

GOOD NEWS

Series: Fullness in Freedom

by Steve Zeisler

For the next couple of months we will be studying the book of Colossians together. To begin with, I would like to ask you to think about the document as a whole. It is only six pages in my small Bible, not a very long piece of literature. But it is more than nineteen hundred years old, and yet it still retains its vitality and importance. The validity of its testimony is undimmed by the centuries.

Think about most of the paper that passes through our lives. We were recently issued recycling boxes here at PBC, because a high percentage of the communications that come through here are written on white paper that can be recycled. The fact that we are given waste baskets and recycling boxes is an acknowledgment that in this culture we do not expect the memos, letters, and other written communications we receive to last very long. If you are in a computer network, you may get electronic mail that never even becomes paper; you erase it periodically, and it never takes any permanent form at all. In the book of Colossians, however, we have a letter that was written to have a lasting impact on the people who read it, as indeed it has not only on them but on every generation since.

LASTING TRUTH

Our modern age is growing more and more concerned about the form documents take. With desktop publishing you can easily produce graphs, pictures, and colors to enhance the way your document looks. The ancients, on the other hand, were more concerned about the content of what they wrote than about the appearance. If you had received the original letter that Paul dictated and signed, or an early copy of it, it would probably have been written in cramped letters on parchment or papyrus. It was difficult to create writing materials, so they squeezed as much onto a sheet as they could. They didn't even leave spaces between words, but ran them all together. And when one of these letters was received, it was cherished because of what it had to say about a living God who cares for people.

The letter to the Colossians was written by the apostle Paul when he was in prison in Rome. The end of the book of Acts describes Paul under house arrest awaiting a trial in which his very life would be in the balance. It was at that time that he became concerned about word that a man named Epaphras had brought to him of some problems that were overtaking the Christians at the church in the city of Colossae. So Paul poured out his heart to them in this letter, urging them to stand firm and become aware of what was happening to them, strengthening them for the difficulties before them.

Again, all this is in contrast to so many of the communications that we receive today, isn't it? When the telephone rings at dinner time or when most of the mail comes, I find myself assuming that I have to defend myself from some intrusion. Someone wants to sell me something, persuade me to vote for somebody, or take a survey trying by their communication to gain an advantage for themselves. But Paul, the prisoner of the Lord, was giving his life away in writing this. The breath of the Spirit of God is in this letter (all Scripture is God-breathed, we're told in 2 Timothy 3:16). The Spirit stirred Paul to write this letter in his extremity to give away life to these people, most of whom he had never met.

The things God will say to us in this document are much more useful than other things we give our attention to. So as we begin this adventure together, I urge you to listen carefully and give all the effort you can to understanding what the Lord will say to us here.

IMPORTANT CREDENTIALS

Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1 are introductory:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Paul is a familiar figure to most of us. He was the great apostle to the Gentiles. Timothy is also a relatively familiar figure; he was an associate of Paul and a leader of the church in his own right. But instead of just giving their names, Paul says something very important about himself. He gives himself a title: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Now, Paul's letter to the Philippians was written about the same time as this one. If you turn to the introduction of that letter, you will see that Paul calls himself only a servant of Christ. He does not call attention to the fact of his apostleship. But he needed to do so in this letter because he was sending it into an environment where teachers who claimed to be of the Lord were infiltrating the young church at Colossae and attempting to bring deception and ruin to that church. So early in the letter he insists on his own credentials. An apostle was a "sent one," somebody who had received a commission from an authority. "I am an apostle of Jesus, the Messiah; I am one by the will of God; and you need to listen to what I have to say," is the implication of his words.

There were basically two dangers that concerned Paul, which we can discern in the rest of the letter. He wanted to defend these young Christians against what can be summed up briefly as sliding forward and falling backward. I will just introduce these problems for you, and then we'll talk more about them later. In chapter 2, verse 8 we read about the first danger, sliding forward:

FALSE PROMISES

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

And in verses 16-17:

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day---things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

He says, "Let no one take you captive," and, "Let no one act as your judge." He recognized that there were "captors" who had descended on these eager young Christians to take advantage of them. What they were offering them was a religious inner ring, if you will, that they could join. There was basic Jesus-centered Christianity, which was all well and good as a beginning point. Certainly it was better than where they had been, and it was probably good enough for ordinary people. "But you, O special person, are invited to join our advanced Christian group," they were saying. "We have special rites; we do secret things. We have knowledge that no one else has, and we look down on ordinary Christians." In the knowledge, philosophy, special training, secret rites, and activities they would get to do together, the deceivers were beckoning these young Christians to have more than ordinary folks had. They were offering "new and improved" Christianity the way that ordinary detergent, which always got your clothes perfectly clean, is no longer good enough; now you need "new and improved" detergent. Or in the same way, just about the time you figure out how to use your computer program, they come out with some advanced version of it that you have to buy even though you will never use all the extra "bells and whistles."

