

Title: It's Thanksgiving Time!
Date: February 3, 2019
Subject: The interaction of hope, faith and love
Scripture: Colossians 1:1-8

Once upon a time there was a tiny town that had shrunk from its once important status as a center of commerce when the main trade route shifted to go through other cities. In this small town there was a small group of believers who met in a home. This was life in Colossae.

One man wrote, "Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed" (Bishop Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 16). Another asks, "Why would Paul write to this relatively insignificant church?" (Steven J. Cole, bible.org/seriespage/lesson-1-christ-flagstaff-colossians-11-2). He answers his own question, "This small town church had some big time doctrinal threats to its well-being. We can be thankful for this problem, because it prompted Paul to write this wonderful little letter that sets forth the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ more forcefully than in any of his other letters...Paul did not write Colossians as a theological treatise to be analyzed by scholars, but as a pastoral letter to be read and understood by common, small town people who were relatively young in their Christian faith. The most mature of these people were probably no more than five years old in the Lord! Since they were mostly Gentile (Col. 1:21, 27; 2:13; 3:5-7), they weren't coming from a biblical background."

READ Colossians 1:1-8

Though they're small Paul reminds them they have a lot going for them. They're holy, set apart by God as his. They're positionally righteous. They're also faithful, meaning they're steadfast, loyal and dependable to the ways of God. They didn't have mere belief. Paul will develop the emphasis on Christ as God, the sufficiency of his person and his sacrificial death that allows people to be united with God and other believers.

I. Christ followers are a cause for rejoicing vv. 3 – 8

A. The example of Paul. There's disagreement over whether Paul had ever been to Colossae or not. This is based on saying he and his team have heard about their faith and love in v. 4. Some conclude he hadn't been there. Others say the people he's referring to are new believers since his visit. Either way, the important matter is that he's thankful to the Lord for them. His thankfulness is expressed in his prayers to God. He interrupts himself by saying why he prays before he tells them how he prays.

It boils down to three central words of biblical Christianity—faith, love and hope. In 1 Corinthians Paul refers to them as the three attributes that remain. In 1 Thessalonians he links them in a similar prayer. "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2, 3).

Paul in the letter to the Colossians places hope on a different level than the other two as they flow from hope. One kind of hope is a response toward something that would be nice but the outcome is partly if not completely beyond our control or is left to chance. It's more of a wish. That's not the hope in these verses. It isn't a wish but a concrete item. It's a noun representing something that is certain.

For instance, if I say, "I hope Jean will make something good," that's not wishful thinking that maybe, someday, one of these days, she might finally be able to come up with something edible when I go home for supper. Rather it's a conviction based on previous and continued experience that she has prepared numerous delicious meals before and that future meals will prove the same.

The believers' hope is a certainty is based on God's word. Our hope is in heaven. It's the fulfillment of everything that's included in salvation. We've experienced some of the preparation down here. We can personalize our hope by saying our hope is the person of Jesus Christ.

The hope in heaven came from hearing the true message of the gospel. By calling it "the word of truth" the apostle signals the underlying note of danger. False teachings competed for the believers' attention to turn them from following the Lord. The nature of the false teaching in Colossae is uncertain. At least 44 different possibilities have been raised (Peter O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary, Colossians-Philemon*, p. xxxi). Douglas Moo concludes, "The false teachers were probably people from within the Colossian Christian community who were bragging about their ability to find ultimate spiritual "fulfillment" via their own program of visions and asceticism. This program was drawn partly from Judaism, particularly in its focus on rules about eating and observing certain days. They were preoccupied with spiritual beings, probably because they viewed them as powerful figures capable of having a significant influence on their lives... The false teachers were appealing to spiritual beings, visions, and rules to find security in this very uncertain universe. In doing so, they were questioning the sufficiency of Christ" (Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 59, 60).

They promise something deeper and fuller and richer and some secret special knowledge that people miss out on including alluring thoughts like worshipping angels. The false teachers might appeal to those who have ticklish ears and want to hear something appeals to their appetites. It probably was a little Christianity, a dash of Judaism, sprinkle in some Greek thought and a splash of paganism. Satan couldn't defeat Christ at the cross so he resorts to attacking the church with confusion and counterfeits. The believers may have become careless and laidback in their Christian lives which would make them easier targets.

Paul reminds believers that they had already understood the gospel of God's grace in all its truth. They understood that Jesus was the demonstration of God's grace. They understood that the demonstration was his death for them to pay the penalty of their sin and that they couldn't do anything in and of themselves to earn God's favor. They understood that God had communicated his word through the Word. The gospel is the truth. It gives hope. Because of this hope people have faith and love.

Faith is the vertical element as it relates to God. It's not the original kind of faith required to experience salvation. It's not the faith as in the collected body of truth. It's the fact of having a personal relationship with Christ and the life of faith, the living out of what Christ followers have since they've come to Christ.

