

The Gospel's Foundation: Hope, Truth, and Grace

Colossians 1:5-8

I. The Gospel's Eternal Foundation: A Hope Grounded in God's Word (1200 words)

Good afternoon church family,

Two months ago I unpacked the opening of this epistle, Paul and Timothy's greeting to "the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae," and the thanksgiving that follows it. You may remember that Paul had never stood in front of this congregation. He had never walked the streets of Colossae, and hadn't shook a single one of their hands. Everything he knew of them came by report, brought to him in prison, almost certainly by a man named Epaphras. And what he heard was enough to keep him and Timothy praying constantly, giving thanks to God the Father for "your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints" (v. 4).

That's where we left off. Verse 4 named two of the three virtues that Paul was thanking God for. Today's text supplies the third, and in doing so also points to where the first two virtues come from. Look at how verse 5 begins: "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven". Paul thanks God for their faith and their love *because of* the hope. As I said in my last sermon, faith looks backward to what God has done in Christ, love looks outward to our brothers and sisters, and hope looks forward to God's promised future. And two months ago I told you that biblical hope is not wishful thinking, but that we would have to wait until today to see why. Today is the day. Over these four verses, Paul traces that hope to its source, describes what it has already done in the world and in them, and names the man who brought it to them. So we'll take the passage in four points this afternoon: the hope's foundation, its fruit across the world, its power in our hearts, and its faithful delivery through Epaphras. I want to start where Paul starts though: with what has already been secured for the Colossians, and with what makes it certain.

Here is verse 5. The Colossians possess "the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel." The hope that they had, and that we have also, rests on one thing and one thing only: the permanence of God's Word. While all creation withers and fades, "the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8). That Word is the foundational for our confidence in Christ's redemptive purposes.

But let's slow down, we have to ask a question: what kind of hope is this? Because in ordinary speech, "I hope" is about the weakest verb I can think of. I hope the weather holds for the picnic. I hope the traffic clears on the drive home. I hope it works out in the end. That's the little word we use for things we want, but have absolutely no power to

make happen. Hope, the way we use it, is just wish. And if that's what Paul means, who cares!? A wish "laid up in heaven" doesn't comfort me, and it shouldn't comfort you. That is NOT what Paul is reaching for here.

The word he chooses shows us something far stronger. "Laid up" translates the Greek word *apokeimai*, which means "to keep something in reserve for someone", it means that something is destined for a particular person. This exact word shows up in two other places in the New Testament, and they give us a very clear picture. First, 2 Timothy 4:8, where Paul writes of himself: "henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing." Paul's crown is *apokeimai*, it's reserved, waiting, guaranteed to be there the moment he arrives. Second, Luke 19:20, the parable of the minas, where the lazy servant comes to his master and says, "Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief." That coin was *apokeimei* too, it was put away, on deposit, sitting right where he left it. So do you see what Paul is telling the Colossians? Your hope isn't a wish, or a mood you're in some days and not others; it is a deposit. It has been reserved in the kingdom of heaven, in a vault no thief could get close to cracking, guaranteed to be there when you arrive to claim it. We have a completely secure hope.

Do you hear our Shepherd's voice in all of this? "Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven" (Matt 6:19-20). Peter says the same thing from another angle: God "caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,".

Imperishable. Undefiled. Unfading. Reserved.

In my last sermon I quoted Hebrews 10:23: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." Now we can see why we can hold fast without wavering: what God has laid up, no one can touch.

Notice, second, where this hope came from, because it did not come from the Colossians. They did no work to attain it. They could do nothing to generate it. It came to them from the outside, through words preached to their ears: a hope of which "you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel" (v. 6). And here is one of the most relevant truths in this passage: the Christian hope is not a feeling. Some of us get downcast because we don't feel hopeful, and maybe we even begin to doubt our salvation because we don't have some warm religious feeling bubbling up inside. The Colossians had this hope the moment they heard it, not the moment they felt it. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17), and so does hope. The strength of your emotions is not what secures the deposit; the faithfulness of the God who made heaven and earth secures it. Your feelings rise and fall, the Word of the Lord stands forever.

