of sacrificial love. This point is demonstrated very well by the second part of verse 4, which we are going to turn to soon.
- Paul is thankful to God for the faith of the church because God is the one who gave the faith, and He should get all the glory and all the thanks.

❖ ...and **your love for all the saints**. In the Christian circle the word most abused is the word love as it is expressed in its Greek form (ἀγάπην - agapen). This word has been read to imply good love or sacrificial love or divine love. Viewed in this way, a theory has been developed that it points to the unconditional love of God which Christians are required to show to each other. This came to portray the church as the community of people who love one another unconditionally.^{xiii} However, as noted, to hang the theological meaning on the word love (agapen) is to do injustice to the biblical teaching. The meaning must be defined by the context in which the word is used.^{xiii} Therefore, no one should automatically read it to mean that Christians are a community of people who love one another unconditionally from this verse. The text does not allow such a reading. Why?

- We are told that this love is love for all the saints. It is love that is conditioned by being together in Christ. Saints are taken to refer to those who are set apart by God in Christ for Himself. Love for God's people is a clear sign that God has indeed brought people into his family. Those having faith in Christ Jesus will not only rejoice in their newfound salvation in a private and personal way in relationship to Christ, but also in that salvation as something they share with all his people.^{xiv} Jesus made it clear that this love will be the only distinction that marks his people (John 13:35). Such love cannot be found anywhere else but among God's people. In this, Jesus was not wrong, for even Tertullian witnesses to this truth, that it was this love that distinguished believers from pagans. It was this love that shocked the pagan world; listen to what Tertullian said: "But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another,' for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; 'how they are ready even to die for on another,' for they themselves will sooner put to death."^{xv} Such love knew no race, colour, gender, age, nationality, or status; it only knew Christ as the bond that joins people together.

- Verse 8 gives insight into this love. It is love in the Spirit. It is love that is worked by the Holy Spirit in the lives of his people. Meaning that it is not man-made; it cannot be produced in any other way but by the Holy Spirit.
- This love is also characterized in the community where it is expressed. No one in the church should be loved for who he is, if this means to love him as a sinner. We are to love one another for what God has made us in Christ – we are saints. This does not only mean that we are set apart for God, but also that we are set apart for God’s purpose, called to live for what He has made us. Therefore, true love rejoices in seeing others being morally holy as well. Christian love rejoices in holiness, and it is weakened by sin. Where sin exists without efforts to root it out among God’s people, the joy of love cannot be experienced.
- ❖ Paul thanks God for this love, for this is purely God’s work.

Application

Verse 3

- ❖ The fact that Paul starts his letter in this way, by giving thanks, should have a sobering effect on us. Often our view of the church is horizontal. When we talk about the church, we often tend to see the people more than we see God. Our discussions are always about what people are doing. However if we were to follow Paul, we will realize that our view of the church should always be vertical. This should be our starting point. In order for us to have a right view of the church, we must start by looking up before we look down. We should start by asking the question: what is God doing among his people?
 - This does not mean that Paul is ignorant of what is happening in Colossae. He heard that there are problems in the church; there is false teaching (2:2-8). However, he does not allow this to cloud his perspective on the church. Imagine what it will be like if you meet Christians who are in a conflict and you ask them – are there things that you see God doing in the life of this believer? Can you thank God for those things? This is the same for a church that is facing challenges or problems. Always start here and ask, what is God doing in this church? If so, God is at work, and then thanksgiving is the only proper response.
- ❖ When we look at what God is doing we should take the same approach as Paul. Why should we ask the question what God is doing in this church? We ask because it is impossible for God not to work in the church. Remember that the God we are talking about is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can look at what God is doing in the life of his people, his church, because we have the grounds for doing that. God has already started to work. He is the Father of **our** Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot fail to point to God’s work among his people because He has already started to work in Christ. The fact that the church is in Christ, and God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, forces us to ask this question.

- ❖ What is implied by this text is that the only way to storm heaven with prayers of thanksgiving is by always looking at what God is doing. While many people tend to read this prayer as a mere standard expression Paul uses in writing his letters, most fail to realize the reason he is doing that. There is a prayer of thanksgiving in almost all of Paul's letters because he is truly following a normal standard of looking at the church, not only of writing his letters. He can give thanks to God because he starts with God. The church that cannot storm heaven with thanksgiving is a church that is not conscious of God's work among them. Find a church that is full of strife, anger, conflict and the like, and you will have found a church where thanksgiving is not part of that church's life. As noted by Piper^{xvi}, thanksgiving is essential to the Christian life and the church's life because at the heart of thanksgiving there are two things:
 - Thanksgiving is not like a telescope, an attempt to make a small God look bigger than He is. No, thanksgiving is making God look as big as He really is. This is so because givers are more glorious than receivers are. Benefactors are more glorious than beneficiaries are. When we thank God, we acknowledge and display that He is the giver; He is the benefactor. We pay Him a high compliment. Therefore, when gratitude springs up in the human heart toward God, He is magnified as the wealthy source of our blessing. He is acknowledged as giver and benefactor and therefore as glorious. But when gratitude does not spring up in our hearts at God's great goodness to us, it probably means that we do not want to pay Him a compliment; we do not want to magnify Him as our benefactor.
 - Thanksgiving always takes away from us. Thanksgiving detracts from our own glory. Because with genuine thanksgiving there is acknowledgement that we are beneficiaries of an unearned bequest; we are cripples leaning on the cross shaped crutch of Jesus Christ; we are paralytics living minute by minute in the iron lung of God's mercy. Verse 4 shows that this is what Paul is doing.
- ❖ One of the ways of teaching the church about thanksgiving is through the leaders. This is what Paul is doing here. It is true that he does this in most of his letters because he is expressing genuine emotions and facts about how he thinks about the church. One of the things that he tells the church is that he prays for them and more specifically, that his prayer is one of thanksgiving. Do the members of the church know that you thank God for the work He is doing in them? Paul makes a point of it to tell the church that he is praying for them. This is not something he says just to bribe them or to make himself look good. He is expressing the truth of what he is doing. Let the church know that you are praying for them; let them know also what is it that you are praying for. It is through this that they will truly know what lies in your heart for them, and what you value most for them. It is in this that they will know how much you care for them. In letting them know that he is praying for them, he was expressing a genuine confidence he has about the church. His confidence was in God.^{xvii}