That psychology is used everywhere-in religion as well as in advertising. The appeal was, "You are stalled in your Christian life. It has become routine, and the spark is gone. Come join us-we have extra knowledge, and we talk to angels [angel worship was a part of this]. Get advanced Christianity with wonderful inner-ring, pride-motivated opportunities for you." And Paul says, "Don't let anyone take you captive by that, because every advance from this Jesus-centered Christianity you started with diminishes Christ! It is a great foolishness, a captivity, and a loss. Don't listen to it."

STANDING FIRM

We'll encounter the other problem, falling backward, when we get to chapter 3. Look at verse 9 for a moment:

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him....

The danger was that they would slip backward into worldliness. Paul was saying, "You have laid aside the old self-don't take up again the life that was characterized by lust, immorality, dishonesty, love of money, competition, self-aggrandizement, and all that you were before you met the Savior. Don't fall backward into worldliness." That is always a temptation, isn't it?

As Paul mentions in his introduction, verses 1 and 2 of chapter one, they were "saints and faithful brethren," good, honest Christians who care about the Lord, who are not stiff-necked, angry, or rebellious. Yet, they were experiencing both a pull toward secret, inner-ring, advanced, pride-filled religion, and a pull from the old life with all its allurements and temptations. Paul was writing to defend these young saints and faithful brethren at Colossae against these problems, and that is why he needed to insist upon his authority to speak.

We are also given in the introduction to this letter both a heavenly and an earthly geography. They are at Colossae, and they are in Christ. It is actually the same preposition in Greek: "In Colossae...in Christ." Every Christian has two geography's. First, you are the resident of a city and the citizen of a nation. You have responsibilities on your block, in your company, where you go to school, and in your family. You have a world environment where the Lord has placed you in which you are to be responsible. These people were in Colossae, a city about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. Yet, secondly, they were in Christ, and they had an eternal reality that did not change. So we find ourselves needing to be faithful in both respects. We are not to forget the world we live, in nor are we to forget who we are in Christ.

The church at Colossae almost certainly came into being through the ministry of a man named Epaphras. Verse 7 of chapter 1 says, "...just as you learned [the gospel] from Epaphras...." If you read about the history of the New Testament church in Acts, you realize that Paul spent a long time in Ephesus as a Bible teacher. He rented a hall, and hour after hour six days a week, he taught anyone who would listen about Jesus Christ. He captivated the Jews by explaining the gospel from the Old Testament. And he spoke in the language of the Greeks from their world view and explained how Christ was the Savior of the world. As he taught, people would learn and be disciples, and then they would go back to their cities and regions. It says in Acts 19:9-10 that all the Jews and Greeks in the entire province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. That didn't happen because Paul went out to them, but because he stayed in Ephesus and taught, and the people who heard the message went out and founded these churches. That is almost certainly the way the church in Colossae originated.

WORDS OF COMMENDATION

Let's move on to verses 3-8, which begin the body of the letter:

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

Paul, as he frequently does after the introduction in his letters, speaks a word of commendation and records a prayer for those to whom he is writing. He says, "We give thanks to God [this letter is filled with thankfulness]...praying always for you...." Now, the paragraph after the one we just read, beginning with verse 9, will actually record Paul's prayer. It is a magnificent prayer, one of the great prayers of the New Testament. In it he teaches anyone who will listen how to pray. But in the phrase "praying always for you," he gets stopped before he records the prayer, and he wants to talk about the "you," his readers, for a moment. Again, most of these were not people that he knew very well. Presumably he had never been to this church. So he wants them to know what conclusions he has drawn from the things he has heard about them. The two things he has heard about are their faith in Christ Jesus and the love they have for all the saints. Now, faith and love, as well as hope, grace, truth, and gospel, are all familiar religious words, but it is wonderful how the apostle packs them together in these verses, how he sees them related to one another. We can find very helpful instruction just by listening carefully to the way he uses the language.