And that brings us to the deepest foundation of all: “the word of truth, the gospel” (v. 5). Scripture makes a constant connection between the reliability of God’s Word and God’s creative power. “By the WORD OF YHWH the heavens were made... For He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it stood.” (Ps 33:6, 9, LSB). God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Gen 1:3). Do you realize what this means for the gospel? Just as God’s Word called light out of darkness, God speaks the Gospel, and it accomplishes what it announces. When the gospel declares, “Christ reigns,” Christ reigns. When God says to a dead heart, “be transformed,” that heart is transformed. The gospel is reliable to hope in because it is God’s Word, and God’s Word creates reality. Our culture has a cheap counterfeit to this: manifest it, speak it into existence, chase your best life. Only God’s Word creates what it says, and the good news is that He has spoken. The hope of the Colossians was exactly as permanent as the Word that carried it to them. And so is yours.

So this afternoon, when your hope wavers, do not go digging around inside yourself, measuring the strength of your feelings. Look to the deposit. Look to the Word. Rest in this: your hope is laid up in heaven, reserved by a faithful God, and carried to you by a Word that cannot fail. But church family, that brings us to our second point: this gospel “has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing” (v. 6).

II. The Gospel’s Unstoppable Fruitfulness Like Rain and Harvest (1200 words)

Church, do you remember the parable of the Minas? Remember the lazy servant in Luke 19 who wrapped his mina in that cloth and buried it, and that coin sat in the ground, completely useless. That’s the exact opposite of what God does with His Word. Look at those two verbs Paul uses. “Bearing fruit and multiplying (or increasing in the ESV)” (Col 1:6). As you can see in the English Paul is writing in the present tense, these are ongoing. The Gospel is bearing fruit and multiplying right now. Constantly! And Paul adds a detail not to be missed: the gospel has been doing this “among you, since the day you heard it” (Col 1:6). *Since the day!* Fruitfulness begins the moment the seed hits the soil. The gospel is in fact, a seed. And seeds do what seeds do.

Now notice the scope: “just as in all the world.” Do you know how small Colossae was? It was a market town, long past its prime, tucked into a valley and overshadowed by the way bigger city Laodicea about 16 kilometers away. Nobody talked about Colossae. Yet Paul tells this little congregation that the gospel has come to them just as in all the world. Within one generation of Pentecost, the message about a crucified Galilean carpenter had planted churches from Jerusalem to Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, and Rome! There was no internet! No printing press! The church didn’t have an empire backing them, in fact, the world powers were all against them! The apostles were twelve unimpressive men. And now the seed had reached an unremarkable market town 100 km inland from Ephesus, where Luke tells us “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

“Bearing fruit and multiplying”, why does that sound familiar? Where have we heard that before? Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” The very first blessing God ever pronounced over man. Earlier we saw that the Word which said “Let there be light” makes light, the same power is at work here. The Great Commission says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The Great Commission is the NEW “multiply and fill the earth” for us, the new creation! Except we aren’t filling the earth with our biological descendants only, but with believers. God’s Word has said “be fruitful” and it is being fruitful. And underneath this all stands Christ Himself: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Christ was our Grain of Wheat, He fell into the ground and He died, and now He is bearing much fruit.

The prophet Isaiah saw all of this seven centuries before it happened. “For just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isa 55:10-11). Think about this picture. No farmer makes the rain fall. He can plow and plant and pray, but water comes down from heaven or not at all. Seed for the sower, bread for the eater, all of life depends on the heavens giving their rain. And *that*, God says, is His Word. It goes out; it waters; it does not come back empty handed.

This is where so many of us struggle, isn’t it? You share the gospel with a coworker, a son, a neighbor, and months pass, and nothing seems to happen. Two temptations arise. Despair: we conclude the Word has failed. Or manipulation: maybe if I twist their arms, soften the message, anything! Both forget Isaiah 55. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares YHWH.” The does all of its work underground, out of our sight. Our task is to sow the seeds, heaven’s task is to water them out of our sight. Remember the counterfeit we exposed just minutes ago, “manifest it, speak it into existence?” We can’t speak anything into existence. But we can sow what God has spoken, and His Word does what ours never could.

