

Prayers

To God

Pray with humility before the God who is Lord of All. Stand up to praise His Name! Sit down to listen to His Word, lie face down on the ground to confess you sins, and stand up again to tell Him you are willing to repent and do His will! This is not conventional religious practice - but why should we do all our praying sitting down in personal comfort when Jesus was hung on a tree for our salvation?

For myself

Weekly theme: Clothes

Ask the Lord God to bless the clothes you wear and help you make reasonable and good decisions about how you project yourself in the world, to others.

For others

Dear Lord God, in Your love, speak to this world about peace and love. These words are misunderstood so often; so reveal to us Your peace, which passes understanding because it is 'peace with God', and reveal to us Your love, which is truly unconditional and free. Show Yourself to us within this world, Lord God, and move people's hearts to respond to the evidence of Your love and peace within this world. AMEN

Meditation

There is a silence in the soul of one who knows tragedy
Of whom we say the heart has been broken,
But more than this; the spirit of life has been shattered ...
The 'God-breathed' heart of life, abused and torn apart.

You have been there, as have I, and most of us alive;
But we can never know the pain and anguish of another.
We are all so very different, born within the heart of God,
So He alone can breathe again the breath that brings new life.

There is no counsel good enough to mend the soul;
Except the comfort of Christ's prophecy; 'come to Me' . . .
Receive this, O broken one, and walk life's paths again!
Hear these words of love; and break the enemy's affliction!

Spirit into spirit flows as breathing life from God again
Remaking things new to stand again within a hurting world.
May Christ's followers so travel the troubled paths of life,
The Creator's healing balm of love is shared again, by all.

Bible Passage

Colossians 1:1-8

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Timothy;

² To the saints and faithful friends in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³ In our prayers for you, we always give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love you have for all the saints ⁵ arising from the hope stored up for you in heaven, which you have already heard about through the preaching of the truth of the Gospel. ⁶ For just as this is bearing fruit in the whole world, it has come to you and has been growing amongst you since the day you heard it and understood the truth about the grace of God. ⁷ You learnt this from Epaphras our much loved fellow-worker who is faithful to us in the service of Christ. ⁸ It is he who has told us of your love in the Spirit.

Review

The beginning of this great letter of Paul is wonderful for us to read today because it speaks so warmly of the things of faith which are dear to us. These verses speak of God's saints as if meaning all who believe the Gospel (1:2), and we immediately feel included. Words such as 'peace' and 'grace' (1:2) in Paul's greeting are music to our ears, for if Paul blessed the Colossians with these valuable spiritual qualities, then they bless us today as well. Then, as the letter describes Paul's prayers for the Colossian church, other great classical Christian words spill out; 'thanks' (1:3), 'faith' and 'love' (1:4), 'heaven' and the 'truth of the Gospel' (1:5); 'fruit' and the 'grace of God' (1:6), 'faithful ... service' (1:7) and 'love in the Spirit' (1:8). Surely any Christian reader will want to launch straight in and revel in exploring how these great Gospel themes intertwine, just as they do at the beginning of many of Paul's letters (see Phil 1:3-11; Eph 1:3-14, 1 Thess. 1:2-6 etc.)

This introduction also helps us understand the way the Gospel was preached in some of the first waves of evangelism in the world, for it appears that whilst Paul was at Ephesus on what is called his third missionary journey (reported largely in Acts 19,20), someone called Epaphras (1:7) was converted and preached the Gospel himself when he returned to his home in the small town of Colossae. Paul therefore wrote to this church, which he had never visited, in order to support Epaphras' teaching of the Gospel (1:7, 4:12). I will not go into the details of how this is worked out through connecting names and place names in Acts and Paul's letters, but this is the general consensus about the origins of the Colossian church.

This explains why Paul talked about praying for what he had 'heard' (1:4) about the Colossian church, and connected it with the exciting growth of the church in the early years after the death of Jesus (1:6). He stressed his personal connection with Epaphras (1:7, 4:12) who had travelled to see Paul and give him news of the young church. As we read on in Colossians we will discover more about the reasons for all this, because Epaphras clearly told Paul about false teaching that had come into the church. The letter was therefore sent to

expose this false teaching (e.g. see 2:8f.) and establish the truth of the Gospel. Paul regarded it as essential that all the young churches kept closely to the Gospel they had received, for so many people believed in such a variety of gods and philosophies that it was easy for a church to be infiltrated by devious untruth. As we read this letter we will learn about these heresies which may have seemed very reasonable to people of the day, but if they had taken root within the church, irreparable damage could have been done to the Gospel.

