

Colossians 1:3-23

Exegetical Focus 1:6b-7

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Form and structure

- 1:6 Gives the effects of the gospel, first in a general sense and within the context of Colossians
- 1:7a Explains how the gospel reached them
- 1:7b Gives an explanation about Epaphras the one who brought the gospel to the Colossians

Exposition

- The key to this text is the conquering effects of the gospel.

Verse 6a: ...which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing- as it also does among you...

- The focus here is on the gospel that brought hope to the Colossians. Here we are told first that the gospel is one – the same gospel that came to the Colossians is the same gospel that is spreading throughout the world. Second we are told that this gospel has the same effects it is bearing fruits, and it is growing among the Colossians but also in the entire world.
- The idea behind the word parontos (παρόντος) which is translated ‘has come’, stresses the point that since the gospel has come to the Colossians, it is still present among them. The gospel which they heard, which has brought hope to them, it is still present among them as he writes this letter to them.
- However this gospel is not only present among the Colossians, it is also present in the entire world. In chapter 1:23, Paul says that this gospel is preached to the entire creation. By the whole world Paul may be likely referring to his world – the Roman Empire, he

may also be using a rhetorical exaggeration. The point is that the gospel is exerting its power widely, in many different places, and, by doing so, attests to its validity.ⁱ

The presence of the gospel locally in Colossae and in the entire world attests to the universality of the gospel.ⁱⁱ Therefore the oneness of the gospel is the focus here.

- The gospel is bearing fruit. Normally in the context of the gospel the idea of this figure of speech can be translated to mean that the gospel has borne results, it was effective just like a tree that brings forth fruit. The figurative way of talking about the gospel as seed producing fruit, was also used often by Christ, see Mark 4:26-29. The emphasis is on the inward energy of the gospel. The picture painted is that of the gospel as a reproductive organism, a plant whose seed is in itself.ⁱⁱⁱ Here the stress is on the effects of the gospel. Just a reminder that this bearing fruit is not only happening among Colossians, it is happening in the entire world.
- The gospel is not only bearing fruit, it is also increasing. The word may denote the rapid spread of the gospel.^{iv} The apostle Paul is saying the gospel is extending its territory, it is expanding.
- The two terms of producing fruit and growing speak respectively of the inner working and the outward extension of the gospel. Do not think of the gospel like a kernel of corn, which having borne fruit, dies, even to its roots, but like a tree, which bears fruit and at the same time continues to grow. The fact that both these verbs are in the present tense suggest constant and continuing action.^v
- Why did Paul use this description of the gospel? There are three suggestive answers to this question:
 - In this verse Paul is already giving some notions against the false teachers. In the words of Moo, the ‘widespread experience of the gospel is testimony to its truthfulness over against the claims of the false teachers, who are propagating a local heresy’^{vi}. Hendriksen expresses the idea of this verse in this way: the Colossians are being reminded of the power and successful course of the gospel... here there is the implication. “Don’t you remember the mighty change that occurred when the message of God’s redemptive truth made its first appearance among you? That the gospel needs no addition or supplement. Its influence is being felt in ever-increasing measure, both extensively, invading region after region, and intensively, producing fruit upon fruit in the hearts won for Christ. Do not attempt to exchange God’s powerful work for man’s beggarly elements^{vii}.” Therefore Paul is saying to the Colossians, the same gospel that has come to you, is the same gospel that is being spread in the entire world. The gospel that is producing fruit among you is the same gospel that is producing fruit in the entire world. Even when this gospel was preached by Epaphras or Paul, it remains the one gospel. For this reason Paul is thanking God in prayer that impact of the gospel shows that the Colossians are part of God’s people. Therefore they do not need anything special or in addition to the gospel.

