

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. Colossians 1:1-8*

A couple of years ago I read a great book entitled “Endurance” written by Alfred Lansing, which documented Sir Ernest Shackleton’s incredible expedition across the Antarctic. In 1914, Shackleton and a team of explorers set out from England to do something that no one before had accomplished—cross Antarctica from one side to the other across the South Pole. Disaster struck when the team’s ship, Endurance, became entrapped in ice and eventually sank after her hull was crushed. Marooned on nearby Elephant Island, there seemed little hope for their survival. In a desperate effort to get help, Shackleton and five others set out in a twenty-foot lifeboat across some of the most dangerous and storm-filled waters in the world on an eight hundred-mile journey to South Georgia Island where help could be found. For fifteen days the men battled the treacherous seas and massive storms with waves of up to one hundred feet. Using only a compass and a sextant, Captain Frank Worsley navigated their course until they safely reached land and found help. Shackleton secured another ship and returned to rescue all of his men. He became a national hero in England for his courage and perseverance.

In many ways Shackleton’s dangerous journey is reflective of all of us - as we make our way through the stormy seas of the fallen world that we live in. Ever since the first sin in the Garden of Eden, fallen humanity has struggled to make wise decisions about the ultimate meaning of life. The only way to ensure that we do not go astray, is to have an objective source of truth that will guide us. Just as a compass and sextant can guide sailors through dark, uncharted waters, God’s Word can guide us through uncertain and difficult circumstances. But we must trust the truth of God’s Word - over our feelings, over our wisdom, and over the contrary advice of others. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” Because the Word of God, the Bible, the Holy Scriptures is inspired by God, it is without error, and we can always trust it.

This morning we will be looking together at the inspired Word of God, specifically at the letter the apostle Paul wrote the church in the ancient city of Colossae, which was located in the southern part of what is now modern Turkey. Colossians is a rich and deep book, I believe one of Paul’s best letters which holds within it deep and great truths which were not only needed for the church in Paul’s day for the church in Colossae, but also for the church in our day in Port Alberni. This is true because we are all born into sin, which means the temptation to trust in things that are not of God is naturally strong within each one of us. The times we live in offer us a plethora of things to trust in other than God - and none of us is so secure in our faith that we do not experience varying degrees of being influenced by the world we live in. The book of Colossians is about trusting in the right things. Or to be exact - the book of Colossians is about trusting in the right person of Jesus Christ. Those in the church at Colossae had fallen under the influence of the world and were trusting in things other than Jesus. And so the apostle Paul sat down and wrote them a letter to point them back in the right direction and set them back on the right path. Most likely this wasn’t any easy letter to receive; as correction rubs against the grain of our pride. For the Colossians, Christianity was a minority religion in their day, and their faith ran counter to the values of their culture, and they were struggling to hang on to their hope in Jesus under the pressure.

Sound familiar? This too is our struggle. We too live in a culture that espouses values counter to Christianity, a culture that offers us prosperity and security and hope in things other than God. Now we know that all that is offered to us outside of Christ is ultimately inadequate. We also know that when comfort become our god, when individualism overshadows broken surrender, when we trust in people or position or possessions over the all-sufficient Christ - our hope in will fade into despair. Our only hope is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the message of the book of Colossians.

At the time this letter was written, there were serious threats within the church in Colossae. A garbled mixture of theological error, and a blend of Jewish and Greek and secular beliefs, was threatening the body of Christ. Such an uncertain spiritual atmosphere, where different religious ideas compete with one another, is always an indication of great unrest in society. It indicates that people have lost their bearings and do not know what to believe. We see that - in that the conditions reflected in Paul's letter to the Colossians are the same conditions we face today. We are still assaulted on every side and from within by false teachings of worldly philosophies and personal opinions, all claiming to be the truth. Paul's letter to the church of Colossae and Port Alberni is about the truth concerning Jesus Christ.

