

Some Background

First, the city of Colossae –

- ✚ Colossae was a small town situated on the south bank of the Lycus River in the interior of the Roman province of Asia (an area including modern Turkey today). Colossae was in a district of great wealth and on the main trade route linking Ephesus in the west and Persia in the east.
- ✚ The population fell into three distinct groups of people: the native Phrygians; Greek colonists who came to live and trade there; and, Jews, the number of whom Barclay estimates to have been as high as 50,000.

Second, the Church at Colossae –

- ✚ It was a Pauline church.
- ✚ It was a Gentile church.
- ✚ It was a troubled church.

NOTE: Dangerous heresy had made inroads into the Lycus Valley. At the time of the writing of this letter there was a serious threat to the well being of the Colossian Church. Since most of what is said in the epistle is related in some way to this false teaching, it is imperative that we understand as much about it as we can. There is some difference of opinion as to the exact content. However, we can be certain about the following:

- 1) It professed to be a “philosophy.” It might be more accurate to call it “theosophy.” Moulton characterizes it as a “dabbling in the occult.”
- 2) It placed great emphasis on ritual circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of holy days.
- 3) It insisted that the mysterious powers of the universe be worshipped.
- 4) It was decidedly ascetic. That is to say they believed the body was evil and must be treated as the enemy of the spirit or soul.
- 5) The advocates claimed to be Christian teachers and by convincing speech and debate were attempting to draw the Colossians away from the truth.

With this as our background we begin the study of this little letter under the title of “The Word of Hope.” The Gospel is nothing if it is not a word of hope. Paul takes note of this at the outset. The apostle takes note of this in his prayer in the opening verses. He is thankful for their love, their faith, and their hope. When he comes to give thanks for their hope, he takes note that they heard it through the word that came to them. The sense in which he uses the word “hope” is best understood in light of the fact that Christ is our hope. **This is a very contemporary word. If ever we found a time in our history when the future seemed hopeless, it is now. There are people who are hopeless as they face their financial future, marriage and family struggles, and a loss of direction for their lives. People need this word of hope more today than ever before in the history of our great nation. The Gospel is that word of hope!**

TAKE YOUR BIBLES, PLEASE...

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 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. (Colossians 1:1-8 ESV).

Hope is essential to our well being. Men go to great lengths to cling to a hope beyond this life. Cryogenics, which is the science of preserving the body through freezing, has become very popular in the last decade. Some famous names have expressed their commitment to being frozen just prior to death in order to wait for a cure to their illness. Simon Cowell, Paris Hilton, Lucy Liu, Britney Spears, Larry King, and Muhammed Ali are a few of those. Ted Williams and Dick Clair Jones (who was best known for his television and film career) have undergone the procedure. It was well known that Walt Disney desired to be cryogenically kept upon his death, however the family had his body cremated and the remains are interred at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California. Michael Jackson, also having expressed a desire to be frozen, is buried in the same cemetery.

It sounds crazy, doesn't it? Yet, in an underground storage facility near Los Angeles, there are dozens of men and women who have paid tens of thousands of dollars to be cryogenically interred. If you could gain entrance this facility you would see giant capsules made of stainless steel that resemble thermos bottles with small windows to view the foil wrapped bodies, frozen solid awaiting their "resurrection." And, all of this simply because they hope to be restored!

All of us have that desire. We want to believe that there is something more beyond this life. We *hope* for something more. We desperately want to cheat death. Billions are spent on anti-aging remedies and procedures every year. However, the truth is that these bodies are dying. Nothing will stop that inevitability. The only hope that is real is to follow in the steps of the One who has already been there and returned. He is Jesus Christ.

The Colossians lived in such a day. The Christians who had responded to the message of Paul and Epaphras had come to this word of hope. While they lived in the same world, with the same problems, their vision of the future was radically transformed. It is that transformation which we need today!

SO, LET'S LOOK CLOSELY...

First, the Word that Gives Hope is a Word of Final Truth (v. 5).

✚ The language of Paul is very precise. In verse five he writes, *of this you have heard before in the word of the truth*. The NASV is a bit better in the translation of the word "before." It uses "previously." The emphasis is that it is not a word; it is *the* word. It is not merely a truth, but the truth. And, it has already come to them. It is a final word.