- Moo sees in the language bearing fruit and growing reference to the creation story, where God commands human beings to be fruitful and increase in number (Gen 1:28, 1:22). The same language is reiterated after the Flood (Gen 8:17; 9:1,7). Later God uses the same language in His promise to Abraham and the patriarchs. Again the language is used as God promises to regather his people after exile (Jer 3:16; 23:3). Therefore, Paul may, be deliberately echoing a biblical-theological motif according to which God’s original mandate to humans finds preliminary fulfilment in the nation Israel but ultimate fulfilment in the worldwide transformation of people into the image of God by means of their incorporation into Christ, the “image of God.”^{viii} In addition to this view of the fulfilment, Wall sees in this the echoes of Jesus parables of growth in which growth (of a tree, a tiny mustard seed) signals the ultimate triumph of God’s covenant people. In this sense, the progress of the Gentile missions to Colossae fulfils in part the promise contained in Jesus’s parables.^{ix}
- Walsh and Keesmaat read the language of bearing fruit and growing through the gospel against the socioeconomic situation of the Colossians. In the promotion of the Roman Peace (the Pax Romana) lies a powerful story. ‘The Roman legitimation for continued military oppression was rooted in a story of peace, proclaiming that Rome was the bearer of cosmic peace, fertility and prosperity. With the coming of the Roman Empire a new age had dawned upon which rested the blessings of the gods. And in conquering the barbarian peoples who populated the whole of the known world, Rome was ensuring that its story would become the story of the whole world^x. With this background in mind, it is understandable then that the word gospel ‘became a general term for the triumphant message from the battlefield, and it was used for joyous political proclamations or for personal messages of good news. It was a technical term for “news of victory.”^{xi} Therefore it is possible then that when Paul employs the metaphor of fruitfulness in his opening section of this letter, what echoes and overtones does this language carry? Wouldn’t this language reverberate with fruitfulness as a dominant metaphor in the conflicting narratives of this community’s life? If the empire encodes in the imagery of everyday life – on public arches, statues and buildings – the claim that Rome and its emperor are the beneficent provider and guarantor of all fruitfulness, then can a claim that the gospel is bearing fruit in the whole world be heard as anything less than a challenge to this imperial fruitfulness? Especially if we remember that the word gospel (euangelion) is the very same term that the empire reserves for the announcements of military success and pronouncements from the emperor, doesn’t it become clear that there is something deeply subversive in what Paul is saying here? Whose gospel is the source of a fruitfulness that will last and sustain the world – the gospel of Caesar or the gospel of Jesus?

- The impact of this statement then to the Colossians cannot be denied as it brought all these three notions to them.

Verse 6b: ...since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

- The gospel has been growing and bearing fruit since the day they heard and understood it. The gospel, which they heard made the grace of God clear. Meaning this conquering which the gospel brings is the conquering effects of God's grace.
- When the gospel came to Colossae it was heard and understood. The word translated understood (ἐπέγνωτε) being a combination of the preposition (ἐπί) and (γινώσκω) denotes mental direction toward, application to, that which is known.^{xii} The idea is to emphasize that they came to know exactly, fully, completely.^{xiii}
- They have come to know the grace of God in truth. One way of translating this can be to take the phrase 'in truth' as an adverb. In this sense then Paul emphasizes the truth of this gospel of grace. Therefore Paul wants to remind them that they have truly – really, authentically, reliably – come to understand the gospel of grace.^{xiv} In this sense confirmation is on the reception of the gospel.

The second way of reading this can be that Paul is saying the Colossians have come to understand God's grace in all its truth. In this sense the phrase 'in truth' is taken to confirm the gospel. The suggestion will be that the gospel that had been recently introduced to the Colossians by the heretical teachers was travesty. Their so called gospel was not a message of divine grace; it was a system of legal bondage and human traditions.^{xv}

Based on this it can safely be said that both meanings are implied in the preaching and acceptance of the gospel. Therefore in this verse Paul seeks to ground the Colossians spiritually by appealing both to the truth of the gospel and to its life changing power. The gospel is authenticated not by its truth only nor by its power in people's lives only but by both working in tandem.^{xvi}

- What is it then that they heard? The answer is clear, Paul summarises the gospel as the proclamation of God's grace. Meaning what the gospel does, is to make clear God's grace. In Pauline usage the word grace carries the basic sense of favour, and when God is its subject, acting in grace towards humankind, it is underserved favour.^{xvii} This is what Paul saw the gospel doing. The gospel is making clear the underserved favour of God towards humankind. In Acts 20:24, Paul explains his ministry in the same way:

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. Acts 20:24

Therefore the gospel of God's grace is the proclamation of the truth that God, and God alone, is the decisive cause at the bottom of our *election*, our *new birth*, our *justification* and our *daily life* of faith and obedience. And by decisive I mean that no

human influence — no human distinctive, no human willing, no human feeling, no human acting, nothing outside God whatsoever — is at root decisive in bringing about our election or new birth or justification or daily life of faith and obedience.^{xviii} This is the gospel that Paul preached, and the gospel that Epaphras preached, which is the same gospel that must be preached today.

