

The Book of Colossians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Thanksgiving for the Colossians

Colossians 1:1-8

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Colossians opens with a single, flowing sentence of thanksgiving, and beneath its warmth a good deal is at stake. Paul is laying the foundation he will build on for the rest of the letter. He establishes that the gospel the Colossians received is the word of the truth, an objective and unchanging message, not a regional opinion or a private experience. He sets the triad of faith, love, and hope at the center, grounding the Christian life in what God has done and what God has stored up rather than in the believer's shifting moods. And he presents the gospel as a living thing that bears fruit and grows wherever it is truly received. The doctrinal task this week is to help students see the gospel as a fixed truth that produces real and visible change, received through a response of obedient faith and understood in truth.

At the same time, this passage was never meant to be only a doctrine lesson. Paul is teaching a young congregation, and most of his readers, then and now, do not need to be argued into the faith so much as warmed in it. So the second aim is formational. Paul wants these believers to see themselves rightly: as saints, as people in whom faith and love are already at work, as heirs of a hope kept safe in heaven. He wants them grateful. Gratitude is not a sentimental add-on here; it is the soil in which a healthy church grows. A congregation that learns to give thanks for the evidence of Christ in one another will be far harder to divide and far easier to lead into deeper truth.

So aim at both targets. Send students home more confident that the gospel they believe is true, public, and powerful, and send them home more thankful, more aware of the grace that found them, the faith it planted, the love it grew, and the hope it secured. If they leave both surer of the truth and softer with gratitude, the lesson has done its work.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul links three things together in his thanksgiving: faith in Christ Jesus, love for all the saints, and the hope laid up in heaven (vv. 4-5). How do these three relate to one another, and in what sense does the hope stored up in heaven serve as a spring that feeds both faith and love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students feel how deliberately Paul braids these three strands together. Faith looks up to Christ, love reaches out to the saints, and hope leans forward to what is laid up in heaven. Paul does not present them as three separate virtues to be cultivated in isolation. He

presents them as one living response to the gospel, three movements of a single redeemed heart.

Pay special attention to the order Paul gives in verse 5. He says they have faith and love because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. Hope here is not a vague optimism; it is the secured, settled future God has stored up, and it functions as a source. When a believer is certain of where everything is finally headed, that certainty frees the heart to trust God in the present (faith) and to pour itself out for others without fear of running dry (love). The future steadies the present.

This is worth pressing because so many people try to grow faith and love by sheer willpower while neglecting hope. They white-knuckle their obedience and wonder why their hearts stay cold. Paul's order suggests a better way. Spend time meditating on the inheritance God has secured, and watch how a settled hope begins to loosen the grip of fear and stinginess on the heart.

Tie the heavenly hope to Christ specifically. This is not hope in general but hope laid up in heaven, guarded by God, anchored in the risen Lord the rest of the letter will exalt. The Colossians' hope was secure not because they were strong but because the One it rested on is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith, love, and hope as the unified response of a heart that has received the gospel
- Hope as a settled, secured future (laid up in heaven), not mere optimism
- The way assurance about the future fuels present faith and present love
- The danger of trying to grow love and obedience while neglecting the hope that feeds them
- Christ as the secure ground of the believer's hope

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul say faith and love spring from hope, rather than the other way around?
- How does being sure of heaven actually change the way we love difficult people today?
- What is one way you could feed your hope this week so that your faith and love grow with it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says the Colossians have love for all the saints, not just for the ones who are easy to love. Picture the people in your own congregation. Is there anyone your love has quietly skipped over? What would it look like this week to let the hope you share with them reshape the way you treat them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and the aim is honesty rather than information. Paul commends the Colossians for love for all the saints. The little word *all* does a lot of work. It is easy to love the saints who are like us, who agree with us, who are easy to be around. Paul commends a love that reaches the whole body.

Help students name, gently and privately, the people their love tends to skip. Often it is not active dislike but quiet avoidance: the person who is hard to talk to, the family that rubbed us the wrong way once, the member whose politics or personality grates. Love does not require that we feel warm toward everyone, but it does require that we act for their good and refuse to write anyone off.

