

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; June 16, 2024

Colossians 1:3-8

“Hope in Heaven is Growth in the World”

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 the love that you have for the all the saints because of the hope that is stored up for you in heaven. You have already heard about this in the word of truth, the gospel that is present with you now. The gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the entire world, just as it also has been doing among you from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. He is the one who told us about your love in the Spirit.

When Epaphras returned from the church Colosse, he apparently had a few things to tell St. Paul about the Christians in Colosse. It seems some were bad, most were good. First: the bad. The Colossian Christians were listening to quite bit of spiritual nonsense. You heard the opening verses of the letter earlier; if you keep reading, you’ll see strong implications that the Colossians were listening to mumbo-jumbo about still needing to keep Old Testament laws, about needing to abstain from certain foods in order to be a “real Christian,” about worshipping angels instead of God alone, and they were even listening to people bragging about – wait for it! – bragging about how humble they were.

Yes, there was a lot of spiritual subterfuge going into the Colossians ears, and they were not only hearing the noise, they were starting to listen to it, too. And, it appears that when Paul heard that report about the Colossians, the Spirit inspired him to put pen to parchment and try to stop it. But here is the strategy the Spirit supplied: don’t just tell them to close their ears to the lies; remind them of the divine truth. Remind them of how beautiful God’s truth is. Remind them of what it means for them. Remind them of how powerful that truth is.

And so Paul opens his letter with that. He’ll get around to attacking the lies later. First the truth: its beauty, its meaning, its power.

Here is the beauty: the gospel of the Triune God. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit has told these Christians the good news, and keeps them telling all the time. The good news of the Triune God is grace – undeserved love – and it’s the beautiful truth. For these Christians in Colosse two thousand years ago, for all people of all time, the Father loved them and sent his Son to save them. The good news centers on the Son, who succeeded in freeing these Colossians and all people from the punishment of hell, and replacing it with the promise of heaven. Jesus lived the righteous life that the Father demands. He died as sacrifice to remove our sin, so that we are freed from death in hell. And he rose to prove the truth of this gospel.

That’s the beauty of the gospel: hell is what we deserved, and heaven is what God gives us in his Son Jesus. The Spirit had brought this message to the Colossians, and he’s brought to us.

And, by the Spirit’s work, they believed it. And so have we. For those who believe, the gospel is hope stored in heaven. That’s the meaning of it. We’re headed to a better place, a perfect place where we will live with our Savior and all the saints forever. The beauty of the gospel for believers is that all the ugliness of this world will melt away, leaving only peace and glory. That hope is stored in heaven, because we won’t see it until we get there. The hope stored in heaven is unseen, but it more certain that what we do

see, because this hope rests on the eternal righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the eternal atonement he made for our sins on the cross.

The gospel is the beauty of salvation in the Trinity's work. It's meaning is that heaven is our home; our hope is stored there. And here is its power for the Colossian Christians and all Christians: **This gospel is bearing fruit all and growing in the entire world, just as it also has been doing among you from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth.** This is the good part of the report about the Colossians. In Colosse, yes, but also in all the world and throughout time, the gospel bears fruit and grows. The Christian church grows every time the Spirit brings the gospel into another heart and gives faith, and faith grows stronger and stronger every time that gospel works. The Church grows in size, and so do the good works of those who know: God loves me so much that he saved me in Christ. My hope is stored in heaven.

Those who know and believe the beauty and meaning of the gospel grow in number every day. And they grow each day in good works. They grow to proclaim Christ so more will join their number. They grow to care for other believers so that all people we know we are Jesus' disciples. They grow to love all people so that they will see our good works for them, and listen to the gospel we cherish. All over the world, to this very day, Christians grow to speak kindly and wait patiently and bear with each other in love. They grow to forgive not seven, but seventy-seven times. They grow to give their money and time in thanks to God.

The Church grows by the gospel, and her members grow to bear fruit. It is a marvel to think about: in Korea there is a Christian mother setting food down in front of her toddler. In Mexico there is a Christian man stopping to help a stranded motorist. In Australia there is a preacher proclaiming the beauty of the gospel, salvation in Christ, and the meaning of gospel, hope stored in heaven. When the plate is passed in Portugal, a widow drops in what little she has for mission work. In Woodbridge there will be forty or fifty Christians leaving here today bear fruit, so the gospel continues to grow and spread all over the world. All over the world, the gospel grows: the Christian faith spreads and Holy Mother Church grows. And all over the world: the gospel bears fruit, whenever and wherever and however Christians do good works in thanksgiving to God.

When you have the beauty of the gospel, when you have its meaning of hope stored in heaven, when you have its power to grow and bear fruit, you don't need other religious messages. The Colossians didn't need a lot of rigamarole about not eating pork and worshipping angels. They needed the gospel, the beautiful, meaningful, powerful gospel. Which is why Paul later instructs them: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.**

Although I should not (for blood pressure reasons), sometimes I walk through the "Christianity" section of bookstores. What an awful lot of noise. So much about your best life now, instead of in heaven; financial success under the cross; five easy steps to family harmony (obviously written by someone without a family); unlocking the hidden meaning of the Bible; and, sometimes, more about angels than Jesus Christ. (Because much like fashion, spiritual silliness tends to come back around.) There are so many voices still enticing Christians to listen to something, anything, everything, other than the gospel of the Triune God. And it sucks people in, because hey, we already know the gospel. Tell us something new! Give some fresh insight!

Yes, the Bible is a big book, and it's got a lot to say. But it always begins and ends with the gospel – the beautiful, meaningful, powerful gospel. Listen to it again and always. Its power is the Trinity's work to save you, its meaning is hoped store in heaven, its power is to grow the Church and bear fruit. Amen.