CHRIST IN YOU

Colossians 1:1-29
Key Verse: 1:27

“To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The epistle to the Colossians was written at about the same time as Paul’s letters to Philemon and to the Ephesians, when Paul was in Rome under house arrest. Paul himself had not visited Colosse before then, but had heard about their faith from his fellow evangelist, Epaphras, who was with Paul at that time in prison. Because this was Paul’s first communication with the church at Colosse, and because of the heretical teachings that were spreading among the brothers there at that time, Paul does not write to the church there as “servant”, “prisoner” or “slave” of Christ, but as an apostle by the will of God. In this way, Paul emphasizes the authority he has by the will of God to proclaim God’s truth about Christ Jesus. And Paul’s intention in writing this letter is to communicate clearly to the Colossians and to us who Christ Jesus is, and what his gospel means to us. Then as now there were many who took Christ’s death for us on the cross for granted, and mistook God’s grace of the forgiveness of sins as an excuse to stop struggling against sin for the sake of growing in God’s holiness. Then as now there were many who, troubled by this lawless application of God’s grace, sought to impose a form of worship that was based on human rules and human righteousness. Paul’s letter to the Colossians reveals to us the mystery of the gospel, by which sinners can become instruments of righteousness, with a hope for complete transformation into the image of Christ through faith. May God help us to understand through this passage the mystery of the gospel, which is Christ in you!

I. Knowing God’s will

First, Faith, love and hope (1-8). Paul’s letter to the Christians at Colosse is written to those who have heard and believed the gospel message. In particular, Paul is thankful that in response to the gospel they have heard, the word of truth in them is bearing fruit. What is it? What is the fruit of the gospel message?

First of all, it is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Look at verse 4. “…because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – …” First and last of all, gospel faith is faith in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. From time to time, well-meaning preachers and teachers have sought to distill from Scripture what are the most important things the gospel tells us. Invariably, they focus on love, service, humility and gentleness. But in their eagerness to make the gospel message more “palatable”, they leave Christ himself out, as if gospel faith were possible for Muslims and even atheists, if only they display these character traits from time to time. But Scripture proclaims for us that the love and service that are derived from human efforts are of a totally different character than that which comes from faith in Christ Jesus. As sinful human beings, we are not in need of another self-help program. As sinful human beings, we are absolutely dependent on the help that God provides for us, through Christ Jesus his Son.
Second of all, the fruit of the gospel message is love for one another. Here, Paul is speaking directly about love for the saints, that is, for those who are in Christ. Of course, being a Christian requires that we love all people, even as Christ loved the tax collectors and prostitutes who came to hear his teaching and be healed from their sin-sicknesses. But Christian love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is special, precisely because all those who belong to Christ are in fact our brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters have the same father. They have the same inheritance. In some sense, they live together, and share what they have together. Through faith in Christ, we have been made a part of a wonderful family of men and women who have been born of God, and in whom the image of God is growing daily. In America, friendship is often restricted to those who have common interests, and those friendships change as interests and desires change. But through the gospel, our eyes have been opened to see the deep and eternal nature of our bond with everyone who acknowledges Jesus as the Christ. We are ready to love them as we love ourselves, because of the hope that we share.

Thirdly, faith and love spring from hope. Look at verse 5. “…the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel.” Christians are people of hope. This has a deep meaning. 1 Peter 1:3,4 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you.” All people have hope. But uniquely Christians have a living hope that is stored up for us in heaven. It is a hope that like Christ, who died and was raised to life on the third day, we too might be raised to live together with him in his kingdom. Because our hope is in heaven, we must patiently endure trials and hardships and frustration that come from living in this cursed world. The most difficult trial to bear is our own inability, foolishness and sin. In the face of this greatest enemy, many become discouraged and lose heart in their struggle to live by faith according to the law of love. They say, “you’ve just gotta be selfish to live in this world.” Selfishness squashes faith and squeezes love. But in those who have a living hope, faith and love spring up like the gusher on Jed Clampett’s property in “Beverly Hillbillies.” And like that gushing oil, they are the promise of a better life in a different world. Paul rejoiced because the Colossian Christians were not lacking in the fruits of faith. It meant that the foundation for eternal life was already there in their souls.

Second, A life worthy of the Lord (9-12). Look at verse 9. “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Paul’s prayer for the Colossian Christians is a little bit surprising. One might think from Paul’s thanksgiving for the Colossians that they were ok as Christians. But evidently, Paul saw their faith, love and hope as a good beginning toward a life worthy of the Lord. Now, however, the Colossian believers must take the next step to build on that foundation of faith and love. Therefore, Paul prayed continuously for the Colossians to take that next step. What was it? What did the Colossians need in order to please God? Look again at verse 9. Paul prays earnestly that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God’s will for them. Christian victory is expressed in one short phrase which Jesus himself used the night of his arrest and trial. Luke 22:42 says, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” Christian victory, the victory over sin and death, takes place when sinners humble themselves and submit their will to Christ and his will for them. This is how sinners can die to sin, and live for righteousness. But
no one can do this without a full understanding of the goodness of God’s will for us. So Paul prays for the Colossians, and his prayer is for us, too. We need to know what God’s will is for our lives. We need to believe that God’s will for us is good, and that it leads to life. We need to see our lives from God’s point of view, and with God’s hope. So Paul prayed night and day that rebellious sinners might repent, deny themselves, and submit to God’s will for their lives.