Then turn the question toward shared hope. Paul has just said this love flows from a hope they hold in common. The people we are tempted to skip are heading to the same heaven, kept by the same grace, bought by the same blood. Seeing a difficult brother or sister in light of where they are finally going can soften how we treat them now. Encourage students to pick one specific person and one specific act of love for the coming week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for all the saints, including those who are difficult to love
- The difference between feeling affection and acting for someone's good
- Shared hope and shared redemption as motives for love within the body
- The sin of quietly writing off members of the church

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone in the body your love has quietly skipped? What would one act of love toward them look like?
- How does remembering that a difficult brother is heading to the same heaven change the way you see him?
- Why is love for all the saints, not just our favorites, treated as evidence of genuine faith?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul calls the gospel the word of the truth (v. 5) and says the Colossians understood the grace of God in truth (v. 6). What does it mean that the gospel is a fixed message of truth and not merely a private feeling or a story we adjust to suit ourselves, and why does that matter for the church in every generation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul calls the gospel the word of the truth (v. 5). This phrase anchors the whole letter, and it deserves careful handling, because the false teaching Paul will confront in chapter 2 traded on

private speculations and human traditions dressed up as deeper insight. Over against all of that, Paul sets a fixed, public, knowable truth.

Help students grasp that the gospel is not first a feeling and not a story we are free to edit. It is news, an announcement of what God has actually done in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because it is true, it can be received, understood, taught, and passed on accurately from one person and one generation to the next. A feeling cannot be handed down faithfully; a truth can.

Connect this to the authority of Scripture. The same gospel the Colossians heard from Epaphras is the gospel recorded for us in the New Testament. We are not at liberty to adjust it to the spirit of our age. When a church loses its grip on the gospel as fixed truth, it drifts, and every generation must be called back to the word of the truth rather than to the latest opinion.

Note too that Paul says they understood the grace of God in truth. Truth and grace are not rivals here. The Colossians came to know grace precisely as it really is, in truth, not a softened or distorted version of it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as objective, knowable truth, not a private feeling or adjustable story
- The gospel as news (an announcement of what God has done), able to be received and accurately passed on
- The authority of Scripture and the danger of editing the message to suit the age
- Grace and truth held together rather than set against each other
- The contrast between the word of the truth and the human speculation Paul will confront in chapter 2

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between treating the gospel as a feeling and treating it as a truth?
- Why is it important that the gospel can be passed down accurately from one generation to the next?
- Where do you see pressure today to adjust the gospel to fit the mood of the times?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think back to when the gospel first became real to you. Was it something you mainly felt, or something you came to know as true and then acted on? How does remembering the gospel as the word of truth steady you on days when your feelings are unsteady?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the truth of the previous one inward. Many believers can recall a wave of emotion at their conversion but have never settled the deeper question of whether the gospel is true. When feelings cool, as feelings always do, a faith built only on emotion can wobble badly.

Be pastorally gentle here. Feelings are not the enemy; God made us to feel, and the gospel rightly stirs joy and love. The point is not to despise emotion but to locate the foundation underneath it. Faith rests on what God has done in Christ, on a fact outside ourselves, and that fact does not change when our mood does.

Invite students to remember a season when their feelings ran dry and ask what held them. For many, it was precisely the knowledge that the tomb was empty whether they felt it or not. Help them see that returning to the word of the truth, especially the resurrection, is a reliable way to steady a shaky heart. Encourage one concrete habit, such as returning to a familiar gospel text on hard days.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith grounded in objective truth rather than in fluctuating feelings
- The proper place of emotion in the Christian life, neither despised nor trusted as a foundation
- Returning to the facts of the gospel as a way to steady a wavering heart
- The reliability of God's work in Christ regardless of our mood

Discussion Prompts

- When your feelings about God run dry, what has actually held you steady?
- How can we welcome emotion in worship without building our faith on it?
- What is one gospel truth you could return to on the days your heart feels cold?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, both in the wider world and among the Colossians since the day they heard it (v. 6). What does this picture of a living, fruit-bearing, growing word teach us about the nature and power of the gospel itself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul describes the gospel as bearing fruit and growing (v. 6), language that recalls the parable of the sower and the picture of a living seed. This is one of the richest images in the passage and worth slowing over. The gospel is not inert information; it is a living word that, once truly received, begins to produce.

Notice the two verbs. The gospel is bearing fruit, which speaks of the visible change it produces in character and conduct, and it is growing, which speaks of its spread to more and more

people. The same word that changes a person also multiplies across the world. Both happen wherever the seed lands in good soil.

Press the point that this growth is the gospel's own power, not ours. We do not manufacture fruit by effort any more than a branch strains to produce grapes. We receive the word, abide in Christ, and the fruit comes as the natural result of a living connection. This guards students from a joyless, self-generated religion of gritted teeth.

