

Introduction

Last week we laid the foundation for the Book of Colossians. We were introduced to the major characters: Paul, and apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ (the author) and the faithful brothers and sisters of Colossae (the recipients). I told you that Paul was going to bring forward the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in a way that was going to rock their little first century Roman empire world, as well as our twenty-first century American idealism. Well, it doesn't take Paul long. We got a ton to cover today, and I had a few shots of espresso this morning, so let's jump in. **Colossians 1.3-8:**

*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.*

Paul continues his letter with a prayer of Thanksgiving. This is another element that we see in all of His letters. He thanks God for an element of grace that he sees in those he is writing to. He thanks God for what God is doing in the midst of the Colossian church. As he commends the people for their faithfulness, he continues to point back to God as the author of that faithfulness. Paul is relentless at this. Even when he is complimenting people, it seems like almost a backwards compliment as he says: good job guys, but remember you have little to nothing to do with it.

Paul is thanking God for virtues that he has heard of. As we said last week, Paul did not plant the church of Colossae, and as we will see as we proceed further in this book, he had probably never visited it either. His knowledge of them comes from Epaphrus, the leader of the church who is in prison with Paul in Rome. It is most likely from this relationship with Epaphras that Paul gains both a knowledge, but also a love and appreciation for these faithful Christians.

He thanks God specifically the fruit that is making itself known among them: *your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love that you have for all of the saints*. These are the results of the gospel taking root in the heart of a person. These two, faith and love, are the natural response of person who has seen Jesus.

The Fruits of the Gospel

Faith in Christ Jesus

Faith is a difficult concept in our world today. It is difficult because we often talk of faith, without really having a vague concept as to what it is. Faith as an idea has been hijacked and redefined as some outside of ourselves mystical, mysterious, completely irrational thing. and while there are aspects of faith that are miraculous, beyond our knowledge, and counter to our immediate wisdom, faith is bound directly to knowledge. Faith, as a matter of fact is impossible without knowledge.

And so we all have faith. Faith is not something that is reserved for a select few. The question is: in what does your faith lie? And when I ask that, the majority of you would tell me what you know you are supposed to say, Jesus. But the real answer is not in what you think that you are supposed to have faith in, but what things in your life are you actually confident about?

I'll give an example: when you throw something up in the air, what do you expect to happen. It will come down. And why does it come down. Gravity. And we know this because of Empirical evidence. We have thrown enough things up

in the air, studied them, and seen that they come down. What controls this? Here is where we find out where faith really is. For most of us, the laws of the universe, specifically the rules of gravity, are what cause that to happen. However, the Bible seems to say that God is in control of all things that happen. So which is it? Is gravity an act of God or the results of a system?

Or another way to ask the question: does your faith rest in the system that you can observe, or in the God that created that system in the first place? Most of the time, I think we would have to admit that we have much more faith in truth as we humans define it, than in the God who is truth. And this is not just in the realm of science; try:

1. ethics: the Bible says not to lie, but you can't succeed in this job if you don't bend the rules a bit.
2. fulfillment: God tells us that He is the only thing that will satisfy, but He would still want me to be happy, so...
3. marriage: you can't really know if marriage is going to work unless you move in together for a while and give it a test run.

In other words, do you actually have faith in God, that He knows what is best, that He loves you, and that he is in control, even as your day to day life gives you plenty of other options to trust in.

Now, you might be thinking: You said the Faith was based on knowledge, but then told us that it was wrong to trust what we know. Because I did kind of say that. Let me be clear, faith is always based on knowledge; the question is where does knowledge come from? Proverbs 1 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. It tells us that knowing God, is the beginning of knowing anything. The Gospel of Jesus Christ shows us who God is. The Gospel reveals to us the mystery that was hidden for ages. The Gospel gives us the knowledge necessary for faith. The knowledge that we can not attain apart from God.

Faith is a response to knowledge that is given to us by God. It is a confidence built out of seeing and savoring Jesus Christ. Faith is not blind, it is built on a strong foundation...a foundation that allows us to trust and have peace in the times when we don't have answers; when we don't understand what is going on. Faith is not just a statement of beliefs that one recites, it is how those beliefs root themselves in your life. The fact that Paul is mentioning it means that their faith made itself known. It changed the way that they lived.

Love for the Saints

One of the most distinct ways that the Gospel changes us is in our love for one another.