In the opening verses the apostle Paul emphasizes the word "*hope*" in marked contrast to the hopelessness of the world of his day. In the midst of domestic terrorism, political and social division, moral and spiritual decline, such hopelessness is a mark of our day also. Even among Christians we see unholy lifestyles, loose sexuality, financial fraud, broken marriages, unhealthy relationships, conflict and division. The glory, the passionate joy for God, has faded from many who claim Christ today. This was also the case among the Colossians when Paul wrote to them. They too were living hopeless lives according to the standards of the world until Paul pointed them once again to the hope of Jesus. Hear Paul's heart as he opens his letter to the churches in Colossae and Port Alberni.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. Colossians 1:1-2*

A few things to note here at the start. When Paul says, "*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God*" he is not pride fully establishing his authority over those in the church. Instead Paul is telling us that he did not make the decision to be an apostle, but that he was called and chosen by a sovereign God, set apart and empowered by Jesus Christ for the ministry of leading God's people through their struggle with sin and into obedient surrender to God's truth through this controversy in their church.

Paul then greets them – "*To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.*" The word "*saints*" here is literally "holy ones" meaning that God has not only set Paul apart from the world for His glorious purposes - but God has also set aside those in the church for that same reason. As the Lord called Paul to be an apostle, He also called and chose those in the church to be His chosen people. Paul normally uses the term "*saints*" when he is writing the churches, but here he also calls them "*faithful brothers.*" Here is the first hint of the struggles going on in the church at Colossae. Paul rarely ever addressed those in the church as "*faithful*" in his letters - but here he is exhorting them to remain faithful in the midst of their controversy and struggle. People were believing in strange theological ideas, believing in their own interpretations, and turning away from true biblical truth. But Paul encouraged them to remain "*faithful*" - consistent, humble and dependable. We see that further on in Colossians 1:10): "*So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*" and in Colossians 1:23: "*If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.*" Paul emphasizes this even further when he addresses those in the church as brothers and sisters "*in Christ at Colossae.*" The original Greek words here says, "in Christ" who are "IN Colossae" not "*at Colossae.*" Now that might not seem to be a big deal until we consider the implications of what Paul is trying to get at.

What Paul is saying is that just as the Colossians were living “*in Colossae*” as “*saints*” - as holy ones set apart for God - they are also to live first and foremost “*in*” Christ. *To live in Christ means* Jesus lives within us. *To live in Christ means* Christ encompasses our entire life: heart, mind, soul, and strength. *To live in Christ means* Jesus determines our behaviors and our priorities and our place in life. *To live in Christ means* we are inseparably joined to Jesus and no other. *To live in Christ means* we are joined also to a new family, an eternal family, a holy family, where there is no division. *To live in Christ means* we do not live in Port Alberni – but, brothers and sisters, we live in Christ. In Galatians 2:20 Paul writes: “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*”

Paul then writes: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*” Though corrective in nature, Paul intends his letter to the Colossians to also be a means of *God’s grace* to them, that they might see their error and repent and be joyfully be reconciled back to God. He also wishes them “*peace*” which is the traditional Hebrew word “*shalom*” which reflects harmony and wholeness with God and with one another. Notice Paul acknowledges that grace and peace cannot come about by human effort but “*from God our Father.*” The image we have here is grace and peace flowing into us from our most sovereign and merciful God. Paul is exhorting God’s people to seek God’s grace and God’s peace in times of controversy and struggle. In all situations and circumstances Jesus is our grace and our peace.

*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.* Colossians 1:3-5

Within these verses Paul brings forth the three crucial concepts which are foundational to life “*in Christ*” - faith, love and hope. He mentions these three crucial concepts often in his other letters. In 1 Corinthians 13:13 he says, “*So now faith, hope, and love abide in these three;.*” The apostle also writes in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3: “*We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This verse also reflects what we see in Colossians when Paul also says, “*We give thanks to God*” – thanking God for the faith and love who is the author and source of faith and love. “*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*” Paul is thankful for their faith in Jesus which has spilled over into their love for one another.

The faith he commends them for is “*faith in Christ Jesus.*” Not faith in a person or a program or a church, but faith “*in Christ Jesus.*” This is not a faith to be possessed or believed in but a faith which is to be a vibrant force of the Holy Spirit expressed in the way we live our lives. We read here, as we do throughout the Bible, that we are to live out our faith through a mutual love for one another - “*the love that you have for all the saints.*” Those who are “*in Christ*” are not united solely by their mutual interest in individual salvation – but also their mutual interest in being knit together by their mutual love for one another. In John 13:35 Jesus said, “*By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