But how does the seed grow? Our Lord tells of a man who sows seed in the ground and then “sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” (Mark 4:27-28). I love this, he sleeps! No farmer stands over his field shouting at the seed to hurry up, no farmer panics while the seeds sit there under the dirt. This is why Paul could write, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” (1 Cor 3:6-7). We live in a culture that keeps inventing new ways to get immediate gratification, but the gospel grows slowly and invisibly.

How does the Word travel though? How do the seeds get in the soil? On foot. The prophet Isaiah once wrote “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” (Isa 52:7). That’s the whole message in one sentence: *Your God reigns*, and when the gospel says Christ is King, Christ is King. Earlier this afternoon I read Romans 10:17: faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. Walk back up that chapter: “How are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Rom 10:15). First is the preacher, then the hearing, then the faith. That’s how the gospel crossed over 160 kilometers of mountains from Ephesus into Colossae, on the feet of Epaphras. And now we get to join that chain, we can now tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among the peoples!

And listen to where Paul aims next. The Gospel is bearing fruit “in all the world” and it has been doing this “among you also”. What happens when the Word of the Lord enters a human heart? That is my third point.

III. The Gospel’s Transformative Power (1200 words)

To summarize what the Word of the Lord does when it enters a human heart, nothing less than resurrection. Paul puts it well in verse 6, “as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace the God in truth”.

Start with that word “understood”. In Greek it is *epiginosko*, the prefix *epi* means full, thorough knowledge. This is very interesting to me. Remember what was circling this church. The false teachers in Colossae were teaching that Paul’s Christianity was entry-level; they offered the upgrade (secret wisdom, hidden mysteries, deeper experiences for the insiders). Paul, writing to these ordinary folks from this small town, says: you already have it. The day you heard the gospel, you came to full knowledge of the deepest thing in the universe, the grace of God.

Notice the order of the words though. They *heard* before they *understood*, and right there we run into one of the biggest problems in this whole letter: dead men don’t hear. Think of a funeral you have ever attended. There’s always someone standing and speaking, but not to the casket of course. We preach *about* the dead, *to* the living, because everyone knows the dead cannot hear. And yet, that is exactly what God commands.

Open Ezekiel 37. Ezekiel has a vision, or dream, of YHWH taking him by the hand and setting him down in the middle of a valley full of bones. Then, YHWH asks Ezekiel the question: “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel in that moment gives what may be the wisest answer in Scripture: “O Lord YHWH, you know” (Ezk 37:3). And God says, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of YHWH.” (37:4).

What God? You want me to preach a sermon to bones? Yes

Because when God says to a dead heart, “be transformed,” that heart is transformed. This happens every Sunday: a man stands in a valley of dry bones and says, “Hear of the Word of YHWH.” The dead do hear, when God speaks.

So Ezekiel preached, and as Ezekiel 37:7 says there was a rattling noise and the bones came together, then sinews, then flesh, then skin, and then verse 9 says “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” The Hebrew word there is *ruach*, it means wind, breath, and Spirit, the ancient Hebrews and Greeks didn’t think of those as different things, they were all one and the same. That is why Paul told the Thessalonians, “because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). This is why Paul thanks God, not the Colossians, for their faith, love, and hope. He looks past the secondary causes to the primary one. Life comes from the Spirit.

God interprets Ezekiel’s vision: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’” (37:11). They were a hopeless people, and God’s answer to them was a preacher. In response to their hopelessness God sends them a Word.

This is the pattern of every conversion in history. “Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons... He sent out His WORD and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.” (Ps 107:10, 20), there is Isaiah’s sent word again, the word that does not return empty. Our Lord told us “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” John 5:25. He proved this at the funeral in Nain in Luke 7:14-15. He proved it at Bethany: “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43). And He proves it still, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The power that made the universe is the power that has made you a Christian. You were dead in your transgressions, He made you alive together with Christ! The Colossians were Ezekiel’s valley! So were we!

How does the Word do it? Jeremiah answers: “Is not My word like fire? Declares YHWH, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jer 23:29). I love this chapter in Jeremiah, Jeremiah is arguing with false prophets. In verse 25 Jeremiah describes the whole ministry of the false prophets with the line “I had a dream! I had a dream!”. God says, “Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my Word speak my Work faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? Declares YHWH.” (v. 28). The false teacher in Colossae had many dreams and innovations (straw). God’s Word is grain; it is fire; it is a hammer. What does a hammer do to a rock? It shatters it. What is the hardest rock any of us have ever owned? Our hearts of stone. God has removed those, and given us hearts of flesh.