Many people are afraid of God’s will, thinking that it involves too much denial, sacrifice, suffering or loss. So, they reject God’s will out of hand, in order not to even think about paying such a cost. But such people have fallen to the temptation of Satan first spoken to Eve in the garden. They are ruled by the fear of God’s authority, instead of thankfulness for God’s mercy and grace. Paul understood this fear, and so he told the Colossians in more detail what God’s will for them was. Look at verses 10-12a. “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father…” Does God’s will for the Colossians sound so bad? No! Not at all! Indeed, God’s will for the Colossians and for all believers is precisely what we want for ourselves. We want to live lives worthy of what Christ has done for us. We want to bear fruit through many good works. We want to know God more and more so that his image is shining within us. We want to be strong in doing what is right, and in rejecting what is wrong, patiently waiting for our true reward. In short, God’s will for us is to grow in the character and image of his Son, Jesus Christ. Does submitting to God’s will for us mean that we must submit to his training and discipline for our lives? Yes. But those who think that they can gain something for themselves by holding on to their own lives in the world are sadly mistaken. Jesus said in Luke 9:24, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” God’s will for us is that our lives might be saved, and that we might enjoy his salvation and love forever. May God help us to know his good, pleasing and perfect will for our lives!

Third, A thankful heart to God (12-14). Look at verses 12-14. “Giving thanks to the Father, who qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Ultimately, even the noblest intentions cannot convince us to give up our will and submit to God’s will for us. However, we can do so when we remember God’s grace to us through his Son. Paul said in Romans 1:14, “I am obligated both to Greeks and to non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.” The apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:10, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God’s unbounded, infinite love expressed through our redemption from sin and darkness demands a response from each and every one of his children. What is it? What must our response be? We must submit to God’s will for our lives in thankfulness for the salvation he purchased for our souls with his Son’s blood. We must let him conform us into the likeness of his Son.

II. Gospel faith

First, Christ is above all (15-18). In this part, Paul lays out for us who Christ is, with the apostolic authority given to him by God. It is so that we may not be deceived into trusting in
anyone or anything else as the foundation of our life in God. Look at verses 15-18. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” The key statement is given in verse 15. “He is the image of the invisible God.” John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Christ Jesus was not another great man. Christ Jesus is the incarnation of the Creator God, God who made the heavens and the earth with the word of his mouth, and God who is the Judge of all things. There is no one and nothing in heaven or on earth that is over Christ, that is superior to him, or that can negate or nullify what he has done. Thus, we needn’t calculate or fear that Christ’s redemption for us is insufficient or unable to change our present reality. We can have total confidence in our salvation in Christ, because he is God over all.

Second, God himself came down to men (19-20). Verses 15-18 speak of the gap that exists between God and men, between Christ and all other “messiahs.” God is perfect, and Christ is perfect in his supremacy. God’s grace was to take that perfection and bring it down to men. Look at verses 19-20. “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” God could have left us in the darkness of our sins, forever cut off from our hope in his kingdom. But God was pleased to make himself known to men through Christ Jesus in the flesh. God was pleased to bring his perfect love down to men, and to redeem men with that love from the power of sin and darkness. God was pleased to sacrifice his perfect Son on the cross and shed his blood for sinners. God gave himself over to death, so that all men who believe might have life and peace. Our God is almighty God, and the Creator of heaven and earth. But our God expressed his almighty power through his sacrificial love for us on the cross. Romans 8:31-32 says, “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Christ Jesus was God above all things, but he came down to this world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

Third, Continue in your faith (21-23). Who were we when God sent his Son Jesus to die for us on the cross? Were we young, fresh, earnest and eager disciple candidates? No. Look at verse 21. “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Indeed, the grace of God has filled up the gap that existed between almighty God and sinful men. But we must remember just how wide that gap was, and that only by the grace of God has it been crossed. Most of all, we must remember that it was not by our own effort that we have been redeemed. Look at verse 22. “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—.” Christ died, because we too must die. We must die to our evil behavior, our rebellious minds, and our rejection of God’s will for our lives. Then, we can be made anew, holy, without blemish and free from accusation before God’s throne. We can do it, because Christ did it for us. Praise God and praise his Son, Jesus Christ!
But saving faith in Christ is not mere knowledge of what Christ has done for us on the cross. Look at verse 23. “If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” The good news of the gospel is that a righteousness from God has been revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last (Ro. 1:17). The salvation of Christ is for those who hold on to this hope, are not moved from this hope and who take their stand on this hope alone. As we have studied, for those who take hold of this hope, stored up for us in heaven, this hope becomes the spring of a new life. It is the power source of our faith and love. It is the power source for our transformation into the image of Christ. It is the power source for our final transformation from the perishable to the imperishable, at the last trumpet. The devil tempts us to fix our eyes on some other hope, which might seem more achievable or even appealing, like the hope for worldly fame, recognition, money or love. But these things have no power beyond this world. They have no power to take sinners and present them to God as holy children of God. The gospel of Christ alone is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. So, we must take hold of the hope held out for us in the gospel, and never let go. We must “feed on it,” as Christ commands us in John 6:56-7, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living father sent me and I live because of the father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” This is our daily struggle to believe that Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection were so that I might die to sins and live for righteousness.

III. Christ in you (24-29)

Paul was a servant of the gospel. So, he participated in the sufferings of Christ in order to make the hope of the gospel plain to all men. He taught the word of God in its fullness, so that all men, both Gentiles and Jews, might know the mystery of the gospel. Everyone loves a mystery. What is the mystery of the gospel? Look at verse 27. “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The mystery of the gospel is that God through Christ comes to dwell in us when we believe. And his presence in our lives fills us with hope, hope for glory, hope for eternity, hope for peace, love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. How is that the almighty God can dwell in us? That is the mystery. We must simply believe, and live by that faith. For the one who lives by that faith, everything is possible. Look at verses 28 and 29. “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

May God bless you to know the mystery of the gospel, which is Christ in you. May God give you knowledge of his will for you, and confidence in Christ that you can carry out his good, pleasing and perfect will for your life by faith in him.