

A Hope that Transforms

I read this quote recently:

The choice for the church in every age will always be, will our identity be shaped by Scripture or by our culture—by the biblical story or the cultural story?

(<https://ecclesiahouston.org/liturgy/2019/11/3/gospel-church-culture-newbiggin>)

And what is true for the church is true for us as individual believers as well. Will our identity be shaped by Scripture or by our culture? Our cultural story tells us that everything is relative and that there isn't one truth that stands above all others. They are all valid. They all have equal weight. Our cultural story tells us that truth is something we get to decide for ourselves. In fact, our cultural story tells us that we are intolerant for thinking that Jesus is unique and the one way to God. And so over time as we are exposed to the "drip, drip, drip" of this kind of thinking, it can erode our confidence in the Scriptures. It can disorient us, and we become confused regarding how we should think about our faith, about Jesus, about salvation, and about how we are to live in this world.

What is shaping you? The Scripture or our culture? The biblical story or the cultural story? Make no mistake, each and every one of us is being shaped. What is it that shaping you?

Starting today and through the summer we are going to study the book of Colossians, which is incredibly relevant for our day. In this letter Paul lays out a strong argument for what **MUST** shape us – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul will articulate that there is only one source of truth, and that source is not you, or me; it certainly isn't our culture. It is Jesus Christ. In this letter, Paul focuses on the person, the work, and the benefits of Christ, helping us get clear so that we stand strong in what we believe, and so that we understand how we are to live in this world.

Today, we are going to look at the first 8 verses, but before we do, I want to give you some brief background information. Paul writes this letter from prison, most likely during the time he was imprisoned in Rome. The letter is to the believers in Colossae, which was a town located in what is now modern-day Turkey some 100 miles south and east of Ephesus. Acts 19:10 tells us that during Paul's ministry in Ephesus that "*all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*" And so, though Paul didn't personally establish the church at Colossae, it likely happened as the gospel spread out from his ministry in Ephesus. Most scholars believe that Epaphras, a native of Colossae, encountered the gospel through Paul's ministry and then brought it back to Colossae as well the nearby towns of Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13).

Now, at some point Epaphras goes to Paul at Rome and informs him about these churches he had started. Certainly, there was much that was encouraging, however, he also brought news of some kind of false teaching that was making inroads and seeking to shape the Colossians. Scholars don't agree completely on the nature of this teaching, but what is clear is that it undermined

the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. It was a teaching that suggested they needed more than Jesus.

And so Paul wrote this letter to confront this false teaching and to keep the Colossians firmly rooted in Christ. He wrote this letter so the Colossians would understand that they have everything in Christ. The relevance of this letter is the same for us today. It can help us stay rooted in Christ. It can help us understand that we have everything in Christ.

And so with that quick bit of background, let's look at the first 8 verses, where Paul talks about a hope that transforms – a hope that arises from the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a letter and so he begins with a greeting.

I. Paul's Greeting (1:1-2)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

Paul writes *an apostle of Christ Jesus*. He is not just offering one man's best advice or insightful opinions. He is called to speak as Christ's representative *by the will of God*, and as such his words are authoritative not only in the day he wrote, but for us as well. The greeting is also from Timothy, one of Paul's disciples who accompanied him on his missionary journeys. Paul writes . . .

*² To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ who are at Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

And so, Paul identifies his recipients. They are located *at Colossae*. Paul calls them *saints*, which is not a statement about their moral achievements. In our day this word is used to refer to someone who is really good; who does really good things, right? That's not how Paul uses it. It is a statement of their status before God in Christ. They are God's holy people. They belong to Christ's kingdom. Paul applies this term to all who believe in Christ. It is YOUR status if you believe in Jesus!

Paul also calls them *faithful brothers and sisters in Christ*. This is not just a random gathering of people, or community organization. In Christ, they are brothers and sisters. They are a family. The report that he has heard has informed him that they are faithful to the gospel they have received. Yes, there is this threat of false teaching that Paul is going to address, but here he affirms their faithfulness, and he expresses his desire that they would experience *grace* and *peace* from the Father.

Now, as we come to verse three, Paul first expresses thanks to God for the Colossians in verses 3-8, and then he prays for them in verses 9-14. It is a section that all hangs together, but today we are only going to look at the thanksgiving portion where Paul gives thanks to God for the Colossians faith and love that is born out of the gospel's work in their lives.

II. Thanksgiving for the Colossians' Faith and Love Born out of the Hope of the Gospel (1:3-8)

³ *We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints;*

Remember, Paul had not personally met them and yet he prayed for them consistently and regularly. This challenges me as one who can struggle at times to pray consistently for the important people in my life that I do know. But not Paul. He prayed and when he did, his heart was filled with thanksgiving to God for what the gospel had done in their lives.

