OVERFLOWING WITH THANKFULNESS

Colossians 1:3–14; 2:6,7; 3:15–17; 4:2

Key Verses: 2:6,7

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

What are you thankful for? Usually we try to find good things that have happened in our lives to remind us for what we should be thankful. But sometimes we can’t find much; in fact, we might find things in our lives that, overall, make us feel pretty bad. Should we still be thankful? The Bible tells us that Christians are thankful not just for their human circumstances, but for things much deeper. For what should we be thankful? Why should we be thankful? How can we be thankful? As we look at several passages in Colossians we hope to find answers to these questions. May God speak to us and through this study may he grant each of us a very meaningful Thanksgiving celebration this year.

Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in a small town called Colosse; he also wanted this letter read in nearby churches of Hieropolis and Laodicea (4:13,15,16). Paul himself had not met these people or started these churches; a man named Epaphras did (1:7). But Paul wrote them this letter because he had heard from Ephapras about their faith and love (1:4,8), and he wanted to develop a personal relationship with them and encourage them in their Christian lives. The major theme of the letter is the supremacy of Christ (1:18). But we also notice another important theme in Colossians: thankfulness (1:3,12; 2:7; 3:15–17; 4:2). It tells us that Christian life should be characterized by thankfulness.

What should we be thankful for? Let’s look first at 1:3–14. Paul starts out by mentioning *his* thanksgiving for *them*. Why was Paul thankful for them? It was because of their faith in Christ Jesus and the love they had for all God’s people (3,4). It’s good to be thankful for things in our personal lives. It’s also good to be thankful for other people, especially for their help in various ways. But here we learn to be thankful for tell-tale signs of Christian life in others, things which may have nothing to do with us personally: faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the other people of God. This is not a self-centered way of giving thanks!

Why was Paul thankful for their faith and love? He says in verse 5 that it shows how they accepted the hope stored up for them in heaven, and he says this is the true gospel. He adds in verse 6b that their faith and love show that they truly understood God’s grace. When people come to understand God’s grace and accept the heavenly hope he has given us in Jesus, we should really give thanks to God. Why? Because it shows that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing (6a). The gospel changing people’s hearts and lives is a real cause for thanksgiving. And Paul reminds us to broaden our hearts to see how the gospel is at work in the whole world.

Look at verse 7. Paul was also thankful for a specific man of God, Epaphras. He calls him a “fellow servant” and a “faithful minister of Christ.” It tells us another reason to give thanks. We should especially be thankful for such faithful servants of Jesus through whom God is still at work. It’s so easy to take such people for granted. But even one faithful servant of Jesus is so precious.

In 1:9–14 Paul generally gives a prayer for the Christians in Colosse. In his prayer what stands out is the phrase “live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.” This was the main goal of his prayer. Paul prays many things for them here: that they may have knowledge, wisdom and understanding, that they may bear fruit in every good work, that they may keep growing in the knowledge of God, that they may be strengthened to have great endurance and patience. But he seems to save the best for last. Read verse 12. The ultimate outcome of their spiritual growth is that they may be giving joyful thanks to God the Father for his amazing grace.

These verses show us why it’s so important for us as believers to be giving thanks. It’s because it’s how to “live a life worthy of the Lord” that’s pleasing to him. If Jesus saved us and gave us the privilege to join his holy people in the kingdom of light, then fundamentally, we should be full of joyful thanks to him. But how easy it is to lose sight of this! How easy to let problems and difficulties fill our minds and hearts and become discouraged, embittered or full of complaints! We need to remember the big picture of what God has done for us in Jesus.

To emphasize it, Paul develops it more. Read verses 13,14. “The dominion of darkness” is a contrast to “the kingdom of light” mentioned in verse 12. But it can sound abstract. What does it really mean to live in “the dominion of darkness”? In short, it’s a really bad life. It’s a dominion where there’s no truth and no hope, a dominion where sin reigns, where people are full of hate and revenge. It’s not a geographical place or a political entity; it’s a spiritual dominion that holds people in as utterly helpless slaves. It’s terrible, and it makes people miserable. So Paul says God “rescued” us from it. It means God intervened and took dramatic action to get us out. Have you ever heard of people being rescued, only to end up complaining about what was done for them? It seems kind of ridiculous, doesn’t it? As Christians, being ungrateful is just as outrageous and ridiculous. These verses tell us we need to be reminded of how we used to live in the dominion of darkness, and how God rescued us and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