However as noted God's grace is a difficult notion for most people to grasp, partly because it contradicts so much of what we learn and experience from the non-Christian society that surrounds and condition us. Secular humanism teaches that only the self-sufficient individual survives, secular materialism teaches that only the self-interested individual prospers. Everyday experience teaches us that receiving gifts from others is conditioned on first giving gifts.

This is not a new problem, from the beginning this has always been the greatest stumbling block to the preaching of the gospel. In our society, as in ancient Colossae, the myths and idols of secular humanism provide no resources for understanding the gospel's truth one's humanity survives and prospers only because of the loving interest of God and the sufficiency of God's grace. And the medium of the message is the proclamation of the gospel for conversion.

Verse 7a: ...just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.

- Here Paul changes from the message to the messenger. He tells us that this gospel of God's grace was learned from Epaphras. Then he tells us more about Epaphras – he is a bond-servant and a faithful minister of Christ.
- Not much is known about Epaphras. We do read about him here and in Philemon 1:23. It is suggested that he may have been converted under Paul's mission journey in the area of Phrygia in Asia Minor^{xix}. As a result he went back home to Colossae and preached the gospel there, which resulted to the church in Colossae (more about Epaphras is available in the sermon outline on Colossians 4:12). However what Paul tells us here about him is that he taught the believers in Colossae the gospel, he is a bond-servant together with Paul and he is a faithful minister of Christ.
 - The word translated 'learn' has the implication of acquiring information as the result of instruction. This suggests that Epaphras laboured among them not simply by preaching but by expounding the truths of God's work in Christ and building them up in their faith.^{xx}
 - Another thing we are told about Epaphras is that Paul sees him as a 'beloved fellow slave'. The fact that Paul calls Epaphras a fellow slave highlights Epaphras significance in Paul's eyes.^{xxi} The concept of slave is used a lot by Paul to describe his relationship to the Lord. It means that as much as Paul considers himself to be a slave, he is a slave of Jesus Christ. He sees in Epaphras the same character. Behind the concept of slavery lies the truth that Christ owns us because

we have been bought with a price. We are in a position of complete and constant availability and obedience to that one master to the degree that we must always say, “Not my will but Thine be done.” We are singular in our devotion and that means we have no other master to obey and no other master to serve, and that’s why the New Testament says you cannot...these are the words of Jesus...serve God and money. You can’t serve God and anything else. As believers we are totally dependent upon our one master for everything...protection, provision now and in the future...totally dependent on Him. All discipline and reward comes from that master.^{xxii}

- As a result, we learn that Epaphras is a faithful minister of Christ. Meaning Epaphras is in the service of Christ. The challenge here is on whose behalf is this service undertaken? The proper way to view this is understanding Epaphras acted on Paul’s behalf. Meaning Epaphras, both when he originally brought the gospel to Colossae and now as he seeks to counteract the influence of the false teachers, is acting on Paul’s own behalf.

Application

- Key to applying these verses is the gospel. Meaning what is said in these verses centres around the gospel.
- The emphasis of these verses is *to give affirmation to the Colossians*. He says this. You have heard the word of truth, the gospel. He first comes to the Colossians and he says look, you've already heard the truth. Somebody can't come to you and say okay now we are going to give you the rest of the truth because you've already heard it. Epaphras has already preached it to you. Do not be tricked. You have already heard the word of truth. The greatest temptation that faces every Christian is to doubt the truth of the gospel; especially by trying to add to the gospel. The church needs such an affirmation that the gospel when preached obediently it is complete. Nothing must be added to it.
- *The gospel truth reaches the world*. Paul was saying to the Colossians the gospel is not just one more mystery religion of the Roman Empire. The gospel is for the world. It is very interesting that the same word that Paul uses to show the growth of the gospel is the same root word that Luke uses to describe the spread of the gospel in Acts – See Acts 6:7, 12:24, 13:49, 19:20. This was something that excited Paul also, that he says he gives thanks to God that the gospel is spreading. The fame of the gospel and Christian faith in the whole world really excited Paul, see how he speaks about the believers in Rome in 1:8, and the believers in Thessalonians – 1 Thess 1:8. Why does this cause excitement to Paul and why should it cause excitement to us? It is important because this is the way to bring true hope to the world. It is also the way of defeating the work of the Devil. Remember that this is what the Satan hates, the spread of the gospel. It is for this reason that Christians are persecuted. Why? In order that the gospel may not spread, this was the first temptation he gave to the apostles – Acts 4:17. How will the myths and superstition that fills Africa be conquered? There is only one way, it is the spread of the gospel. This

