

WHERE HOPE BEGINS

by Ray C. Stedman

It is with a sense of excitement and anticipation that I begin with you a series of studies in Paul's letter to the Colossians. This is one of the prison letters of the apostle, written, most scholars believe, while he was a prisoner in Rome, although one scholar makes out a good case for an imprisonment in Ephesus. It is not really of any great importance as to where the apostle was when he wrote this letter: the important thing is the message of the letter itself. It was written to a church located in what we now call Turkey, in the Roman province of Asia Minor, about one hundred miles south and east of Ephesus. Near Colossae were two other cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis, located about ten miles apart on the Lycus river.

The church at Colossae was one of two New Testament churches (the other was Rome) that Paul never visited before he wrote to them. It was founded under the ministry of a man named Epaphras, who is introduced in the opening verses of this letter. Of these three cities, Colossae was the smallest and the least important. But this church at Colossae became the founder of other churches which started up in the nearby cities. This letter also is connected closely with the letter to Philemon, who was a businessman friend of Paul and a citizen of Laodicea.

In many ways the letter to the Colossians is very similar in its teaching to the Ephesian letter. Some of you may ask, if that is the case, why do we need a letter to the Colossians? The answer is, because it is not quite the same. Colossians has a distinctive message, one that is extremely relevant to people living in our area today. It is primarily a letter of hope: the hope that comes by means of the gospel. At the time it was written, there was a serious threat to the faith of the Colossians. A garbled mixture of religious error, arising from both a Jewish and Greek background, was threatening the church.

Such an uncertain theological atmosphere, where different religious ideas compete with one another, is always an indication of great unrest in society. It indicates that people have lost their bearings and do not know quite what to believe. That condition is reflected in the letter to the Colossians and you will recognize it is what we face today. We are assaulted on every side by cultists and various philosophies, all of them claiming to be the truth. Thus the letter to the Colossians is very important in the New Testament record.

In the opening verses the apostle emphasizes the word hope, in marked contrast to the hopelessness of the world of his day. How hopeless many people are growing today! Yesterday I received a phone call from a friend in another state seeking comfort and advice on how to handle the suicide of a very dear woman friend. This woman had been for years an outstanding Christian, but her husband was an alcoholic who had brought great grief to the family. He had stopped drinking for a year but, much to his wife's chagrin, had gone back to it again. Last week when he returned home from a late evening of drinking he found a note from his wife with but two words---"No more." Going out into the garage he found her dead in the family car.

How do we explain that kind of hopeless despair, especially even among Christians? Today, teenage suicide is rising to unprecedented heights. Alcoholism, drug abuse, a hurtful lifestyle, homosexuality, financial failure, broken marriages, false friends and failed health are some of the causes for people losing hope. Some here today may be struggling to keep a sense of hope. The glory, the zing, has gone out of life. That is how the Colossians felt when Epaphras first began to speak the truth of the gospel to them.

Alexander Pope was the author of the oft-quoted proverb, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." But it is really not true. At times we all lose hope, and it is not always because of loss or failure. Right here in Silicon Valley there are thousands of affluent people, living in luxurious homes, driving expensive cars, but if you talk to them you will discover that they are dead inside, empty, hollow, without hope.

Just a few weeks ago I learned something about one of our former elders which I had not known before. Years ago, before they ever became Christians, this man and his wife invited my wife and me to dinner. We spent the

whole evening talking about Christ and the gospel. We had a delightful time but had no idea of the seriousness of their situation. After we left that night the man opened his heart to Christ, but the story I heard recently was that for that same night he had planned his own suicide. Had he not heard the gospel that night he would have taken his own life. He went on to become a glowing, joyful Christian and served as an elder with us here for quite a number of years.

The Colossians too were once hopeless but they had found hope. And with it they found two other enormously valuable commodities, called faith and love. Listen to these opening words of the letter:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae."

These days it is necessary to point out that when the Scriptures talk about "brothers" and "brethren," it always includes sisters as well--"sistern," we might say. If we understood the biblical truth about mankind we would not have gotten into the awkward situation we find ourselves in today, where we wonder whether we ought to call a woman a "chairperson" or "chairwoman," or what. That entire situation would be happily taken care of if we observed what the Bible says. "In the beginning," it says, "God created man, male and female he created them, and he named them man." Thus, women have as much right to the word "man" as males do. They can properly call themselves the "sons of God" just as men do, and they can properly include themselves in the term "brethren" as much as men do. Both are "men" in that generic sense. If we understood that there would be no need, as some are threatening today, to republish the New Testament, eliminating all so-called chauvinist terms.

Paul continues,

"To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. 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 the saints---the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you."

Did you pick out the three words that are crucial there: faith, hope, and love? We could say these are favorite words of the apostle. He uses this triad in several of his letters. In 1 Thessalonians he writes about "your work of faith," "your labor of love," and "your patience of hope." Many of you have already remembered that wonderful triad at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, "And now abide faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love."