Read verse 14 again. Redemption means being bought out of slavery. God rescued us from the dominion of darkness by paying the price. What price? It was the precious shed blood of Jesus (1Pe1:18). Our Lord Jesus shed his own precious blood to get us out of the dominion of darkness. It says his redemption gives us “the forgiveness of sins.” Have you ever seen someone receive a gift and not really know how much it cost? When we don’t know the cost, we can’t fully appreciate the gift, right? Likewise, if we don’t know the great cost Jesus paid for us, we won’t really appreciate his forgiveness. We need to remember what he did for us, how he rescued us, paid the price and got us out of the dominion of darkness. In the movie *Toy Story 2* Mr. Potato Head hijacks a truck in order to get to the airport to rescue Woody from being sold, and in the truck are these three little green alien toys. The truck is going so fast that the aliens fly out the window, but Mr. Potato Head rescues them and brings them back in. Then they famously tell him: “You have saved our lives. We are eternally grateful.” And when they get home, Mrs. Potato Head decides to adopt them as their own children, though Mr. Potato Head is kind of annoyed. As Christians we should be better than toys and fiction. Our Lord Jesus’ grace of forgiveness to bring us to his kingdom should make us *eternally grateful to him*. No matter what is going on in our lives, we should remember the big picture, his saving grace.

Read 2:6,7. These verses show how to be thankful. We need to be rooted and built up in Christ. He’s the source of our thanksgiving. Not people, not things, but Jesus himself. The more we meditate on who Jesus is and what he’s done for us, the more we cannot but give thanks. We also learn that thankfulness is not something we should do just on Thanksgiving Day once a year, or something we can turn on or fake once in a while. Thankfulness comes when we “continue to live our lives” in Christ on a daily basis. It tells us why we fall into being ungrateful. It’s because we’re trying to do things on our own. We’re living life based on our own strength and abilities. We’re not really depending on Jesus. Our relationship with him is not so deep. If we’re truly connected to Jesus, these verses tell us that we’re going to be strengthened in faith and “overflowing with thankfulness.” It’s like we’re *oozing* with thankfulness, *gushing* with thankfulness. It cannot *but* happen. Is your thankfulness “overflowing,” oozing, gushing? If not, we need to get reconnected with Jesus and continue to live our lives in him.

Now let’s read 3:15–17. These are famous verses written for a church community. These verses suggest that to be thankful, we need to be not only rooted in Christ but also encouraged by one another. In other words, to be thankful we need to be part of a Christian community. To some people that may sound odd. When they think of Christian community, they think of conflict and distress. But real Christian community is intended to be mutually encouraging. In Christian community, we first of all experience “the peace of Christ” (3:15). It’s the peace of soul knowing that he’s totally forgiven me. But it’s also the peace that his forgiveness gives us with other people. So in verse 15 Paul stresses that we are all members of one body and that we are called to peace. Paul says the peace of Christ needs to rule our hearts, especially as we relate to others in our church community. Paul adds in verse 15b, “And be thankful.” Thankful for what? Of course for God’s grace in our own lives, but also for one another, thankful for what God is doing in each person’s life. As Christians in fellowship with one another, we shouldn’t be full of strife and hidden complaints; fundamentally we should be peaceful and thankful.

But how? Read verse 16 again. It’s surprising here that the primary means of instruction is not words or lectures but singing! Singing to God with gratitude in our hearts might be the most powerful form of teaching. How so? It’s because through songs of praise we’re letting “the message of Christ dwell among you richly.” Talking about it isn’t bad, but singing about it brings it to a whole new level. It’s not about having singing skills; it’s about singing meaningfully, with a grateful heart. We all know that when we’re upset, we don’t feel like singing; we may feel like yelling or complaining. But though we may feel bad for some reason, when we start singing songs, hymns and songs from the Spirit, the message of Christ comes to our hearts newly, and our praise and thanks to God are renewed and made genuine again. We may remember the story of when Paul and Silas were flogged and in jail for spreading the gospel, but despite their wounds they were singing hymns late at night, and God worked to bring the jailer to faith in Jesus (Ac16:16–40). Likewise, when we sing praise songs while suffering and others hear it, it’s a blessing to those around us.

Read 3:17 again. Whether we’re talking or acting, we should be doing it for Jesus’ name’s sake, with thanks to God the Father through him. It emphasizes “whatever you do.” Whether it’s mundane chores or acts of service in daily life, or seemingly more important matters, we should be doing it with thanks to God. How? It says “through him.” It again stresses the importance of continuing to live our lives in him, in Jesus, depending on him in everything we’re doing.

Colossians has one final teaching about thankfulness. Read 4:2. It teaches that a devoted prayer life is a key way to remain thankful. Through prayer we can keep watch against temptation, and it reminds us to stay focused on Jesus and on our hope in him. When we really devote, or give our hearts to, prayer, we can remain thankful.

Read 2:6,7 again. This Thanksgiving may God renew our relationship with Jesus, help us live our lives in him, and make us overflowing with thankfulness.