

LifeGroups

GROWING TOGETHER IN THE GOSPEL

Growth Sheet

Faith, Love, and Hope

Colossians 1:3-8

Review: The Theme of Colossians

Where does true spiritual maturity come from? That was the raging question in the Colossian church. Does maturity come from observing certain religious ceremonies (2:16-18)? Does it come through a program of self-denial (“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch,” 2:21)? The fallout of this controversy was that believers in Colossae were being lured to seek spiritual wholeness *apart* from Christ instead of *in* Christ. They were tempted to believe this false claim: “Jesus was a fine way to begin, but there’s so much more you need.”

This is not a dead issue. People are still trying to figure out, “Where does maturity come from?” or, to put it differently, “How can I reach my full potential?” Just visit out any “self-help” section of a bookstore, and you’ll see the variety of answers to this question.

In response to this burning question, the Apostle Paul stresses this answer: *True maturity is found in Christ alone*. Everything you need for personal wholeness comes from Christ. Apart from him, there can be no healthy self-discipline, religious practices, or relationships. As Paul puts it, “in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3).

This answer calls for action because merely *knowing* that true maturity is found in Christ alone does not automatically make us mature. This is why Paul urges the Colossians, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so walk in him*” (2:6-7, emphasis added). Walking in Christ, then, means guarding against anything that would draw us away from him (2:8-23). It means radically rearranging our priorities (3:1-4), virtues (3:5-11), and relationships (3:12-4:6)—all around who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

Faith, Love, and Hope

After opening with a greeting (1:1-2), Paul begins by recounting his prayer for the Colossians. This prayer has two parts. First, he *thanks* God for the Colossians’ first signs of spiritual maturity in their response to the gospel (1:3-8). Second, he *prays* that they would continue to grow (1:9-23).¹ This study focuses on the first part of Paul’s prayer, in which Paul gives thanks to God for the Colossians’ faith, love, and hope, and recounts how it all started.

¹Why is this prayer so long? Because the final part of this prayer—that they would “give thanks to the Father”—is like an accordion: it expands into a description of what the Father has done (1:12-13), as well as who Jesus is (1:14-20) and what he has done (1:21-23).



Our study, then, divides into two parts: 1) the evidence of spiritual life (1:3-5), and 2) the source of spiritual life (1:6-8).

1. The evidence of spiritual life (1:3-5)

The evidence of spiritual life is faith, love, and hope. We find these qualities throughout the New Testament.² *Faith* is one's total reliance on Jesus Christ. *Love* is the tangible expression of this reliance, demonstrated in selfless acts toward others. *Hope* is the forward-looking expectation that God will do all the good he has promised. In this passage, "hope" stands for the *object* of our hope (what we hope for).

2. The source of spiritual life (1:6-8)

When we rightly understand faith, love, and hope, we will see that they are radical, supernatural qualities. Together, they form the evidence of *spiritual* life—life that will continue to blossom into the maturity found in Christ alone. So what could possibly bring this about? The answer comes in the gospel, the source of spiritual life. The Colossians' growth in faith, love, and hope began "since they day you heard [the gospel] and understood the grace of God in truth" (1:6).

Discussion and Application

1. Suppose you wanted to discover whether someone was truly a Christian. What qualities would you look for in that person? Why do you think Paul identifies faith, love, and hope as the evidence for spiritual life?
2. Many consider themselves to be people "of faith." What do you think people mean by that? What is true about the faith spoken of Colossians 1:4 that makes it different than simply being a person "of faith"? See also 1:23 and 2:7.
3. Suppose someone claimed to have faith in the Lord Jesus, but showed no evidence of genuine love (shown in obedience to God [John 14:15] or in self-sacrificial giving to others [James 1:27]). Based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, what is true of such a person?
4. Of all the possible qualities (joy, peace, longsuffering) why do you think *love* is singled out as a prime evidence for faith? To think about it in a different way, what is true about love that makes it a good litmus test for genuine faith?
5. Hope is often overlooked as an evidence of spiritual life. Perhaps this is because of the abundance of our comforts: we easily forget that our final hope is not on this earth. Look up the following passages and name things we will *miss* if we neglect *hope*: Romans 5:3; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 3:6; 6:18-19; Romans 15:18).
6. Our study of faith, love, and hope has been in a context of Paul's prayer of *thanksgiving* for the Colossians. Why do you think we often fail to thank God for the evidence of spiritual life in others believers? Take time to observe and thank God for genuine evidence of spiritual life you see in the believers around you.

²Faith, hope, and love often appear in a group. Besides Colossians 1:4-5, see Romans 5:1-5; Galatians 5:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Ephesians 4:2-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Hebrews 6:10-12; 10:22-24; 1 Peter 1:3-9. A study of these qualities reveals that they are interdependent—one cannot be rightly lived out without the others. Augustine organized his theological handbook *Enchiridion* around these three qualities.