Paul had prayed for them *since* [they] *heard* the report from Epaphras. Epaphras had come and reported about the Colossians *faith in Christ Jesus and the love which* [they had] *for all the saints*. Paul's passion was to see the gospel spread and to take root in the lives of those who believed. And that is exactly what was happening in the lives of the Colossians. They had *faith in Christ Jesus*. And so Paul gives thanks for their faith, which is evidence of God's work in them.

He also gives thanks because of their *love* for one another. Obviously, love is such an important quality in a Christ follower. It is a mark of maturity. It is evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in a person's life. Later in Colossians, Paul will call love the perfect bond of unity (3:14). They had *love for all the saints*. And so Paul's heart is filled with thanksgiving to God for this good report he hears about the Colossian's faith and love.

As many of you know, Cindy and I lived and ministered in Hungary back in the mid-90s. One of the guys I spent a lot of time with was Ferenc. Over the years, we've traded emails from time to time, but when Covid hit and Zoom became a thing, we decided that we should Zoom once in a while. And so we've done that a couple of times over the past two years. In fact, I chatted with him on Zoom a week ago. As you might know, Hungary is just west of Ukraine. And so we talked about how that was affecting them. We also talked about some other challenging things that they are facing in Hungary. Eventually, at some point, Ferenc said something about his faith in Jesus and the hope that he find in Christ. For me, after all these years, to hear of Feri's continued faith in Jesus it filled my heart with gratitude to God. That's what Paul is feeling – thanksgiving for a good report on people he cares about.

Now, as we come to verse 5, Paul talks about the source of their faith and love. He says . . .

⁵ *because of the hope reserved for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel*

The faith and the love that they were expressing grew out of the *hope* of the gospel. It is *because of the hope*, that they had faith in Christ and love for all the saints.

At times, when Paul talks about *hope* it can mean an attitude of hope (e.g., Rom. 4:18), but here he is speaking the object of the Colossians' hope. He says specifically that it is *the hope reserved*

for you in heaven. It is already theirs; Paul says it is *reserved for you in heaven.* God is the one who reserves it. But they will only experience the fullness of this hope in the life to come (Titus 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:4).

Now, Paul gets really clear that the content of this *hope* is what they had *previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel.* Paul is referring to when the gospel came to Colossae through the ministry of Epaphras. Paul calls the gospel, *the word of truth,* which means that is reliable. It can be depended upon. This will be important later as Paul begins to engage the false teaching that they were being exposed to.

Now, this gospel, the source of their hope, becomes the focus in the remainder of our passage. Paul goes on to highlight the transforming power of the gospel.

III. The Transforming Power of the Gospel (vv. 6-8)

And so, Paul writes that the gospel . . .

⁶ which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth;

Paul says that the gospel was *bearing fruit and increasing.* It was doing this in the lives of the Colossians *since the day* [they] *heard it.* The moment they understood and believed the gospel of Christ it began to change their lives. But it didn't just do this in Colossae, it was doing this *in all the world.* Paul is making the point that the gospel is powerful everywhere it goes. It transforms.

That the gospel doesn't just work in some contexts, but not in others, points to the truth of the gospel. And this is important in a context where the Colossians were being tempted to look for something beyond Christ for ultimate spiritual fulfillment and growth. Paul declares that it is not needed. Everything is found in Christ.

And this is important for us as well. Our culture offers us all sorts of things outside of the gospel as the "real answer" to spiritual fulfillment and growth, for where you can find peace, and joy. And we can be tempted to pursue some of those things. But the hope found in the gospel is what transforms. We have everything in Christ.

Paul summarizes this powerful, transforming gospel, by calling it *grace.* From first to last, it is grace. We can't earn it. We simply believe. And the Colossians had believed. They had truly believed this message of *grace,* and when they did it begin its transforming, fruit-bearing work, in their lives.

Finally, in this expression of thanksgiving, Paul talks about the role of Epaphras.

⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

It was from Epaphras that they Colossians *learned* about the gospel of grace. And it was Epaphras who had now carried a message back to Paul in prison about Colossians and how they were doing as well as this threat that they were facing.

And so, Paul gives thanks to God for the Colossians. They had learned the gospel from Epaphras, they had believed, and from the moment they did, the gospel began a powerful work in their lives. The message of the gospel articulated a hope that gave rise to faith and love in the Colossians.

When we consider the flow of Paul's thoughts here, his focus really is on the gospel. He writes this letter because Epaphras has brought word of some kind of false teaching that is tempting them to think that they might need something beyond Christ. Something more. But Paul's point in this letter is that they find everything in Christ. Nothing else is needed. The gospel is what transforms. We see that here in this prayer and Paul is going to flesh out throughout this amazing letter.

And so I'm not going to get real specific in thinking about application today. But here is the main think I want to ask. As we begin this series, ask God to give you a deep understanding and a settled conviction that you have everything in Christ. Pray that in these weeks that you will be able to immerse yourselves in the gospel and that it will truly become the final authority in your life in all matters. Ask God that the Scripture, not our culture, will be the thing that is shaping how you think and live. Ask that God would help you be firmly rooted in this gospel that transforms.