

Thought 18th April 2021

So this morning we are starting our journey through Paul's letter to the Colossians and discover who these Colossians were, why Paul felt he had to write to them, what Paul had to say to them and finally what Paul's words to them means to us here today in Hurst Green, or wherever we are.

In Paul's time Colossae was a town down on its luck, yearning for the long-gone days of importance and wealth. It was a diverse community of around thirty thousand inhabitants brought to the city by the great East West trade route on which it sat. It would have been a melting pot of many different beliefs and religions. However, as Colossae was a Roman colony the predominant religion was the worship of the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods.

In the midst of this ever-shifting diversity of people, language and religions was the handful of believers that Paul was writing to. The fellowship had been founded some years earlier by Epaphras, a native of Colossae, who came to faith after hearing Paul preach the Gospel whilst he was in Ephesus. It was the visit of this same Epaphras to Paul whilst Paul was imprisoned in Rome some years later that occasioned this letter. Epaphras bore news to Paul that the believers, who were now meeting in the home of Philemon, were facing pressures and temptations and were in danger of being lead astray from the Gospel they had first believed.

The believers in Colossae were being influenced by the pagan worship of the Greek and Roman Gods and were being tempted to worship Jesus as another god amongst multitude of gods already worshipped. Worse still was the pressure from the Jewish Christians that demanded that the believers should adopt Jewish customs by observing the Sabbath or circumcision. These Jewish Christians believed that to be saved you needed to observe the Old Testament Law as belief in Jesus wasn't sufficient to save you. On top of both of these influences was the emergence of a radical group, possibly from within their own number that were trying to combine paganism, Judaism and Christianity along with Angel worship to form a completely new religion.

It was to this handful of believers, perhaps only thirty to fifty souls that were beset with pressures and temptations to turn from Jesus that Paul wrote this letter. Paul entrusted the delivery of this letter, along with a personal letter to Philemon and letters to the churches in Ephesus and Philippi to Tychicus and Onesimus.

So, what was Paul's response to the pressures and temptations that the Colossian believers were experiencing? Well his response, as usual was simple and direct, he pointed the believers to the truth of who Jesus is. The heartbeat of Paul's letter is Jesus; Jesus as Lord, Jesus as Saviour and Jesus as God. Paul's answer to all the temptations and pressures the Colossian believers were facing was to show them who Jesus really was and what that meant for their lives.

Paul starts his letter in a very Paul like manner by introducing himself. He then launches into a prayer of gratitude for the believers in Colossae, *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people"* Isn't remarkable that even in the midst of all the temptations and pressures that the Colossian believers were experiencing Paul could thank God for their faith and love. I like to think of the Colossian believers as showing grace under pressure, even in the midst that all was assaulting them they were still people of faith and of love. Ernest Hemingway said, "Courage is grace under pressure". The Colossian believers were courageous, even with all the pressures they were facing to turn from Jesus they courageously continued to have faith in Christ Jesus and to show love for one another. To stand up for what you believe when everybody else is trying to tell you are wrong takes real courage.

So where does the Colossian's courage to have faith and to love one another come from? Paul is clear that the source of their faith and love is hope. Paul very helpfully gives us insight into what that hope is when he writes, *"the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you."* Paul is clear the well spring of this faith and love that the Colossians were courageously demonstrating in the midst of all the pressures and temptation is hope.

When we twenty first Westerners think of hope we tend to think about hope in a nebulous or emotional manner. So, we think of hope as that warm fuzzy feeling we experience when we think life is going our way or we are about to get lucky. This is not the hope Paul is writing about. Hope for Paul could equally be expressed by words such as certainty, surety or absolute confidence. Hope for Paul is neither nebulous nor emotional because hope for Paul is more than just an idea.

So we are going to look at what this hope that is so sustaining and empowering for the Colossians was. It is easy to read Paul's words, "*the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven*" and think that Paul is referring to pie in the sky when you die. Or to put in different words we can think Paul is saying, "Yes life is miserable at the moment but it will be okay when you get to heaven". Whilst this is true that there is no more suffering in heaven this not the hope that Paul is referring to here. Nor is Paul referring to the hope that Eddie talked about last week, that is the hope of receiving an inheritance in heaven from the Lord as a reward for our service to God here on earth. Again whilst it is true, we will receive a reward in heaven for our service here on earth this is not the hope that Paul is referring to.

So if the hope Paul was referring to wasn't the release from earthly suffering or the promise of heavenly reward what is this hope? Paul elaborates on the hope when he writes, "*about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you.*" So, what is the hope that the Colossian had heard about in "*the true message of the gospel*"? John famously sums up the Gospel or literally the Good news in the most famous verse from the Bible **John 3:16** "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" We need to be careful here, Paul wasn't saying the Colossian faith and love was because they hoped in a clever idea or well-crafted theological statement. No, Paul was saying their faith and love sprung from Jesus and the certainty, surety or absolute confidence in all that He had done for them. The hope of the Gospel is Jesus Christ, that's why Paul write a few verses later in **Colossian 1:27** "*God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

The Gospel or good news isn't an idea or theological statement, the Gospel is Jesus. It wasn't an idea that was born in Bethlehem for you and me, it was Jesus. It wasn't a theological statement that lived for thirty-three years on earth for you and me, it was Jesus. It wasn't a catechism that suffered on the cross for you and me, it was Jesus. It wasn't a mantra that rose on the third day for you and me, it was Jesus. The Gospel is that God Himself, in Jesus did all this for us. The good news is that God literally went through hell to save you and me. The source of hope that drives on the Colossian's faithfulness and love is what God has already done for them in Jesus and the certainty of what He will do for them in their present circumstance and into days to come. The author of Romans sums this hope for today and tomorrow up when he writes in **Romans 8:32** *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

Indeed in another letter that Tychicus was delivering for Paul to the church in Philippi Paul clearly define this hope for tomorrow **Philippians 1: 6** *"being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* The Colossian had faith and love when facing the pressures and temptation of the present because of all that Jesus had already done for them in the past and the certainty Jesus would continue to be all they needed for their future.

So what does Paul's opening words of his letter mean to us? Well it raises a question for us, do we have hope and confidence in Jesus for our today's and tomorrow's because of all that He has done in our yesterday's? Paul's words challenge us to be courageous, like the Colossian believers and stand firm in Jesus in the face of the pressures and temptations of our lives. Because if you put your faith in man's teachings or clever ideas or our own efforts or even in religion you my friend will be disappointed. But if you stand firm in Jesus your life will be filled with faith and love.

Now you may be thinking okay Keith, I get it but you seem to have missed a bit of what Paul wrote, he says that this hope is stored up in heaven. So what is Paul's meaning here, if the hope is Jesus how can Paul write that Jesus is stored up in heaven. I would answer that it is a very good question and one I have deliberately left until next week as the answer to it is the key to understanding Paul's letter to the Colossians.