

Colossians 1:1-8 — The Chain of Faithful Servants

COLOSSIANS 1:1-8 (WEB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

Somebody you may have long forgotten first told you about Jesus, and the thing they planted in you is still growing right now, so this week you go find that person and say thank you out loud.

Opening Lines

Paul is writing a thank-you note to people he has never met, in a town the world had already started to forget. Before he corrects a single thing, he gives thanks. Let's find out why.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Every person in the room can name the human being who first handed them the gospel, and feels the pull to actually thank them. That's the seed germinating, the same seed Paul heard growing in Colossae.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the deep dive on the geography of the Lycus Valley. It's fascinating but it isn't the fire. If time is short, drop it and protect the naming of names.
- Where the moment lives: It lives in the table question — saying a real name out loud. Not in your explanation of faith, love, and hope, but in the moment someone remembers who prayed for them.
- Your prep: Do the exercise yourself first: name your own Epaphras and decide whether you'll actually contact them this week. You can't lead a room somewhere you haven't gone.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening (5 min): read the passage cold, ask what surprises them about how Paul starts. Teach the word 'hope' (8 min) with the package-behind-the-counter image. Historical setup on Epaphras and the chain (7 min). Questions 1-3, with you going first by name (18 min). Landing and commitments (7 min). Transformation happens at question 3 — the naming. If short, cut the geography of the Lycus Valley and protect the naming.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening (5 min): hold the name of who you'd call at 2am. Read the passage

(3 min). Teach 'hope' briefly (6 min). Work questions 1-5, letting question 3-4 breathe (32 min). Commitments out loud, each person a name and an action (9 min). Spontaneous closing prayer over their actual words (5 min). Transformation lives in questions 3 and 4. If short, cut question 2 and go straight from tone to the Epaphras question.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening (4 min): you name your Epaphras first, unprompted. Read verses 3-8 together (2 min). One idea only — the chain of faithful servants (5 min). Ask questions 3 and 4 straight, and just talk (14 min). One commitment each before you leave (5 min). Transformation is the whole middle — this format IS the exercise. If short, skip the reading and just ask who first told them about Jesus.

Go First, Go Real

Here is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately: you go first, and you go real. Before you ever ask the room to open a vein, you open yours. When you get to the table question tonight — 'who first told you the gospel, and have you thanked them?' — do not ask it and then wait. Answer it yourself, out loud, by name, before anyone else speaks. A room will only go as deep as the leader has already gone. If you offer a polished, tidy answer, you'll get polished, tidy answers back and the evening stays shallow. If you name a real person and admit you never thanked them, the room exhales and follows. This week the rep is simple: model the vulnerability before you request it. That's level one. Master it now, because every future drill builds on this floor.

Why This Passage Matters

Most people carry a name they've never said out loud in a room. A grandmother who prayed. A college roommate who wouldn't shut up about Jesus. A stranger at a bus stop. Someone handed them the thing they now build their life on, and they never went back to say thank you. This passage cracks that open. Paul is writing to a small church in a shrinking city, believers he has never laid eyes on, and the first thing out of his mouth is gratitude — because he heard that faith and love were growing there. And the reason he even knows about them is a man named Epaphras, who carried the gospel home to his own town. It's a chain. Paul got it from the risen Christ. Epaphras got it from Paul's circle. The Colossians got it from Epaphras. And you are standing somewhere on that same chain, holding what someone faithful handed you. When you teach this, you're not delivering ancient history. You're giving people permission to remember, and to reach back. That's a rare and holy thing to get to do. Few lessons hand you a room's own gratitude on a plate. This one does.

Catch the Fire First

Before the room ever hears the question, you sit with it yourself this week. Say the name out loud in your kitchen — the actual person who first told you about Jesus or first prayed for you. Feel whether you ever thanked them. If they're alive, draft the text or make the

call before Sunday, so that when you stand up and say 'here's my Epaphras,' you're not performing an example — you're reporting something that already happened. Walk into the room already having done the thing you're about to ask of them. That's the whole game.

Bring Your Own Story

- Prompt: Name the person who first told you about Jesus — and whether you ever went back to thank them.
- Prompt: Tell about a time you found out, years later, that someone had been quietly praying for you the whole time.
- Prompt: Describe something specific you've watched God grow in another person — the way Paul 'heard of' the Colossians' faith.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real): Polished — 'I'm grateful for the faithful witnesses who shaped my walk.' Real — 'It was my aunt Deb. She wasn't fancy about it. She just kept showing up, and she died before I ever said thank you.'
- Guardrail: Bring it lived-in, not raw — a story you've made peace with, not one you're still bleeding from in front of the room.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Read Colossians 1:1-8 aloud, slowly. Then: 'Reading this cold, with no backstory — what surprises you about how Paul starts this letter?' Someone will notice he begins with thanks, not correction. Let them see it before you tell them."

Reward fresh eyes over Bible trivia — protect the newcomer by asking a question anyone can answer.

SMALL GROUP: "'Before we open anything — think of one person you'd call if you needed prayer at 2am. Just hold the name.' Pause. 'Keep them in mind. Paul's about to write a whole letter that starts by thanking God for people like that.'"

Start with a shared human experience before the text, so the passage lands on soil already turned.

COFFEE: "'Can I tell you who first told me about Jesus? I've been thinking about it all week.' Say the name. Then: 'Paul does exactly this in the passage — let me show you.'"

Go first yourself to set the depth — model the vulnerability you're about to ask for.

