

WAITING IN HOPE FOR CHRIST

SERIES: WAITING FOR CHRIST



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Colossians 1:1-8
1st Message
Paul Taylor
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I want to start out this morning by asking a question. What do you hope for?

Here's what I hope for: that the two trees I planted in my side yard last summer will survive. We had been looking for these types of trees for a while and then found them on clearance at OSH for about twenty dollars each. So we got them and planted them. But I'm a little worried because I'm not sure how well they'll do. A few years ago we planted a similar tree and it's done great. I want so much for these trees to grow and flourish: to give us some shade and protection, but it's too early to tell.

We hope for a lot of things. I think hope is a uniquely human experience. I don't think my cat has hope. He gets excited when he hears the scoop in the food bowl, but I don't think he lays around yearning for a different world and hoping that his life could get better. My cat is actually in the habit of eating squirrels. I'll find squirrel skins lying in my yard pretty regularly. I have noticed that the squirrels he's eating are getting progressively larger. I think he's working his way up so I'm keeping a close eye on my youngest daughter these days. But I don't think my cat hopes for a world where squirrels are served on platters. I think hope is something humans do. I think hope is something humans need.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the theme for this week of Advent is hope. A lot of people talk about hope during this season. If you go to the mall, you'll probably see large signs proclaiming "HOPE," but what is hope?

This Advent season we're going to be starting a new series focusing on the themes of Advent: hope, joy, peace, and love. We'll do this by working our way through the book of Colossians. The first chapter or so of Colossians seems practically written to use for an Advent series. The traditional themes of hope, joy, peace, and love all show up in this first chapter. So we're going to start our series in Colossians as an Advent series and then continue to work our way through the book for a total of 12 weeks.

The focus of this Advent series is one of our favorite

things to do: wait. We are going to learn to wait. Waiting is one of the most frequently repeated commands in Scripture. The word Advent means "coming." For us as Christians, this is a season of waiting for the coming of Christ. Most people think that during Advent we wait for Christmas, but that's not actually the main focus. Christmas remembers the first coming of Jesus. Advent anticipates His second coming. Advent isn't about the coming that already came, but the coming that is yet to come. Advent is about waiting for Christ to return.

So as we look at each of the traditional themes of advent, we'll talk about how we wait for Christ's return with that theme in mind. As it happens, the first chapter of Colossians has a lot to say about who Christ is and what it means to wait for his return.

We'll be looking at the first eight verses in Colossians 1:1-8. It's basically the introduction to the letter, but one of the main themes is hope. Paul says something fairly remarkable about where hope comes from and where it leads. We're going to find out how easy it is to be confused about what hope is; what actually forms the basis for our hope; and how we see that at work in the world.

Reject False Hope

Paul began the first two verses of the letter with a fairly standard introduction in ancient times.

Colossians 1:1-2:

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the Colossians, whom he had never met. Whenever you start reading a letter in the Bible, you have to ask the question:

“Why did the author write this letter?” We see right away that the believers at Colosse seemed to be in pretty good shape. He said they were holy and faithful. In the verses that follow, Paul expressed thanks for the depth of their faith. So these guys were in an OK place. They were not brand-new believers. They didn’t rebel like the Corinthians. They didn’t walk away from their original belief like the Galatians. They were faithful Christians.

But Paul still wrote them a letter. He didn’t just say “Hey—you’re doing a great job, keep it up.” He wrote with a purpose. The Colossians were doing well, but they needed something. As we read through the book, we get the clear sense that these faithful people in Colosse were on the verge of believing some false stuff about Christ. They hadn’t fallen for it yet, but there was a strong influence in their midst that had the potential to confuse their faith. We’re not quite sure what this influence was: commentators call it “The Colossian Heresy” and there are plenty of opinions about what exactly it was. All we are sure of is that it was a threat to them. But as we keep reading, it’s clear the big issue has to do with the identity of Christ. Who was this Jesus that they claimed to believe in and what did it mean to worship him?

So we have a group of faithful believers who lived in the midst of threatening ideas that could cause confusion about Christ’s identity. I’d like to suggest that this is a picture of us here at Peninsula Bible Church. We are a diverse congregation with people in a lot of different stages of life, but for the most part, we are a group of faithful believers. We’re not mostly a church of new believers. We haven’t gone far astray from the truth of the gospel.