Christian faith and love go hand and hand, because it is impossible to experience the gospel and not respond in love. The Gospel shows us what love is. It shows us how we have been loved. It gives us the ability to put aside our personal desires and put on Christ.

What is the Gospel

Up to this point we have seen the fruit of the Gospel, but we have still not really defined what it is. We have seen that the gospel will lead to a bold faith and a selfless love, but it is difficult to imagine how anything could cause that sort of change. What could be so powerful as to make everything else pale in comparison? Paul tells us:

*because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven.*

Paul tells us that this faith and love exist because of the HOPE laid up in heaven. Christians have an assurance of eternal life. God has promised us that we are given life everlasting as an inheritance. But it is not just the living forever that we have to look forward to. Everyone is going to live forever, the question is where. The first three rules of real estate are location, location, location. But God's

people will be forever in the presence of Jesus Christ. Our joy and hope rest in the fact that Jesus is our future.

But the fact that we will receive something some day is not the reason what causes change. If I told you that in five years I will give you 1 million dollars, how would that change the way that you live? Would it make you more loving? NO. It would probably just make you spend money much more freely. The hope that we have is not just a hope for the future. The hope that we have can not be separated from what it took to secure it. The gospel promises a future, but the gospel is intimately tied to events of the past. Our hope is not just in what it is to come, but in what happened 2000 years ago in the Middle East. Our hope is in He who acted to bring us hope.

Our hope comes from the fact that God came to earth. Jesus, fully God and fully man, came down from heaven to bring about the clearest description of God's character.

Jesus lived perfectly. He was without sin. He was tempted in every way that we are, but he chose to submit, fully in every moment of His life, to God the Father. He gave up the earthly pleasures that we dive into. He fully trusted in God's faithful plan. He had FAITH, a confidence that led Him to put all of His chips in. He did not hold anything back.

This innocent man was put to death. He was killed because He told the people that He was God. But even moreso, because the way that He lived: the healings, the truth that He spoke, and His character in general, led people to believe that it was true. He was killed by religious leaders who were afraid that He was going to take their power. And so they beat Him, and mocked Him, and killed Him. Jesus died on the cross.

Three days later, He walked out of His tomb. Jesus, God in human flesh, showed that He was not bound by the rules of the system that He had created. He is above it. He is the controller of it. and so after spending a bit more time on earth giving witness to his resurrection, he returned to heaven, to sit on His throne, and to prepare a place for His people.

This is the hope that is laid up for us in heaven. That Jesus is the propitiation for us. He acted as a sacrifice, taking upon Himself all of our guilt and shame, and through His death, relieved the punishment. We are made innocent, because He took all of our sin and died as our substitute. Someone needed to suffer, and Jesus stepped up and said, I'll do it, so that you don't have to. As **Galatians 3.13** tells us:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

So we are made blameless, but the gospel is not just about bringing us back to zero. We are also given Jesus righteousness. This is called imputed righteousness. We receive from Jesus, a piece of His glory. He shares with us the blessings that He earned. And when God look on the life of a Christian in judgment, he no longer sees your works, He sees the perfect life of Jesus.

Romans 5.19-20 give us a picture of how the perfect life of Jesus becomes our righteousness:

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

How the Gospel works

This is the gospel. This is the work of Jesus Christ to change us from enemies of Him into adopted sons and daughters. This trade: our dirty, sinful life, for His perfect, righteous sacrifice is amazing. But it is not the end of the gospel's work. The gospel is not something for us to get so that we can bury it in the ground to keep it safe. It is living and moving and continues to work. As Paul goes on to encourage the Colossians:

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

They have heard the gospel, but that does not mean that they do not need to hear it again, or that it is done working in them. As Paul says, 'it is bearing fruit and increasing.' IT is working. This is important in a culture of spin. In our life, we attribute actual power to very few things. Their power is limited to whether or not it can be sold. Even good things go out of popularity, fade in significance, and lose their influence. They are only as good as their public relations department. And it can become easy for us to measure the gospel in the same way. To believe that we have to have the perfect method, be a perfect presenter, or that it is somehow up to us to make the gospel relevant strips from the gospel the power that it has in itself. The simple story of a God who comes down to live, die, and raise for His people has been changing people for thousands of years, it is not up to us to make it more. It is, and always has been, bearing fruit and increasing.