- ❖ The other practical ways of storming heaven is by cultivating a desire to know how other believers are doing. What triggered this thanksgiving in Paul's heart? He heard (verse 4) about how the believers are doing in Colossae. Will it not be a great idea after greeting one another, that we add a question not only to ask how you are, but also to ask how have you been experiencing the work of God in your life?

Verse 4:

- ❖ Often Christians look at other things to find reasons to thank God. However, what this verse tells us is that the reason to thank God is just before our eyes. Paul did not thank God only once; he said always. When he thinks about the possibility of himself coming to faith, of other believers who came to faith, he realized that there was none. It was impossible, only God can do that. Only God can make faith in Christ Jesus real. Therefore, this thinking should be the same in us. How often do we rejoice to the point that we go on our knees to thank God for the faith in Christ we see in others, and the love we see among believers? These are the things we must look for, because these two things will point us back to God.
- ❖ The best way to strengthen the faith of the Christians is to point them to Christ. The more the Object of their faith is clearly known, the more their faith in Him will grow. This can be done by pointing out to believers how lovely Christ is. Believers must see how Christ is lovely in his person, offices and relations.^{xviii} The call is to preach Christ more.
- ❖ The relationship between faith and love are made clearly visible. We cannot think of the one without the other. As noted:^{xix}
 - Love without faith is sloppy and insipid, for love without faith lacks courage, while faith without love is arid and pompous and eventually mean-spirited and unkind.
 - Although both faith and love are personal, they are hardly private and certainly never secret. They are visible and vocal in their expression.
- ❖ It is well noted that the diaconal ministry was founded on this ground of love. Diaconal ministry was experienced. The believers knew that ministering to the saints was an expression not only of how they love one another, but also of how they love God (Heb 6:10), and that God will not forget such works.

Bibliography

ⁱ Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, from Bible Works 7.

ⁱⁱ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, p 82.

ⁱⁱⁱ Garland, David E. *Colossians & Philemon: The NIV Application Commentary*, p 44.

See also: Hendriksen, William. *Colossians and Philemon*. New Testament Commentary. Banner of Truth Trust. P 46.

^{iv} Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, p 82-83.

^v Hendriksen, William. *Colossians and Philemon*. New Testament Commentary. Banner of Truth Trust. P 46.

-
- ^{vi} Johnston, Mark G. *Let's study Colossians & Philemon*. Banner of Truth Trust. P 16.
- ^{vii} Hendriksen, William. *Colossians and Philemon*. New Testament Commentary. Banner of Truth Trust. P 46.
- ^{viii} Garland, David E. *Colossians & Philemon: The NIV Application Commentary*, p 46.
- ^{ix} Bruce, F. F. *Commentary on the epistle to the Colossians*, p 180.
- ^x Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, p 84.
- ^{xi} Piper, J. 2002. *Thank God for famous faith*: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/thank-god-for-famous-faith>,
- ^{xii} Carson, D. A. 2000. *The difficult doctrine of the love of God*. Crossway Books. P 25-30.
- ^{xiii} Carson, D. A. 1996. *Exegetical fallacies*. Baker Academic. 2nd Edition, p 31-32, 51-56.
- ^{xiv} Johnston, Mark G. *Let's study Colossians & Philemon*. Banner of Truth Trust. P 17.
- ^{xv} Tertullian quoted by: Baars, A. *The lesson of four mirrors: some thoughts about the spirituality of sojourning in the early church*. Lux Mundi 2013. No 1 p 7.
- ^{xvi} Piper J. I will magnify the Lord with thanksgiving: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/i-will-magnify-god-with-thanksgiving>
- ^{xvii} Johnston Mark G. *Let's study Colossians & Philemon*. Banner of Truth Trust. P16
- ^{xviii} Flavel John. Christ altogether lovely. <http://www.puritansermons.com/sermons/flavell.htm>
- ^{xix} Storms Sam. 2007. *The hope of glory: 100 daily meditations on Colossians*. Crossway Books. p29-30