The Lord, however, was in control, and Paul was not simply a remarkable evangelist and a worker of miracles; an impression we may easily obtain from the stories about him in Acts (chs. 13-28). His letters were written to stabilise the sharing of the Gospel so that the young Christian Church had a clear standard, a reference point for the truth of the Gospel. The letter to the Colossians was written from prison (4:10,18) and was included in the New Testament Scriptures for this very important reason.

Going Deeper

As we go deeper, we will look at how Paul introduced himself and what this says about his ministry. We will also look more closely at the meaning of his prayers for and comment about the Colossian church and how this was connected with both Epaphras and also the wider picture of the growth of the early church in their day. It has much to teach us.

Paul's greeting to the Colossian church

The standard way in which a letter was written in the days of Paul was to state one's name, then that of the recipient of the letter, and adding a formal greeting of some kind. Given that the standard form of greeting amongst Jews and early Christian groups was 'Shalom' meaning 'peace' (in Greek, 'eirene', hence the English name Irene), the minimum we could expect would be this; 'Paul, to the Colossian church; peace.' If we now look at what Paul added to the bare essentials, then we will begin to understand more of what was in his mind as he wrote!

Paul identified himself as an 'apostle of Jesus Christ', as he did in all his letters, except for Philippians, Thessalonians and Philemon; and in those, he made it clear elsewhere that he wrote in this capacity. Paul was uniquely commissioned by Jesus for the work of spreading the Gospel throughout the then known world of the Roman Empire and beyond (Gal 1:15,16), and he sometimes used the word 'apostle' in this way in order to emphasise the authority with which he spoke. For example, because of their close working relationship during the latter part of his ministry, Paul included Timothy in this greeting, but he did not call him an 'apostle'. In some of his letters, Paul wrote about the general gift of the Spirit given to those who were sent (i.e. 'apostles' – see Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor 12:28 etc.), but Paul had such a special task in the founding of the early Christian churches it is best to regard his claim as unique.

Paul addressed many of the churches to which he wrote as the 'saints' (Romans, Corinthians 1&2, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians). Because there was trouble in some of the other churches to which he wrote, Paul omitted this from his greeting (notably the strongly worded letter to the Galatians), so its inclusion here gives a feeling of Paul's support for the Colossian church. The true 'saints' of God were those who had fully committed themselves to Jesus, and they therefore constituted the real church. Because of their faith they could be called 'saints' (which means 'holy ones') and were set aside for God's holy purposes; not necessarily in the same way as Paul, but nevertheless, in a way of which he approved. He also called the church there his 'faithful friends' (1:2) because even though he did not know them, they were part of the greater fellowship of all believers.

The greeting Paul gave was 'grace ... and peace'. It certainly appears as if the early Church in general used 'grace and peace' as a form of greeting (1 Peter 1:2, 2 Peter 1:2; 2 John 1:3), not just Paul, and the words combined two essential features of Christian fellowship. 'Grace' comes from another word meaning 'favourite', and means God's unconditional and impartial favour towards all, expressed supremely in the work of Jesus Christ. Although we can and do call people 'gracious' when they exhibit similar qualities, the grace of God in Jesus Christ is of a different order, and unique. 'Peace', however, derives from the ancient Hebrew word 'Shalom' which meant living in a state of peace. Now, whereas a common Hebrew greeting was 'mercy and peace' (which called upon God to be merciful in order to bring peace) the Christian greeting 'grace and peace' declared that God had already done this. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans 'since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

The opening words of the letter

Paul began his letter by telling the Colossians that he prayed for them regularly (1:3). His prayers were prayers of thanksgiving, which meant that he gave praise to God for the way in which He had worked to establish His Church, and to sustain it and empower it for its mission. All of this is strongly implied in the coming verses (4-8). But it was not Paul who prayed alone, for verse 3 is written in the 'plural'. It was Paul's general practice to give thanks together with those around him; of whom we know of Timothy at least (1:1). Paul began many of his letters in a very similar way (1 Cor. 1:4,5; Phil. 1:3,4; 1 Thess 1:2,3; 2 Thess 1:3,4), which indicates that such prayer was a regular feature of his life, even when in prison (4:10:18). Given that the letter goes on to talk of both good and bad things within the life of this church, his prayers present us with a challenge to give thanks for the churches of God in our own midst whatever we think of them.