Yes, love is what is needed in our world. But according to this Colossian statement love comes from faith. And where does faith come from? The NIV puts it this way: "the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth." It is extremely important to recognize that these wonderfully warm words, faith, love and hope, are related. Notice that two of them are four-letter words (love, hope), so not all four-letter words are bad. These words mark what we could well call qualities of authentic Christians. If you are really a Christian, if you are one of the "holy and faithful brothers," the mark will be: you have faith and love which spring from hope, and that hope is found in the gospel.

Paul calls the Colossians "holy brothers." Many think of the word holy as a synonym for grim. Holy people, they feel, are sanctimonious, long-faced killjoys. Remember what one little girl said on seeing a mule for the first time: "I don't know what you are but you must be a Christian; you look just like grandpa!" But the word holy really means "separated unto God"---or in modern terminology, "claimed by God." Christians are holy because they belong to God. This morning we sang "Bless His holy name." Why is God's name holy? Because it is his name. We call his book the "holy" Bible because it is God's book. We call Palestine the "Holy Land" because it peculiarly belongs to God, more than any other spot on earth. In that sense, therefore, "holy" has nothing to do with how you act but more with who you are. You belong to God. By faith the Colossians had believed what God said, therefore God claimed them for his own; they belonged to him.

Paul also calls them "faithful brethren." Here is the first hint of the struggles going on in the church at Colossae. There were strange doctrinal ideas floating about in an effort to upset these people and turn them away from their faith. But Paul is encouraging them to remain "faithful brethren"---consistent, dependable, genuine believers, because of a constant supply of love and hope from the Spirit (verse 8). By the way, that reference in verse 8 is the only time the Holy Spirit is referred to in this letter. It is not because the truth about the Spirit is not important, but Paul is not focusing on the Spirit's work in this letter; rather he is dealing with the results of the Spirit's work, faith and love arising out of renewed hope.

The important thing is to notice that hope produces faith, and faith in turn grows into love. Hope is the root, faith is the plant, and love is the fruit. Thus, hope is foundational. This gives rise to the question, what produces hope? We all desperately need hope. Without hope men lose the desire to live. We have all had hopeless moments when we felt like saying, "What is the use of going on?" What, then, produces hope? Here is Paul's answer, "hope stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come unto you."

Hope is awakened by the gospel. That is the good news. The gospel addresses itself to losers. Not to the successful, but to the failures, the weak, the empty, the lost among us---and it gives them hope. When nothing else can give them hope, the gospel will. But how does hearing the story of Jesus: his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection and his coming by the Spirit, give hope that awakens faith and stimulates love for others? The answer is in this one phrase, "the hope stored up for you in heaven."

To most, that immediately suggests life after death. After this life we will go to be with the Lord and all the glory of eternity will then be ours. That is a wonderful hope, but that is not what this phrase means. If we take it that way, it gives credence to Marx's accusation that "Religion...is the opium of the people." If all the gospel offers to Christians is that they will go to heaven when they die, this may well tend to make them content with their lot on earth and do nothing to correct or improve their conditions. That is the accusation of the Communists. They say we are putting people to sleep, turning them away from changes they should make if only they got stirred up about the problems and injustices of society. That charge is not without some merit if this is all the gospel offers.

But though it is a wonderful truth that there is hope of life after death, this translation obscures what is really being said. The singular word "heaven" is what misleads us. What the Greek text actually says is, "hope is available to you in the heavens"---plural. This term "the heavens" (or, as it appears in the letter to the Ephesians, "the heavenlies"), is a reference not to heaven after death, but to the invisible spiritual kingdom that surrounds us on all sides right now. Thus, what this is saying here is that the gospel reveals there is hope for us immediately coming from that invisible spiritual kingdom which surrounds us right at this very moment.

What is that hope? It is patent all through the New Testament. Jesus himself said, "Let not your hearts be troubled for I am with you." That is the hope that is awakened by the gospel. It is the good news that right now, whatever you are facing, in your moment of weakness peril, or hopelessness, Jesus is available to you. His strength can be imparted to you, his wisdom granted to you to steady you, strengthen you and make you to stand. That is the hope of the gospel. That is what awakens faith.

Faith means to act upon that hope. Faith means you believe that Jesus is there. At once you feel your spirit steadied and strengthened and you are able to go on and take whatever is coming. We have all known what it means to have some dear friend come along in a time of trouble to stand by and steady and encourage us. If that friend is the Lord of Glory himself, what tremendous hope there is in that fact. That is what this means here: the hope that is in the gospel. Hebrews 11 says of Moses that "he endured because he saw him who was invisible." That is what Paul writes to the Colossians about: an invisible reality that is available right now in Jesus. He is there, ready to help and encourage.

Paul also calls this gospel "the word of truth." That is what marks its realism. Dorothy Sayers, the great Christian philosopher, said, "The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable, but whether it is true." Does it accord with reality? Does it do what it says it will do? That is the test.