Teaching the Word

The word is *elpís* — 'hope.' In verse 5, faith and love spring up 'because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens.' But hear this: in the Bible, hope is not crossing your fingers. *Elpís* is not 'I hope it doesn't rain.' It's a settled, already-secured certainty — Paul says it's laid up, stored away, reserved. Picture a package with your name on it, already paid for, already sitting behind the counter, waiting for you to walk in and claim it. It's not

maybe. It's yours; you just haven't picked it up yet. Jesus carried it into the heavens ahead of you and no thief can touch it. So when your grip feels weak this week — and it will — the hope doesn't depend on how tight you're holding. It's already in the back, with your name on it. Your hope does not depend on the strength of your grip today. [Then stop. Let it sit.]

Discussion Questions

1. Paul writes to people he's never met, in a town the world had forgotten. What does it tell you that the first thing he does is give thanks?

Coaching note: You're establishing tone. Let two or three answers land without correcting. The point they're reaching for: grace gets named before anything gets fixed.

If it stalls: Would you rather get a thank-you note or a correction first? Which one makes you actually listen to the rest?

2. Paul names faith, love, and hope. He puts hope underneath, holding the other two up. Why might hope be the foundation and not the decoration?

Coaching note: Draw out that hope here is a secured certainty, not a mood. If someone says 'because hope keeps you going,' push gently: kept going by what, exactly?

If it stalls: If you knew for certain something good was already waiting for you, how would that change how you love the people around you today?

3. There's a man named Epaphras here — he carried the gospel home to his own town. Who is the Epaphras in your story?

Coaching note: This is the heart of the night. You go first, by name, before you ask. Then silence. Do not rescue it. Let people arrive at a name.

If it stalls: Just the name — who first told you about Jesus, or first prayed for you? You don't have to tell the whole story yet.

4. Have you ever actually thanked that person? If not — what's stopped you?

Coaching note: This can get tender fast; some Epaphrases have died. Hold space for grief as well as regret. Don't fix it — let the honesty stand.

If it stalls: Yes or no — did you ever say thank you? If no, is it that you forgot, or that it felt awkward, or that they're gone?

5. Paul says the gospel is 'bearing fruit and growing' in them — a living thing, still spreading. Where do you see it still growing in you, and who might you be an Epaphras to?

Coaching note: This turns them outward and forward. Some will resist 'I could be that for someone.' Affirm that they already are the next link in the chain, whether they feel it or not.

If it stalls: Think of one person in your life who hasn't heard this yet. Just picture their face. You don't have to do anything tonight but see them.

Questions You May Hear

"Who was Epaphras?"

A native of the Colossae region who carried the gospel home and planted the church

there. Paul never went to Colossae himself — Epaphras is the reason this letter exists, and Paul calls him a 'faithful servant of Christ on our behalf.'

"What does 'hope laid up in the heavens' actually mean?"

It means a secured, reserved inheritance — not wishful thinking. Peter describes the same thing as an inheritance 'kept in Heaven for you,' unfading and safe because Jesus has gone ahead and is holding it where no thief can reach it.

"Why does Paul list hope after faith and love instead of the usual order?"

Because here hope is the foundation the other two rest on — faith in Christ and love toward the saints spring up 'because of the hope' already stored away. It's the same triad from 1 Corinthians 13, just arranged to show what holds the others up.

"Why write such a warm opening to a church he'd never even visited?"

Paul had heard reports of their real faith and love, and for him those are the fingerprint of the Spirit's work — proof the gospel genuinely landed. He gives thanks out loud for grace already growing before he addresses a single problem.

For Experienced Leaders

- When you name the reference, pause in silence until you see the last person land on it — phone, app, or print. Never call out a page number; half the room is on a device with no fixed pages, and it only helps the people holding your exact edition.
- Some people's Epaphras is dead. Don't let the room turn 'thank them this week' into a burden that shames the grieving. Say plainly: 'If yours is gone, thank God for them out loud tonight — that counts.'
- If a newcomer is there who can't find Colossians, don't announce 'we're all friends here.' Just do things that make it true — wait for them to land, ask them the cold-eyes question, learn their name before they leave. That's what brings them back, not your best point.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around: 'Say the name of your Epaphras out loud, and finish this sentence — this week I will _____. ' Make them fill the blank with an actual action, not a feeling.

Close by praying out loud over the specific names and commitments people just spoke — the Epaphras they remembered, the person they said they'd thank, the grief for the ones who've died. Don't reach for a written prayer; naming their actual words back to God is the point.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 3 — if people are still sitting with a name and can't move past it — stay there. That's not falling short of the lesson. That IS the lesson.

Midweek follow-up: Next week, before you start, ask: 'Did anyone reach out to their Epaphras?' Let the ones who did tell it. That report is worth more than your best point.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/colossians/1-1-8/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The name of the person who first told you about Jesus, or first prayed for you:
- Have you ever thanked them? If not, what's stopped you?
- 'Hope laid up in heaven' — in your own words, what would change if you truly believed something good was already reserved for you?
- One thing you've watched God grow in someone else — name the person and the thing:
- This week I will _____ (fill in one real action):

Take-home actions:

- Tell one person today something specific you've seen God grow in them — not flattery, the actual thing: their patience, their quiet generosity. Do it by tonight.
- Reach out to your Epaphras today. Send the message. Tell them their words took root and are bearing fruit in your life still.
- Think of one person who hasn't heard the good news, and pray for them by name this evening before you sleep.

Someone told you the truth once, and it changed everything. Go thank them today.