Help them see the encouragement here. The Colossians were a small church in a small town, yet the same unstoppable word at work across the empire was at work in them. No faithful congregation is too small or too obscure to be caught up in what the gospel is doing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as a living word that bears fruit and grows wherever it is received
- Fruit (changed character and conduct) and growth (spread to others) as the gospel's twofold work
- Fruitfulness as the result of the word's power, not human striving
- Encouragement for small and obscure congregations: the same powerful word is at work in them

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between fruit that the gospel produces and change we try to force by willpower?
- Where have you seen the gospel quietly changing someone over time?
- How does it encourage a small congregation to know the same word is at work worldwide?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul expects the gospel to keep bearing fruit in those who have received it. Where do you see real fruit growing in your life since you came to Christ, and where is there a corner that still looks more like bare ground than a fruitful garden?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the fruit image into the student's own life. Paul expects the gospel to keep bearing fruit in those who have received it, which means the Christian life is meant to be visibly, increasingly fruitful over time, not static.

Lead students to look for real evidence rather than vague self-assessment. Where is there more patience than there used to be, more honesty, more generosity, more willingness to forgive? Naming actual fruit is a healthy and humbling exercise that gives glory to God for the change He has worked.

Then make room for honesty about the bare patches. Every believer has a corner of life that still looks like untilled ground, an area where the gospel has not yet been allowed to do its work. Help students name one such area without despair. The point is not condemnation but cultivation. Where the seed has not yet borne fruit, the remedy is the same: receive the word there too, bring that corner to Christ, and let Him grow what we cannot.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian life as increasingly fruitful rather than static
- Naming real fruit as an act of gratitude that gives God the glory
- Identifying the corners of life the gospel has not yet been allowed to reach
- Cultivation rather than condemnation as the response to barren areas

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific fruit the gospel has grown in you since you came to Christ?
- Where is there still a corner of your life that looks more like bare ground?
- What would it look like to bring that corner to Christ this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

The Colossians learned the gospel from Epaphras, whom Paul calls a beloved fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ on their behalf (v. 7). What does this tell us about how God has chosen to spread the gospel, and about the importance of faithful teachers in the life of the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names Epaphras, a beloved fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ, as the one from whom the Colossians learned the gospel (v. 7). This is a quiet but important verse about how God spreads His word: ordinarily through ordinary, faithful people who carry the message to others.

Help students see the dignity of this. Epaphras was not an apostle. He was, by all appearances, a local man who heard the gospel, perhaps through Paul's work in Ephesus, and carried it home to his own town. The whole church at Colossae existed because one faithful person took the word seriously enough to share it. God still works this way.

Underline the word faithful. Paul does not commend Epaphras for being clever or impressive but for being faithful, for teaching the gospel accurately and laboring for the people. The church is always one generation away from losing the truth, and it is preserved by teachers who hand on the word of the truth without adding to it or subtracting from it.

This is also a fitting place to honor the teachers and elders God has used in your own congregation, and to remind students that supporting and praying for faithful teachers is part of guarding the gospel for those who come after.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's ordinary pattern of spreading the gospel through faithful people
- The dignity of the work of ordinary Christians, not only apostles or famous figures
- Faithfulness, not cleverness, as the mark of a true minister of the word
- The church as always one generation from losing the truth, preserved by faithful teaching
- Honoring, supporting, and praying for faithful teachers and elders

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul commend Epaphras for being faithful rather than impressive?
- How does the church lose or keep the gospel across generations?
- Who are the faithful teachers in your congregation, and how could you encourage them this week?

Question 8

Student Question:

Almost everyone who follows Christ can name an Epaphras, someone who first carried the good news to them. Who was yours? And whose Epaphras might God be asking you to become, even if you have never thought of yourself as a teacher?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the previous truth personal in two directions, looking back with gratitude and forward with responsibility. Nearly every Christian can name the person who first brought the gospel near, a parent, a friend, a preacher, a coworker. Naming them aloud is an act of thanksgiving that fits the spirit of the whole passage.

Then turn the question forward. The same chain that reached us is meant to continue through us. Many believers disqualify themselves from this, thinking that carrying the gospel is only for the gifted or the trained. Gently challenge that. Epaphras was simply a faithful man who shared what he had received. The question is not whether we have a platform but whether we are willing to be a link in the chain.