And it is bearing fruit and increasing in two different ways (laid out here):

1. in the whole world
2. among the believers

First, it continues to bear fruit and increase throughout the whole world. At the time of writing this, Paul is a great distance from Colossae. In his travels, he had gone around much of the known world, so he would be a pretty good measure of how the gospel was increasing. Paul would have been able to give an accurate report on the spread of the gospel. And we can say with some confidence that this spread has continued to occur. Because we are meeting right now in a church that is nowhere near Colossae or Rome. And it is interesting to look at the spread of the gospel throughout the world because it has occurred in a far different way than the spread of any other religion...and really anything else period.

If you look at how trends spread through our global entertainment world, you will see that they sweep into different cultures and destroy everything in their path. What I mean is, they simply replace something old, they do away with the old cultural norm in order to set up a new one. Think of movies as an example. As Hollywood has produced movies and sent them overseas, it has changed the culture that it has reached. It has brought American cultural ideals and style, replacing the distinct cultural history of nations with this forced style from another context. This is what happens when we attempt to import something that comes from another culture.

Religious advancement does not look much different. Think of what it looks like to be a Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist here in America. You can point them out in a crowd. The patterns, rituals, and aspects of the religion are very culture-centric. So much so that as a religion you have to adopt a culture along with it. Not so with Gospel Christianity (though many missionaries and crusaders have made this mistake in the past). Gospel Christianity is a Middle Eastern religion. And it looks very different there than it does here. And if you go to Africa, you will find a different pattern, different rituals, and style. If you go to India, you will find a different culture of Christianity. In China, the house church movement relates specifically to the fact that they were not allowed to assemble. And on and on.

Gospel Christianity bears fruit and increases in this manner because it works in and through people, not on people. It is not an institution that one must conform to, but a God who makes people His. And while the gospel changes us, it doesn't require to adopt a new culture, it changes us within the culture we already exist in. The gospel of Jesus Christ is multi-cultural, because it works on individuals who come from a variety of different contexts.

And this continual changing of the individual is the second way that the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing. Among the Colossians the gospel continues to work. This does not just mean that new converts are being added, but that since the day that they heard and understood the grace of God, they have continued to be shaped by the gospel. It is growing their hope, strengthening their faith, and deepening their love. It is the same for us. The gospel is not simply a way to save us from hell and get us to heaven. It is a daily relationship with Jesus. Coming face to face with the truth of the Gospel continues to shape our wants and desires and make us more like Jesus Christ.

To see how this works, let's look at the fruit that Paul refers to here: love for the brothers. I said that love was a natural response to the Gospel. This is an offensive statement, because let's be honest, most of us don't feel like loving. We are Christians, so we have seen the gospel, but it did not naturally follow that we are ready to give up our rights and sacrifice for the good of others. But we know that good Christians are supposed to love. So simultaneously in us is a desire to love (because we want to follow God's law), but also not to love (because we don't want to give up what is necessary). How do we remedy this? This is where the gospel becomes the tool for sharpening us. 1 John 4 lays out clearly how this heart change is to occur:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us,

that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (7-11)

So in order to become more loving, we need to know God. It is out of a knowledge of God that we know what love is, and it is out of the knowledge of how He has loved us that we our desires are changed so that we will love others. It isn't natural and it doesn't happen all at once. It is the slow and painful process of Gospel Transformation, as we Jesus coming to earth, living, dying, and raising from the dead was God preaching a sermon on who He is. It was in Jesus Christ that the love of God was made manifest among us. This is how the Gospel changes us. It reveals to us the knowledge of God, giving us a basis for our faith and love, and a reason for hope.

If the way to grow and be fruitful is to know Jesus and place our hope firmly in him, than the best way to stagnate growth is to pursue knowledge somewhere else and place our hope in other things. And we could spend forever talking about all of the false hopes, but I could shoot down a hundred of them and you and I would just create new ones. Instead, I want to point you to the one hope that has power. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope that is able to bring about real change. The only knowledge that is able to grow us closer to God.

I pray that you believe that, and continually come back to the cross of Jesus Christ, recognizing that it holds all of the power to change. Both change you and change other people. I pray that you make it your life to recognize the changes that God is doing in you and proclaim with joy to others how the gospel has changed you from a self-serving sinner to a servant of the King. And then go back to the gospel so that it can do it again tomorrow.