We live in a world that constantly gets in the way of our understanding of who Christ is. We’re constantly bombarded by false versions of who Christ is and what it means to hope. In fact, I’m convinced that there is no other time of the year where it is harder to focus on Christ in our culture than the season leading up to Christmas. Our culture has so thoroughly taken over Christmas, that we have to fight daily during this season to think about what this season means to believers.

Our culture acknowledges that Christmas is about hope, but what kind of hope? Here’s the real problem. Our culture has two wrong views of Christmas. The bad wrong view and the good wrong view. The bad wrong view is that Christmas is about stuff. Many retailers count on the Christmas shopping season to collect up to 50%

of their profits for the year. Two days ago, our country celebrated *Black Friday*, the biggest shopping day of the year. It’s a rich tradition. On Thursday you give thanks for everything you have. On Friday you go out and buy everything you don’t have. This is the bad wrong view of the Christmas season.

If that were the only version of the Christmas season that our culture offered, that would be OK. It would be easy to say that as Christians we focus on Christ instead of stuff. But the problem is that our culture has a “corrected” version of the Christmas season to offer us as well. Our culture recognizes the tendency to become materialistic during this season. So there’s all this talk about what this season really means. People say that this season is really about generosity, hospitality, kindness, love, and even hope. This is the good wrong version of Christmas. These are all good things, but it’s still a wrong version of the Advent season. In truth, Advent isn’t about being nice to each other. It isn’t even about generosity. Advent is about Christ.

Our call during Advent is to live in a world that offers a bunch of different false views of hope and to reject all of them. Like the Colossians, there are heresies all around us and we need to reject these false stories. We need to reject false hope.

This weekend my family and I watched *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.¹ It’s one of my favorite stories. It’s an inspiring story of the Grinch, whose heart was two sizes too small. He tried to steal Christmas by taking away all of the presents. When that didn’t quench the Christmas spirit, he realizes,

Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store

Maybe Christmas means a little bit more ...

So in Whoville they say, that the Grinch’s small heart grew two sizes that day.¹

That’s a beautiful story about a hard heart softening. It’s a good story, but it’s not really an Advent story. It’s the good wrong version of Christmas. We think Advent is about being nice and our hearts softening, but Advent is about Christ. Not us. Advent is about Christ fixing the world. Not us fixing the world through our generosity. Advent is about the kingdom of God finally declaring victory over the kingdom of this world. Advent isn’t about being nice. It’s about Christ.

Paul began his letter to the Colossians by telling them that he had something for them; something they needed to remember that came from God. He told them that he was an apostle. He wrote alongside Timothy, a faithful servant of Christ. He greeted them with the grace and peace of God our Father. The Colossians were in danger of being seduced away from the person of Christ to some other, not-quite-right view of things. They needed God to speak into this to set them straight. That's what this letter is and that's why we need to hear it. We're in the same place they were. We need to reject all the false notions that swirl around us in our world. We need God to re-center us on Christ.

When I bought those two trees for my yard on clearance at OSH, we asked the sales clerk how they'd do. She replied, "Oh, I'm sure they'll do really well in your yard." Think about that for a moment. She was sure they'd do really well in our yard. How was she sure? What did she base that on? She clearly hasn't been in my office and seen the series of healthy plants that come into my care only to dry up and wither away. Plants come to my office to die. So what makes her so sure?

That kind of thinking isn't hope—it's wishing and it makes me feel better—I want the sales clerk at OSH to be confident about the trees that I'm buying. I want her to be confident in my abilities to make them grow, but that's not what I want in the bigger questions of life. I want real certainty. I want something solid. I want to have real hope. Our culture offers us a kind of hope, but it's not based on who Christ is. Our first challenge is to reject false hope.

Hope in Christ

If we're rejecting the false pictures of hope that our world offers, what do we replace them with? We find out as Paul continued his introduction to the Colossians. He often starts his letters by giving thanks for the people he's writing to and we find this in verse 3.

Colossians 1:3-5a:

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—^{5a}the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and

that you have already heard about.

Paul gave thanks for what he had heard about in the lives of these Colossians. It's the essence of what it means to be a Christian. This is what it all boils down to: faith in Christ and love for other believers. We are defined by our faith in Christ. That's why you are here and that faith expresses itself in love for each other. Faith in Christ and love for all the saints is what it means to be a Christian.