Love is the horizontal expression of the relationship with Christ. It's responding to experiencing God's love by loving the saints, God's people, all of them. The people at Colossae expressed love to each other. The human type of love comes from having similar interests or from the desire for pleasure or from selfish motives. The love from the Holy Spirit crosses beyond human similarities and extends to those who are different, though there is the one major similarity of being a fellow brother and sister in the Lord.

B. People for us. I shared how one of Debbie Wellskopf's sisters-in-law felt about this church family. I shared at the annual meeting about a person from our Prayer Support Team who, in response to our outreaches to the community, has sent money. There's another family who used to be part of the church who also sends money but more importantly fondly recalls their days when they were here. After they first moved they said they were having a difficult time finding a church that was similar, one they could call home. International workers and guest speakers frequently comment about the depth of spiritual insight and the love they witness. Others who've visited when they've come to visit relatives in the community for the holidays have expressed delight that there's a gospel witness in the community. These are some of the ways people who aren't part of this body of Christ rejoice in this group because of our faith in Christ and love for each other.

I can add other ways faith and love are shown – faith through talking about Jesus to each other and those who don't know him as Savior, sharing insights in Bible studies or after services. Love through caring for those who grieve, giving financially for those who are in need, praying for one another.

We should thank the Lord for those things being present in the lives of others, of one another. The gospel has born fruit in our lives to salvation and transformation.

II. More good news v. 6

A. From Paul's time. He told his friends and fellow believers that the truth of the gospel is having an effect all around the world. It's producing fruit and growing. He'd personally witnessed this during his three missionary journeys through present day Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, Syria and Israel. He'd seen the power of God change lives - hardened Roman soldiers like the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31- 34), those steeped in religious ritual like synagogue rulers (Acts 18:8, Crispus), government leaders (Dionysius, Acts 17:34), people movements where large numbers came to Christ (Acts 17:4, Thessalonica; Acts 17:12, Berea), transformed lives in Ephesus where believers renounced their former sorcery and magic arts (Acts 19:17-20), people who were immoral, idolaters, homosexuals, adulterers, greedy, thieves, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers had come to Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-11), people able to withstand persecution and sustain them even as they're dying (Stephen, Acts 7).

He'd experienced it himself. You couldn't get more devoted and zealous than Paul was to being a Jew and Pharisee. And his hatred of Christ followers was off the charts. He gave his consent to the stoning of Stephen. He recounted his story, "I too was convinced that I ought to do all I could to oppose the name of

Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem. With authority from the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were condemned to death, I cast my vote against them. I frequently had them punished in the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme. In my raging fury against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them...I persecuted this Way even to the death, detaining both men and women and throwing them into prison” (Acts 26:9 – 11; 22:4). But he was changed into a new creation.

B. In our world. The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the world in our day. According to Operation World (operationworld.org/hidden/evangelical-growth) the top five countries for growth in the evangelical church are Greenland (8.4%), Cambodia (8.8%), Gambia (8.9%), Afghanistan (16.7%) and Iran (19.6%). The US is a measly .8%

Christian pollster George Barna would define evangelicals as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it’s based upon the Bible, and having a biblical view on six core beliefs--the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize.

The chief impact of the gospel is people coming to a relationship with Jesus, having their sins forgiven and granted a place in heaven. There’s further impact. Dinesh D'Souza wrote in his book *What's So Great About Christianity* "Christianity is responsible for the way our society is organized and for the way we currently live. So extensive is the Christian contribution to our laws, our economics, our politics, our arts, our calendar, our holidays, and our moral and cultural priorities that historian J. M. Roberts writes in *The Triumph of the West*, 'We could none of us today be what we are if a handful of Jews nearly two thousand years ago had not believed that they had known a great teacher, seen him crucified, dead, and buried, and then rise again.'...Christianity exalted heterosexual monogamous love, which would provide the basis for a lasting and exclusive relationship between husband and wife, oriented toward the rearing of children. We take the family so much for granted—it remains such a powerful ideal in our society, even when actual family life falls short— that we forget the central premises on which it is based. Those premises were introduced by Christianity into a society to which they were completely foreign... This Christian idea was the propelling force behind the campaign to end slavery, the movement for democracy and popular self-government, and also the successful attempt to articulate an international doctrine of human rights” (from faithfacts.org/christ-and-the-culture/the-impact-of-christianity).

The site I got this quote from traces how Christianity impacted the world, other than through salvation. They listed the impact on human life (human rights, women, children, slavery, gladiators, cannibalism), compassion and mercy, marriage and family, education, government of the people, science, free enterprise and the work ethic, art, music and literature. Those are some things to rejoice about and thank God for.

The book of Colossians, the message of God in Colossians is one of hope that comes from the word of truth the gospel. We live in a world where there are competing ideas of what to believe that attempt to draw people away from following Christ. May we filled with hope by the God of hope as we trust in Christ so that we overflow with hope that will strengthen our faith and love.