In these words of God, spoken through Paul, we read that “*hope*” is the source, the foundation of faith and love. Colossians had faith and love because of what? Because of “*the hope laid up for (them) . . . in heaven.*” What makes this so interesting is that for some reason we have come to believe that hope is grounded in faith; in that we must have faith to have hope. But God’s Word here formulates it quite differently. God says that faith is grounded in hope, not the other way around. Hope is not so much of a personal expectation as it is an anticipated objective reality. Hope here refers to something hoped for – something that is *from outside of ourselves* - something that is “*laid up for you in heaven.*”

What is that “*hope*” - the anticipated objective reality laid up for us in heaven? Well Paul doesn’t specifically tell us here, but he does in Titus 2:13-14 when he speaks of “*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*” He also says in Colossians 3:4: “*When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*” In Colossians 1:27 Paul says it most clearly: “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

This is the reality of our hope - *the crucified and risen Christ living in us*. Jesus, the Son of God, in whom all things were created, the firstborn among the dead - living and breathing and at work in us. For those “*in Christ*” - whether in Colossae or in Port Alberni, this implies that we should be in a constant state of being changed and transformed into the image of God that we were created for, until the day we fully know and realize the power of the resurrection from the dead in our own lives. Our hope, the resurrection, eternal life after death which is “*laid up . . . in heaven*” – from outside of us – *should be at work within us* in Christ Jesus. And our hope, the resurrection, eternal life after death which is “*laid up . . . in heaven*” – from outside of us - will someday be fully realized when we die. Faith and love are rooted in the hope we have in Jesus - a hope both at *work within us* and *laid up in heaven*.

In John 14:1 Jesus proclaimed: “*Let not your hearts be troubled*” and Matthew 28:20 he declared: “*I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” That is the “*hope*” that is awakened by the truth of the gospel. It is the good news that right now, wherever we are in life, in whatever we are facing - in our moments of weakness, struggle, hopelessness, anger or despair - Jesus is the hope within us. His strength can be imparted to us, his wisdom granted to us, his presence given to strengthen us because Jesus came to earth and died on a cross, in our place, for our sins – so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. That is the hope of the gospel that awakens faith and love. Faith allows us to act upon hope. Faith means we believe that Jesus is with us. Faith steadies our spirits and strengthens our wills so that we are able to go on and take on whatever comes. In Christ we can then love despite whatever pain or struggle we are experiencing. We have all known what it means to have someone come alongside of us in a time of trouble. In Christ - that someone alongside us is the Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory Himself! Our hearts are not troubled - whatever comes our way - because Jesus is always *within us*.

Paul tells us we know this our hope because it is “*the word of truth, the gospel.*” The gospel is objective, it is real beyond our human understanding. The Christian apologist Dorothy Sayers once said, “The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable, but whether it is true.” Is the gospel of Jesus Christ true? Is the gospel of Jesus Christ real? Does “*the word of truth, the gospel*” do what it says it will do? That’s the test. And that’s greatest thing about the gospel. It’s true. It is real. It does change hearts. It does transform lives. It does deliver people. It does save people. And “*the word of truth, the gospel*” is still saving people. The apostle Paul affirms that, as he continues to write:

*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. Col 1:5-8*

“*The word of the truth, the gospel*” is true and real and effective because “*it is bearing fruit and increasing*” through “*the whole world.*” Just as a tree without fruit would no longer be a tree, so “*the word of truth, the gospel*” without fruit would no longer be “*the word of truth, the gospel.*” Many would argue in this age of individualistic entitlement and religious pluralism that “*the word of truth, the gospel*” of Jesus Christ has lost its ability to produce kingdom fruit. It seems that way because truth of today has become relative or pragmatic even to many who claim to be evangelical Christians. For many Christians biblical truth has been abdicated by personal opinion and individual preferences.

Professor Robert Wuthnow, who teaches sociology of religion at Princeton University has said that “spirituality is no longer true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along. I am the judge of its worth. If it helps me find a vacant parking place, I know I am on the right track. If it leads me into the wilderness calling me to face dangers I would rather not deal with at all, then it is a form of spirituality I am unlikely to choose.” Brothers and sisters, we must acknowledge that we live in a predominantly secular culture and we are under constant and powerful pressure to conform to the views and beliefs and values of the world we live in. And we, as a people of God, are fading fast when it comes to truth. *The church is not taking the world by storm because we are too much like the world.* But we must remember that Paul’s context was no less pluralistic and relativistic than the times we live in today. The problems and pressures we face in our society and culture are similar to the problems and pressures faced by the Colossians.