Paul then said something that was very unique; he started talking about hope. That's not such a big deal: the ideas of faith, love, and hope are often seen together in Scripture. They form a sort of holy Trinity of our experience as Christians and they are usually seen together. Here Paul says that the Colossians' faith and love spring from their hope. Hope is the soil that faith and love grow out of and that's a really different idea. After all, Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for." So don't you need to have faith in order to have hope? Well, apparently not. In fact, if you read closely, even in Hebrews, hope must come first. What Paul seems to be saying here is that hope is the first thing. First you have hope. Then that hope allows you to have faith in Christ and love for each other. It all starts with hope, but how does that work?

Paul said that this hope is stored up in heaven. We need to be careful here because this phrase can be confusing to us. One version of the message of Christ that is prevalent in America is the idea that believing in Christ allows you to "get into heaven when you die." It's a ticket to the party at the end of the line. Most of us know that following Christ is a lot more than that, but it's a common idea in our society. So when we hear about "the hope that is stored up for you in heaven," that's probably what we think of. We get to go to heaven when we die. That's our hope.

However, this phrase doesn't mean that at all. The Greek word for heaven does not mean the place that you go when you die. That's always how we hear it, but the Bible never refers to heaven in that sense. Nowhere in the Bible does "heaven" mean a delightful place where you sit on clouds, listen to harp music, and are bored out of your skull. I used to wonder as a kid if I even wanted to go to heaven because it didn't sound that great. Instead, heaven in the New Testament refers to the place where God dwells. It refers to his domain, his kingdom, the spiritual reality, and the cosmic truth that we can't see. Heaven is the unseen kingdom where God reigns in contrast to the

kingdom that we are so keenly aware of or where money and power reign.

So to say that something is “stored up for you in heaven” in Greek culture is to say that it is certain. This hope is kept away where nothing from man and nothing from this world can get to it. This hope is secure, safe, and assured. Nothing can damage this hope.

So this is the hope that we have. We hope with absolute certainty in an unseen reality where Jesus really is King. We hope in the knowledge that this new kingdom will eventually be the only kingdom. Heaven will come to earth. As we reject the false pictures that our world gives us, we replace them with this picture of a life stored away in heaven. We replace them with Christ. We need to learn to hope in Christ.

Ironically enough, Advent can be one of the hardest times of the year to really think about what we hope for. We make the Advent season so much about Christmas that we forget to look beyond it. We don't hope for Christmas. December 25 will come soon enough. We don't hope for Jesus' birth—that already happened. So what do we hope for? What does that “HOPE” sign at the mall really mean?

A lot of us don't even know: we just want hope. The problem is that hope isn't really a thing. Hope isn't a sweater that you put on to feel warm. It's the knowledge that someone is knitting a sweater for you. Hope is an arrow that points to something. It's the sound of a loved one approaching. It's a FedEx tracking number.

My family loves to eat Clementines during the summer when they are in season: those small little oranges that you can peel really easily. One of our favorite things to do is to see if you can peel the whole Clementine in one big strip. Then my kids like to hold it in their hands so that it looks like a complete orange, offer it to me, and laugh at the fact that when I grab it, the whole thing collapses because it's just the peel of an orange.

This is the kind of hope that people talk about at Christmas. Nobody cares about a FedEx tracking number—they care about the package. An arrow that doesn't point to anything is pointless: literally. It's a vague, empty notion that something good will happen in the future.

One commentator said that:

The false teachers at Colosse were intending to rob them of this aspect of the Christian message, possibly by denying any future dimension of Christian salvation.²

This was part of the false ideas that the Colossians were surrounded by and it is certainly one of the false ideas that we are surrounded by. We are tempted to believe that our Christian life is entirely about now. About worshipping, serving, loving, and being loved. It's easy for us to forget that the Christian message is that something better is coming. Not just a season of peace in our marriage or growth for our church, but an eternity of life with God.

When our world talks about hope, all it has to offer is an empty orange peel or a salesman's assurance that everything will be fine. We have so much more and yet we forget. Paul told the Colossians that they had already heard about this hope. He wanted them to realize that they didn't need some new teaching. They didn't need some new story to inspire them. They needed to be inspired by the story they had. They had heard the message of hope.