Encourage students to think specifically. Who in their life has not yet heard the gospel clearly from them? A coworker, a neighbor, a grown child, a friend? The aim is not to manufacture guilt but to help students see themselves as people through whom the living word can keep spreading.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gratitude for those who first brought the gospel to us
- Every Christian as a potential link in the chain of the gospel
- Disqualifying ourselves from evangelism by waiting for gifts or training we think we lack
- Identifying specific people who have not yet heard the gospel clearly from us

Discussion Prompts

- Who was your Epaphras, and have you ever thanked God for them by name?
- What makes us feel disqualified from sharing the gospel, and how does Epaphras answer that?
- Who is one person God may be asking you to carry the good news to?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul says the gospel came to the Colossians as grace, the grace of God which they understood in truth (vv. 5–6), and he opens the letter by wishing them grace and peace from God our Father (v. 2). How does the New Testament hold grace and truth together, so that grace is never an excuse to ignore what God commands, and obedience is never a way of earning what only grace can give?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the most doctrinally weighty question of the lesson, and it deserves careful, confident handling. Paul says the gospel came to the Colossians as the grace of God, which they understood in truth (vv. 5–6), and he opens with the familiar greeting, grace and peace from God our Father (v. 2). The question is how grace and truth, grace and obedience, hold together.

Begin by establishing that salvation is by grace from first to last. We did not earn the gospel coming to us, we cannot earn the forgiveness it offers, and we will never deserve the inheritance laid up in heaven. Every good thing in this passage is a gift. Any teaching that turns the Christian life into a way of placing God in our debt has lost the gospel.

But then show that grace, rightly understood, is never opposed to obedience. Paul says they understood the grace of God in truth, and the New Testament everywhere presents grace as teaching us to respond. The gospel of grace is received the way the Colossians received it and the way Scripture describes everywhere: by hearing the word of the truth, believing in Jesus as Lord, turning from sin, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). None of these earns salvation; all of them are the God-appointed way grace is laid hold of. Baptism does not put God in our debt any more than Naaman earned cleansing by dipping in the Jordan.

Guard students against the popular error of faith only, which treats any act of obedience as a threat to grace. Scripture knows nothing of a grace that asks for no response and nothing of an

obedience that earns. The same letter that exalts grace will go on to call these believers to a whole new way of life. Help students hold both truths: we are saved entirely by grace, and saving faith is a living, obedient faith that takes God at His word.

Close by tying it to peace. Grace and peace go together because a person who has received grace on God's terms, in truth, can rest. They are not anxiously trying to earn what is already given, nor carelessly presuming on a grace that asks nothing. They walk in the settled peace of a reconciled child of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as the gift of God's grace from beginning to end
- Grace received in truth, that is, on God's terms and not a distorted version
- Saving faith as a living, obedient faith (hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ), never as faith only
- Obedience as the God-appointed way grace is laid hold of, never as a way of earning salvation
- The error of treating any act of obedience as a threat to grace
- Grace and peace together: rest for those who have received grace on God's terms

Discussion Prompts

- How can we say salvation is entirely by grace and still insist that faith obeys?
- Why is baptism into Christ a response to grace rather than an attempt to earn it?
- What goes wrong in a church that pits grace against obedience, in either direction?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across these eight verses. Paul takes a small, unseen church and helps them see their faith, their love, their hope, and the worldwide gospel that bound them all together. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the single truth from Colossians 1:1–8 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to gather up the whole passage and name one specific way Christ is forming them through it. Resist letting the answers stay general. The goal is a single, concrete truth carried into the week, not a tidy summary.

It can help to walk back through the movement of the passage as a prompt. Paul gave thanks for a small church's faith, love, and hope. He reminded them that the gospel they received is the word of the truth, a living word bearing fruit and growing across the world. He honored the

faithful teacher who brought it to them and rooted the whole thing in the grace of God. Any one of those notes might be the truth a given student most needs.

Close by reminding students that transformation, not mere information, is the point of the study. Paul did not write to fill the Colossians with facts but to ground them, warm them, and prepare them to stand. The aim of this lesson, and of the whole study, is not that students would know more about Colossians but that they would become, week by week, more like Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at transformation, not merely information
- Gratitude as the foundational posture of a healthy disciple
- Carrying one specific truth into the week rather than a vague summary
- The Christian life as ongoing formation into the likeness of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from this passage does your heart most need this week, and why?
- What would it look like, concretely, to live in light of that truth before we meet again?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?