The Greeks and the Romans of Paul’s day were normally tolerant in their attitudes towards other religions. They could make room and accommodate for a mixture of numerous gods and goddesses because they believed in many gods and goddesses. But in even in that context those who were truly following Jesus Christ dramatically stood out. They were different because of their unswerving allegiance to one God and they were different by how they passionately and sacrificially they lived out their lives for Jesus. So they were persecuted for their rejection of worldliness and idolatry and they were rejected because they claimed exclusive truth in a culture that prized tolerance. Sound familiar?

The God Paul worshipped, the God you and I worship, is not subject to our opinions or human wills. He is not one god among many other gods. He is the One and only true God who acts in history, who acts in your life, who acts in my life, and who has acted distinctively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Son of God. Jesus is the only hope we have in a world of personal opinions and false gods. In Ephesians 1:11-12, the Word of God tells us, *“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”*

The greatest argument for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a new heart and a transformed life. In Christ we do not *search for truth, we start from truth.* If we are to produce fruit of faith and love, we must be thoroughly rooted the word of the truth, the gospel of the hope we have in the risen Lord Jesus. The hope we possess in Jesus Christ is our confident expectation that God will fulfill His promises, not our personal dreams. The truth is - the hope of salvation we know in Jesus Christ cannot be found *in this world.* A fallen humanity in a fallen world offers no hope. But the truth also is that the hope of salvation we know in Jesus Christ does not just lie *outside this world.* The truth is - the hope of salvation we know in Jesus Christ *lies within us for today* (Christ in us, the hope of glory) - is also a hope *beyond us into tomorrow* (the hope laid up for us in heaven). The hope we have in Jesus Christ is the power to live out our lives today, tomorrow and forever in spite of our situations or circumstances.

The situation and circumstances the Colossians faced were similar to ours today. They lived in a world that opposed and challenged and demeaned the hope of Jesus Christ. But the truth of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life. Jesus is our truth; Jesus is our hope. God has called and chosen and set us apart in this place at this time in history for a great and glorious purpose. This is our corner of the world to live out the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. God is with us in this. In our battle for the truth of the hope we have in Christ, God’s Word tells us in Ephesians 6:16-18: *“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”* Hebrews 4:12-13 also reminds us: *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*

Because God is who He is, God is at work here. Our God is a God of grace. Our God is a God of peace. Our God is the God of faith. Our God is a God of love. Our God is a God of truth. Our God is a God of hope. God sent His word of truth into a broken, fallen world through Jesus Christ, who died on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. He has set us apart to be faithful conduits His grace and His peace into the world we live in, a world that is full of war and division. He calls us today to take up the truth of the gospel, and through our faith in Christ, and by our love for one another in Christ - to live out the hope we have been promised in Jesus, constantly bearing fruit and increasing, for the glory of God.

About 20 years ago while I was on mission in the Philippines, I visited the Manila American Cemetery. The cemetery is 152 acres of gently rising ground set aside to memorialize the military dead who served during World War II in the South Pacific. The cemetery is laid out like a never-ending circle. 17,206 Italian marble crosses inscribed with names of the brave dead, crosses that stretch out in perfect circular rows. They come from every State in the Union from the United States, as well as from Panama, Guam, Philippines, Puerto Rico Australia, Canada, China, England, Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, Finland, Jamaica, Burma and Peru. In 20 cases, two brothers lie side by side.

As I passed by many of the stones, reading each name, I felt the weight of pain and emptiness of war overcome my spirit. I wondered how many loved ones have been able to visit the grave of those whom they lost - in this cemetery so far removed from the rest of the world. Yet as I prayed the hope of Christ lifted me above that cloud. *For on each grave there is a cross.* It is the cross that covers sin. It is the cross that gives hope of the Resurrection. It is the cross that promises new life. One day those brothers who are in Christ, who lay side by side in that cemetery, will rise together for all eternity. My prayer is that we who are alive will rise side by side today - because that is the hope we have in Jesus.

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.* Titus 2:11-14

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Galatians 2:20

*Christ in you, the hope of glory.* Colossians 1:27

2019-08-25

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