The great thing about the gospel is that it is true. It really works. It does deliver people. When you lack hope,

feel defeated, cast down, or betrayed, Jesus stands there, available to you. That is the word of the gospel. He offers to go with you to face the drug pusher. He offers his love and his acceptance when loneliness or horniness tempt you to wrongful sexual activity. He offers to steady you in times of pressure and stress. And he offers forgiveness and restoration if there is any failure.

That is what the apostle now affirms, saying to the Colossians in verse 6:

"All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."

I have come to see that this is the most neglected truth among Christians. I am always amazed at how many Christians, facing difficulty and trial, give up because there is no human help available. The woman I told you about earlier who took her own life, knew about Jesus. But she did not avail herself of him at the moment of pressure. She gave up, and in that moment of unsupported stress did a deed that she could not reverse.

I confess that in my own life it is easy to look only for human help, forgetting that God's help is instantly available to me. We are like the little girl who kept calling for someone to sit with her in her bedroom at night. Her mother told her, "Now you will be all right. Don't worry. The angels will be with you." "But I don't want angels," the child replied, "I want people with skin on their faces." Many of us feel that way. We do not want invisible help. We are angry and resentful if human help is not available. But God will sometimes deliberately deny us human help in order that we may learn how much greater is the help waiting for us from his invisible kingdom.

Further, Paul says, this help works anywhere in the world. I think this is one of the most amazing proofs of the authenticity of the Bible. I know all the apologetic arguments for biblical authenticity, but I have to confess they do not help me much at times. All of it can be argued away by various intellectual approaches. Apologetics do not really steady and strengthen our faith very much. Oh, it helps at times to relieve some of the problems we face in working out our faith, but the primary proof of Scripture is, it works! Right when you need it, and anywhere in the world.

My wife and I were in Northern Ireland this summer, meeting with young Christians in the most troubled part of that troubled country. At a conference one evening there was an interview with a man who had been a member of the IRA, the Irish Republican Army, the terrorist group that has caused so much bloodshed in Northern Ireland. He had been a wild and rough man, raised in a Catholic area, and who would have nothing to do with Protestants. He joined the IRA and became, in fact, what was called "an enforcer." He was responsible to see that orders for terrorist acts---murders, bombings, or whatever---were carried out even if he had to break the legs of the person who refused to carry them out. He had been in prison several times and during one of those prison experiences somebody gave him a New Testament. Reading it, he heard for the first time of the grace of God and the availability of Jesus Christ to forgive his sins.

He received the Lord, and was wonderfully changed. We heard him that night, interviewed by a Protestant pastor whose cousin had been killed some months before by the IRA. The men ended the interview by embracing one another before one thousand people in riot-torn, strife-filled Northern Ireland. What a change the gospel makes!

That kind of thing had been happening also in Colossae. It was happening all over the world, wherever the apostle went, and it still happens today.

The proof of the Colossians' faith was love, the apostle declares in verses 7 and 8:

"You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."

Just as though I were there, Paul seems to say, Epaphras has been teaching you the truth. Epaphras was the man who started it all. We do not know much about him, although he is mentioned in a couple of the other letters of Paul. He evidently was a layman, and had probably been part of the group that Paul himself taught

when he was resident in Ephesus for three years.

There, as Acts records, Paul rented a hall (the school of Tyrannus), and for five hours a day, six days a week for three solid years he taught the Scriptures. I would have given almost anything to have attended that special curriculum, taught by Paul. Many who were present went out through all the provinces spreading the truth, and among them was Epaphras. He came into the insignificant city of Colossae and probably started a home Bible class. He had friends also in Laodicea and started another class there and another one over in Hierapolis.

Epaphras simply told the people who came the truth about Jesus: the meaning of his death, the glory of his resurrection, his accessibility to them by means of the Spirit who came on the day of Pentecost. That began to excite them and awaken them in their hopeless condition. They found hope again, and faith and love came along with it. A healed community of beautiful people came into being and caught the attention of many in those pagan cities. That is God's favorite way of evangelism.

As you hear the Scriptures expounded here on Sunday, perhaps some of you may be thinking that if you only knew the Bible like one of the pastors, then you could be of use to God. But don't you see that you already are the important people, the true evangelists? You are out there, rubbing shoulders with people who have no hope, hearing their sad stories, meeting them in the streets and in the stores, having coffee with them. You are the ones who can spread the word of hope. That is how the gospel spread throughout the Roman province of Asia, and hundreds of churches came into being. The gospel has power to change, power to awaken, power to give hope, and out of hope springs faith and love. What a remarkable thing it is!

This area is our corner of the world. We too can see these very things happening here. What excitement will come into your life when you reach out with the good news, the only source of hope in the world, to the hopeless ones around.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you that you are the God of hope. You have sent a word of truth into this broken, despairing world. What a remarkable thing it is, in a world where everything comes to us biased and slanted by those with axes to grind, to find a place where there is a word of reality, a word of truth that we can trust! Send us now back into our world, to our friends, our neighbors, the hopeless ones around us, and help us to demonstrate, by the joy and peace of our lives, that we have found the answer, we have found the place of hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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