"We heard of your faith...and the love you have...." What that means is that those things were describable. If real faith existed, it would issue in action that could be described; and so Epaphras could tell Paul of all the great faithful activities of the Colossian church. If real love existed, it too would issue in action; love would change lives, reach out, and express itself. But he is saying, "If this faith and this love exist, it must be because your life has been overtaken by real hope, the hope laid up for you in heaven. And if hope exists, the conclusion I draw naturally from that is that you have heard the gospel, because the gospel is the source of hope."

Paul's drawing conclusions this way is a bit like an insightful person who watches the Olympics and sees some magnificent gymnast doing all kinds of vaulting, twirling around in the air, landing perfectly, and so on. They then turn and say, "That gymnast was trained by such-and-such a coach, because I can see the mark of that coaching in how she acts." They are led to their conclusion by what they observe.

Again, if you walk into a home that is filled with joy, love, harmony, laughter, peace, and community, you can conclude from making these observations that these people have made a lot of tough decisions over a long period of time. Harmonious, loving, peaceful homes do not happen instantaneously. They develop through a long process of learning to trust Christ, give up your rights, submit to one another, and care about one another. When you see such a home, you can draw these conclusions about the people. That is the kind of thing Paul is saying here. He is teaching these people to think about themselves the way he thinks of them.

FAITH AND LOVE

Now let's look at these words in a little more detail. First, faith is trusting something that you cannot see and cannot measure. To have faith means to act, to bet your life in effect, on things that are unseen.

If you find courage, confidence, and buoyancy in people, or perhaps someone who seems unnaturally uplifted in the midst of death and difficult circumstances, then you should realize they are trusting something they can't see. If you know someone whose life has been ruined by some horrible addiction or dominating habit year after year, and you observe that person one day after another walking as a free man or woman, you might begin to conclude that what had gone on for so long without help is now being changed because they are trusting in something unseen at work. When you see someone forgive an unfaithful spouse, or someone rejoice and trust in God even when a dear one has died or has fallen ill, you are encountering faith. It is in this sense that Paul has heard of the faith of the Colossians. Epaphras was able to describe it to him in these terms.

Hebrews 11 gives a wonderful description of men and women of faith in the Bible. Let me just read verses 32-34: "And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...." These all acted in faith.

The second thing that Paul says is observable is love, and he qualifies that: "the love which you have for all the saints." That is, everybody in the circle was loved, not just the attractive people or the socially glib who easily made conversation, those whom everybody liked to be around. The shy, awkward, and backward people were

loved. One of the great stories in the New Testament is the story of how Philemon and Onesimus, a master and a slave in this very community (the Lychus Valley-Colossae, Laodicea, and other cities) became brothers in Christ. There was no distinction between rich and poor or between the classes in society. There were no outcasts, whether those with criminal records, the diseased, etc. In the church in Colossae, all the saints were welcomed with love, and it became a mark of the church that Epaphras could describe to Paul. Paul was encouraged by what he heard of their love. And he says, "I know that if faith and love exist as they do, then you are people who have founded your life on hope. I can't conclude anything else."

A CERTAIN FUTURE

Hope is another magnificent biblical term. It is essentially being absolutely sure of occurrences that have not yet taken place. They are in the future, but having hope, I see them so clearly, I am so confident of them that everything that is true of me now is influenced by what I know is coming: "hope laid up for you in heaven." I am destined for eternal union with Christ, intimacy with Him. I am destined with certainty to be part of a fellowship of brothers and sisters that will go on forever. I am destined to have a body that is not going to keep breaking down, falling apart, and growing ill; an eternal body that will respond to the eternal spirit that is mine. These are all certainties, and it is because I know them that I am secure in the present. I can live a life that isn't filled with desperation for the moment. Because there is hope, my life can be filled with Christ and can therefore exhibit both faith and love.

In this life there are things that bewilder us, for which we have no answers. There are honorable people who are treated with dishonor, rights that are denied. Yet we know that all of these things will be reversed in eternity. There is hope laid up for us in heaven that cannot be taken away from us, and what bewilders us now will be answered someday. I do not need to have the answers at the moment because I know I will have the answers then. I am certain of it. It is the glorious influence of hope that makes a life of faith and love possible. One of the greatest securities that we can have is an answer to the word that comes to us over and over again in temptation: If you don't have it now, you never will; or if you don't scratch, claw, insist, demand, defend, and compete, you will never have what you don't have now. As Christians we live a life based on the certainty that we will have everything someday, and what we have now is of relatively little consequence.