Paul regarded the Colossian church as his responsibility even though he had not been there himself, because the Gospel they received had been passed on through the preaching of his own convert, Epaphras (1:7 etc). Verse 4 could not have been worded as it is unless Paul had never been to Colossae! Paul's thanks included prayer to 'God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', a statement of faith in itself, and went on 'and the love you have for all the saints'. Presumably, the Colossian church had released Epaphras to come and visit Paul (as implied in 4:12) and in so doing had accepted the importance of the wider fellowship of those who believed in Jesus Christ (1:4). It was easy for Christian groups or churches in small Roman towns to go their own way under the influence of leaders who perhaps had a greater sense of their own importance than was warranted, and there is a great deal of evidence of this happening in the first and second centuries A.D. It was vital that the Christian church had a unity which was expressed in practical terms, visiting each other, and sharing letters and also leaders, for this was the only way that it could grow in the Spirit rather than disintegrate. In the early days of the church, the prayer of Jesus that all His disciples 'may be one as We are One' (John 17:11, referring to Jesus' relationship with the Father) was still fresh in the minds of His followers, principally the apostles, and it is a pity that we have lost this sense of urgency in pursuing the active recognition of the wider church and valuing it, today.

Paul then rejoiced in the successful work of the preached Gospel, by which the Colossians had heard the message of Jesus Christ. What had happened in the founding of their church was a wonderful example of what the Spirit of God could do with one faithful person who was prepared to do His will. As Paul then wrote, he used the phrase 'the hope stored up for you in heaven' (1:5) which sounds an odd way for Paul to sum up what the Gospel was all about. There was a reason for him doing this, however, and it was not one that we would spot if we were simply reading through the letter ourselves with no particular personal agenda. As we shall discover in the coming days, the Colossian church was having a problem with people teaching something which is best described as a 'mystery religion'. In this particular heresy,

access to God was obtained by joining in the heavenly worship of God by angels according to certain (often secret) rules and regulations which people had to observe. Some people saw no difficulty in believing that Jesus died for them and also professed that Jesus was the 'Son of God' (see John 20:31), but they sought to fulfil their duties of worship through these heavenly 'mysteries'. Having explained this, you will probably realise that Paul wrote as he did about 'the hope stored up for you in heaven' to indicate, none too subtly, where his letter would be heading! He was going to tackle the doctrinal problems of the church head on!

Our passage concludes with verses (1:6-8) which explain the growth of the Gospel which was based upon the truth that was passed on to them, rather than the inventions of certain teachers with heretical agendas, and Paul's warm comments about Epaphras which clearly stated his confidence in the Gospel they had received through him. There are some standard features to the beginning of the letter to the Colossians, but the differences tell us something of what Paul thought of the Colossians, and something of what was to come in the rest of the letter.

Discipleship

Application

The value of the 'letters'

In the same way that Paul reveals something of himself and his faith simply by the way he wrote his letters, I wonder whether we do the same. If you go back in time even 50 years in cultures related to the English language, you will find that people frequently expressed themselves in letters using phrases from the Bible, even if they were not religious. Some simple phrases such as 'God willing' persist, but are becoming rarer. Now, it would make many people embarrassed to use words or phrases which had any religious connotations and many Christians would find it hard to use the vocabulary of faith, even in writing letters or articles. I have recently read the weekly newspaper the Methodist Recorder, and found in its general reporting, article and letter pages little reference to God or Jesus, despite the whole paper being about the life of the church; a small devotional article was an exception, along with a book review which mentioned Jesus because it was impossible to comment upon the book without so doing. Even reports which come to church meetings are often written in a way that is devoid of spiritual reference.

Great words with powerful meaning

There are many wonderful words and phrases within this passage of Scripture; 'peace', 'grace', 'faith', the 'saints' and each of them could inspire us to many a deep insight. In the course of the next few weeks we will revel in some of these as Paul uses them to explain all manner of things about the faith we profess. For today, however, we should perhaps be challenged concerning whether our words, whether written or spoken, reflect something of the glory of God that has been revealed to us. Have you met someone who appears to be very close to the heart of God, because when you speak to them, their words and their manner all speak of Godliness? It is a worthy aim for us not to claim to be like this, but to aim to be like this.

Ideas for what to do

- Think of some issue in your church about which you have a disagreement with someone, or something you feel needs representation to be made to the governing

church 'council' (or elder's meeting, for example). Try writing a letter which explains the situation, but does so by applying Scriptural principles and / or Bible texts.

- Pray for those who find it hard to express their faith in 'standard' terms, and always seek to go beyond the boundaries they perceive. Pray that God will hold them within His church and help them perceive truth.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Would you find it easy to say to a fellow Christian 'grace and peace to you'? What greeting could you give which conveyed your faith?
2. Discuss the impressions you have gained about the Colossian church from the opening verses of the book.
3. How can we strengthen the ties between the true churches of God in our midst today?

Final Prayer

Give us the Spirit of Praise, Father Almighty! May we thank You for our lives and the world in which we live; may we praise You for the saving work of Jesus Christ; may we thank You for each other and the love we find in fellowship, and may we praise You for Your eternal glory and power, revealed to us through Your Word. May the Spirit of Praise never leave us!
AMEN