As we read the New Testament we are not left with any doubt as to the full content of this truth. It was the word concerning the Son of God becoming flesh, dwelling among men without sin, dying on a cross for our sins, being raised from the dead by the power of the Father, and now declared to be the Lord of all. It was on the basis of this that God did then and now declare all who have faith in Him to be righteous and in possession of eternal life. This is the substance of the truth. It is the final word.

✚ **This word that gave them hope was also a word of the Gospel.** This additional description of the word that gives hope reminds us that it is “good news.” There are so many today who would tempt us by arguing there is no final word of truth. But if our world is to ever have any basis for hope, it must hear the word which makes the claim to being the final truth, the Gospel. Without apology we must call modern man to hear this truth. It is the only hope.

Second, the Word that gives Hope is a Word of Spiritual Power (v. 6).

Paul writes, *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.* (v. 6).

By the ministry of Epaphras, the word of the Gospel came to them. When it came, it came as a word of power; and, it immediately began to transform them. This transformation was the fruit of the Gospel.

✚ **There was the fruit of repentance.** The first of these Greek verbs, here translated “bearing fruit,” refers to the action of a seed as it is transformed in the growth process. Those who heard the Gospel also heard the Holy Spirit as he worked in their lives to bring them to surrender to the will and purpose of Christ. It was like a seed being planted in the ground to be changed, ultimately growing to bear fruit. In the case of the Christian’s life, the fruit is the result of this work of salvation.

✚ **There was the work of sanctification.** The second verb, “increasing,” pictures the growth of the seed as it is transformed. There is outward evidence of the seed’s transformation. It changes form and it produces fruit. The life of the Christian grows outwardly, continuing to cut a path of victory since the word of truth has rooted itself in the new soil of the believer’s life.

There is an old Irish story about a man who was asked to sit up all night at a wake. Unknown to him was the fact that he was being set up in a practical joke. It seems that late in the night as he was alone in the room with the body of the deceased friend, the dead man was to rise up in the casket and scream the man’s name giving him the scare of his life. All went according to plan. There were many people present until the early hours of the morning. However, as they began to trickle out to go to their homes, the man soon was left alone with the “corpse.” The lights were dimmed and as the room became silent, the dead man sat bolt upright and screamed the man’s name! With no apparent fright at all, this man walked over to the very-much-alive dead man and pushed him back into his coffin and said, “If you’re dead, lay down and act like it!”

There have been a few Christians who I have known that I would have liked to do just the opposite with. They were alive and acting as if they were dead and I would have loved to be able to push them up and say, "If you're alive, get up and act like it!"

Third, the Word that Gives Hope is a Word through Mortal Men (vv. 7-8).

Paul says, 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.

Notice what they heard was spoken by Epaphras. The words of the Gospel have always been spoken by men to men. We don't know much about this man. Paul warmly commends him and speaks of him as a spiritual brother and companion, but beyond that we know very little. Whoever he was and wherever he came from, he was the mortal man through whom the final word of truth came to the Colossians. He declared it plainly and faithfully with the result that some believed. They became people of faith, love and hope. It was a divine message delivered through earthly means.

There is an important message for us in this truth. In our day of electronic communication, we are tempted to rely too heavily through these means of communication for the spread of the Gospel. While it is very helpful to use every means of technology to spread the Gospel, technology has not replaced human involvement.

A Final Thought

The word that brings hope is a final word, there is no other. The word that brings hope is a word of spiritual power. The word that brings hope is a word through men to men. Our responsibility is in sharp focus.

Leighton Ford tells the story of a missionary captured in Viet Nam during the days of the French occupation of that country. The missionary had been captured by a small band of communist Viet Cong. He was held captive in a remote camp for several weeks. During that period he became very friendly with a young officer and taught him English by means of a Bible he had when he was captured.

Toward the end of his captivity they sat discussing a very large military operation soon to take place. The small band of guerilla fighters was up against terrible odds. Many of their number would be killed by the overwhelming French forces. When the missionary asked him why he would be willing to throw his life away in a lost cause, he answered, "I would gladly die if I could advance the cause of communism one more mile." Then he went on to state a very telling truth. He said, "You know, as you have read from the Bible I have come to believe that you Christians have a greater message than that of communism. But I believe we are going to win the world. Christianity means something to you, but communism means everything to us!"

The word has come to us. We ought to ask ourselves what it really means to us!