In telling the story of some children who went to Narnia, C.S. Lewis did a wonderful job of capturing a bit of what hope is about in the Bible. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, four children go to Narnia and become kings and queens there. They are the great historical figures in Narnia, but they return to this world and grow up to be adults. In their adulthood, three of the four recall that they are kings and queens in Narnia, that there is another place where they are given all honor and authority, where their lives are filled with joy, beauty, accomplishment, and friendship. Whatever else is true in this life, that is who they are. But Susan, by the time she is an adult, can't remember. It was just a children's story for her; she is overtaken by "the things of this world." Lewis is trying to tell us something in this. We can live lives in which we are kings and queens, and we know it and are defended by that knowledge. We haven't seen it happen yet, but it will happen for sure. Or we can live lives in which that becomes a story that fades in its importance, and this world looms larger and larger.

GOSPEL TRUTH

Paul says, "I observe faith and love. I conclude hope, and if hope exists it can come from only one place: the gospel. He says in verse 5, "The hope that has overtaken you, which is laid up for you in heaven, comes from the word of truth. You heard of it in the gospel, which has also come to you, just as it has in the whole world, constantly bearing fruit and increasing as it has been doing in you since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras." Paul says a lot here, and we are not going to be able to spend much time on it, so I invite you to do some thinking on your own. But this gospel is the source of hope. You heard of it and were transformed by what you heard. There is good news about God who became human, died on the cross, paid the price for our sins, was raised again to life, with whom we can be united, and whose righteousness is imputed to us. There is information that, if you believe it, is life-changing and hope-producing!

Paul also says, importantly, that the gospel is true. It is not just a great story, but "the word of truth." And two

verses farther on he says, "You learned the grace of God in truth." God's gracious concern for us will not change. It is not based on anything we do; it pours out from his heart. The message of the gospel is a gracious message-but be certain also that it is true. You can believe something that might be uplifting for the moment, for instance, reincarnation: "If I mess up this life, I'll get another chance, or another ten thousand chances, or however many it takes. That is kind of encouraging, so I'm hopeful." You could choose to believe that---but it isn't true. The word of truth is the gospel about Jesus, a sure foundation for our faith and a dynamic message that grows, produces fruit, and changes lives. It is "the power of God for salvation," as Paul says in Romans 1:16.

Paul says it is going out into all the world. It isn't just for some people; it's for everybody. You will remember that these Colossians deceivers were in the business of isolating people and inviting pride, and Paul cuts away at that at the beginning.

Lastly, we will do well to note that Paul identifies a spokesman of the gospel: "...you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf." Epaphras brought news both ways: He informed Paul and Timothy of the Colossians' love in the Spirit, but he was also the one who originally came to the Colossians with the gospel. Paul says he is worth listening to. Now, remember verse 1 where Paul said, "I am an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. I am one you should listen to. And I nominate Epaphras as one you should listen to. He is my faithful fellow servant. He will tell you what is true."

There are voices that claim to speak for Christ that are liars, perhaps deceived themselves, and deceiving others. There are any number of sources that are going to attempt to remake Christianity, bring it up-to-date, and do all kinds of other wrenching of the truth into some other form. But the Scriptures, overseen by those whom Jesus named as apostles, is where we go for truth that can be trusted. So Paul is saying, "The gospel message, which is true, life-giving, and for everybody, has a particular channel, the Scriptures, through which it can be learned. And when it is understood, it bears hope in the heart, and when a heart has been overtaken by hope, the life that surrounds that heart becomes faithful and loving. You can look at the evidence and conclude everything else that must be true about it."

Now, as I said, Paul will go on to record in the verses to follow what he will pray for people of whom he has concluded these things. We will learn of his prayer next week.

Every verse, every book, and every section of the Bible is centered on Jesus Christ. But if there is a book that is supremely centered on the person and work of Christ, it is this book of Colossians. It returns time and again to the greatness of Jesus Christ, to his sufficiency. We need nothing else, and indeed there is no other place to go. If you started the Christian faith with Jesus-centered Christianity, that is all you will ever need. There is no advance on that. Every voice that beckons us into some deeper, fuller, newer, expanded, modified, secretive experience of the Christian faith is a lie. Jesus Christ made the claim that he is at the center of the Christian faith. And if we are tempted to fall back into the world and all its pleasures and promises, the centrality of Christ is our answer to that as well. This is a wonderful book in which, as we will see, our Lord is given the highest possible place. It is a book that will encourage us.

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