gospel has come to you. Is it in the same manner as Colossae? Can you sense this excitement? Paul is saying I thank God for this spread of the gospel. Not only is Satan's work destroyed, God kingdom is increasing. If you listen to this, and your heart remains cold and dull, then you need to come to God in prayer of repentance. Pray and say that which causes the angels to rejoice and makes Paul to be on my knees, why is it not doing the same to me. Examine your emotions if by now they are not aroused.

Look also, at how Paul paints this picture of the gospel – the gospel has come to you as in all the world. You have two things there - you have the gospel being personal and the gospel being universal, this is such a beautiful contrast. It's come unto you. In other words, the gospel is that personal, it can belong to you and yet it is that universal that it can be told to the world^{xxiii}. This is the nature of Christian faith. It is personal, it calls you, yet at the same time, it is universal. It can be shared with anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

- *The gospel truth reproduces fruit.* This is really the heart of the gospel, it is a living thing. The Word of God is alive and powerful, it is productive. Divine energy produces fruit. The gospel is like an inward energy that spreads like the mustard seed becoming a tree. It's alive and when it falls into a divinely prepared heart, it bears fruit. It not only works within, not only bearing fruit within but it also spreads. These are two points. The first point of bearing fruit has an inward concept; the second is that it spreads. The gospel gets into a person and grows and he begins to mature and then it spreads and the church begins to grow. So, you have internal spiritual transformation and you have external growth in the church.^{xxiv} Is that the same fruit that we long to see as the word of God is preached? You see, the gospel always produces fruit.

The conviction that the gospel will always bear fruit is a fact that our forefathers embraced with both hands. Listen to the way they phrased it: "God's wrath remains on those who do not believe this gospel. But those who do accept it and embrace Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith are delivered through him from God's wrath and from destruction, and receive the gift of eternal life."^{xxv} Commenting on this article Bouwman puts it this way: Each response to the preaching of the Gospel has its own consequence: the response of faith results in life and the response of unbelief results in eternal death...The Word of the Lord never returns empty. The preaching of God's Word demands a response: a yes or a no; both are responses. God's Word always accomplishes what God sets out for it to do. We should dare to see both faith and rejection as fruits of the preaching of the Word.^{xxvi} Do you? The gospel does bear fruit.

- *The gospel truth is rooted in God's grace.* What is it that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions? What is it that Epaphras preached? He preached the gospel of God's grace. Epaphras preached that God gave us what we do not deserve. This is Christianity at heart. You see all other religions are based on the fact that a man can, by his own works, commend himself to God. Man thinks he can earn salvation by human effort mixed with a certain degree of divine grace. What Epaphras told the Colossians, is that

God is freely gives, is sovereign, merciful and forgiving, due to nothing we have done but His own grace, so Paul calls it the grace of God in truth.

That is what the gospel does; it makes God's grace clear. It explains God's grace to His people. Can this be the result of true preaching? When you listen to sermons, do they help you see the grace of God in Christ clearer? Does your preaching point people to this grace of God more and more?

- *The gospel truth is reported by men.* Do you see the beauty of this, what is happening here? We have Epaphras. He probably heard the gospel during Paul's ministry in Asia Minor. Then he went to his city, and there he repeated the gospel he heard. You see the key to the spreading of the gospel. It is not found in big strategic plans and huge budgets. The key is found in the people who are sitting on those chairs every Sunday. The question is not how much can they give, the question is: are they passionate about the gospel?

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