As Joel prophesied in Joel 2, and as Peter said in Acts 2, the Gospel crosses all geographic boundaries, and it crosses all generational boundaries. Peter's closing word in Acts 2 is that "the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off". So pray over the dry bones, whether they're your children at your dinner table, or in Australia. Keep your children and grandchildren under the preached Word. They can hear better than you think, the dead can hear when God speaks.

So in this passage in Colossians, who stood on this particular graveyard? Who carried the Gospel up the mountain road into the Lycus valley and preached until the Colossian dry bones stood up? Verse 7: "you learned it from Epaphras." This is my final point this afternoon.

IV. The Gospel's Faithful Stewards: Epaphras (1200 words)

Finally, we come to verses 7-8, and to the man himself: "just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf". Let me ask you something. Before we looked at these verses together, how many of us could have said who Epaphras was? Be honest. He's not on the Twelve. He never wrote a page of the Bible. As far as we know, he never saw Jesus with his own eyes. He's a footnote in most of our Bibles, and yet, church family, this is the man God used to plant the church in Colossae. We've spent this afternoon looking at enormous things, a hope laid up in heaven, a gospel filling the whole world, dead men coming to life again. And all of it entered Colossae through one ordinary, faithful man.

So who is he? Paul tells us later in this letter, Colossians 4:12: "Epaphras, who is one of you". One of them! He's a local. Remember from my second point that during Paul's years in Ephesus, "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Somewhere during those years, a random man from the Lycus Valley heard the gospel, and he carried the gospel home to his small town. And Paul testifies in Col. 4:13 that he had "worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis." This one man sowed seeds of the gospel in three cities.

And here's a detail I love. According to multiple of the bible dictionaries I used when writing this sermon, the name Epaphras is short for Epaphroditos, and that named means "devoted to Aphrodite," the Greek goddess. This man's name means that he is devoted to a pagan goddess, and he is the one God chose to carry the true God's gospel into this pagan valley. Our God loves to choose the people we'd least expect to be His servants.

Now notice the key word here that the Colossians "learned" it from Epaphras. Not once will you ever read Paul saying that the Colossians "experienced" the Gospel, or that the gospel "happened" to them. You have to learn the gospel. The gospel is a deposit that gets handed down, person to person. Paul says it himself in 1 Corinthians 15:3, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." And he commands in 2 Timothy 2:2: "And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust

these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” That is why we do what we do from the pulpit, in Sunday school, in private times together when believers gather with each other and study God’s Word, the faith is learned! And praise God it has never gone silent, because God keeps raising up faithful hands to pass it on.

So who is Epaphras to us? He’s the Bible’s picture of the ordinary faithful Christian. The Sunday school teacher handing down the faith year after year. The grandmother agonizing in prayer over every member of her family. The brother who evangelizes to his coworkers every week. Two months ago I briefly touched on the hyper-individualism of our age, the lie that you don’t need the church, your faith is a private thing. Epaphras is the answer to that lie, because the gospel that saves must be shared from person to person.

V. Conclusion

Church family, before we close, here is what I want to be on our hearts as we leave. Someone sowed the seed into Epaphras. Epaphras sowed it into Colossae. Some faithful soul sowed it into you. Maybe it was your mother, a preacher, your Sunday school teacher, a friend who kept inviting you out to church a hundred times. And now you’ve heard it. It’s our turn to sow the seed now, may we do so faithfully and trust our God to give us the growth.

Let’s pray,

Heavenly Father,

Thank You so much for the hope You have laid up for us in Your Kingdom, where moth and rust will never destroy it, and where no thief will ever break in and steal. Thank You that Your Word does not return to You empty, but accomplishes what You purpose. It found us in a valley of dry bones, and it made us live.

Father, breathe your Spirit on the ones we love who are still dead in trespasses and sins. Make us faithful sowers, and give us Your patience while the seeds grow. When our hope wavers, please lift our eyes and let us remember the hope we have in Heaven.

In the name of Christ our King, I pray, Amen.