Without hope, there is no faith or love. We are able to maintain our faith in Christ because we have hope that he is returning. We are able to walk with him now because of what he has promised for the future. Faith springs from hope. We're able to love one another because we're waiting for him together. We're a family gathered at the airport waiting for our long lost brother to come home from the war. As we wait for him, we are connected together by our love for him and our love for each other springs from our hope. So hope forms the basis of all of this because without hope, everything falls apart.

Find Hope in The Gospel

That's why we need this letter. We need to know how to have this hope. We need to know what Paul said to the Colossians. We're always dangerously close to living our Christian lives entirely in the present and forgetting that we are supposed to be waiting for Christ to return. Where does this hope come from?

Colossians 1:5b-8:

^{5b}You have already heard about [this hope] in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶that has

come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing 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. ⁷You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Finally, Paul tells us where this hope comes from. It comes from the gospel. The gospel is what gives us hope. From this hope springs forth faith and love. So as we learn to hope in Christ, we need to understand the gospel. We need to find hope in the gospel.

But what is the gospel and why should we find hope in it? Paul says that the gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the earth. That's a great clue to understanding why the gospel brings hope. Do you remember the first command that God gave to Adam and Eve after he created them? He told them bear fruit and grow over all the earth. That's what Paul says the gospel is doing now.

This helps us to understand why the gospel is the source of hope. First, God created the earth. Have you seen this planet? It's incredible. It's beautiful. One of my favorite things about living in California is that we have fruit trees in our backyard. For a few weeks a year, I can walk outside of my house, reach up to a tree branch, pull a purple sphere off that branch, and bite into it. This causes one of the most incredible tastes I can imagine in my mouth. It's awesome.

After God created this world, He created two people: Adam and Eve, a man and a woman, with the instruction to enjoy the fruit of this world and to be fruitful themselves. Eating fruit is fun and being fruitful is fun too. God gave us sex as a way to be fruitful and we can admit this, even in church: sex is fun. It's enjoyable. It's incredible. This world was created with enjoyable fruit and enjoyable fruitfulness.

But then something terrible happened. Everything was all tarnished and God's plan was thwarted. We destroyed what we had because of our selfish pride, so we were cast out of the garden. But the rest of the story is that God had mercy on us. He sent his Son to suffer the exile that we deserve and Jesus is returning to restore everything so it will be even better than it had been in the garden. Jesus is fixing the world.

That's the gospel: the message that things will be made right. Paul says it is bearing fruit and growing. It's doing what I hope the trees in my side yard will do one day, or rather, what I wish they would do. This is the same thing God told Adam and Eve to do; what they were supposed to do in the first place. The gospel is the message that God is fixing this world.

Our problem is that sometimes we just don't believe that. Sometimes we look around the world and think the gospel is stagnant, weak, impotent, and ineffective. Or maybe we even think the gospel is making things worse: creating division and alienating people. We wonder if we got taken in by an over-confident salesperson.

Pretty much every day when I come home, I look at those two trees that I planted to see how they are doing. They aren't growing. In fact, they are losing their leaves. For the last few months, they looked a little tired, but now they look worse. Should I just conclude that those trees are doomed to die?

We know that trees take time to grow. We know that we're entering into winter when trees look dead before coming back to life. The gospel is the same way. Our perspective is often too small problem when we think about the gospel. We want fast dramatic change and that isn't always the way things work.

One of the best ways for me to be discouraged in ministry is to ask myself what I did this last week. I had a few conversations, spent a bunch of time studying and preparing, did some administrative work, and prayed a lot. But not much really happened. That's why I can't let myself think that way. It's so much more encouraging for me to ask what happened over the last year. Then I can see the gospel at work in the lives of students and young adults and in my own life. But that doesn't come naturally. Our first tendency is to look at the short term and wonder whether the gospel is doing any good at all.

That causes us to think that we need something else; we need something more than the gospel to really see our lives changed. We need some new insight or some new spiritual technique. Our world needs something more than the gospel to be really changed. We need new technology, new ideas, and new thoughts. The plain old gospel just isn't working. But if we have eyes to see, the gospel is growing and bearing fruit. When you remember who Christ is and anticipate His return then the gospel is growing in your life

Paul finished this section as he reminded them that they heard the gospel from Epaphras. The very fact that they read this letter was evidence that the gospel was growing throughout the world. Epaphras was part of this vine of the gospel growing and spreading everywhere. It's connected to Paul and came through Epaphras. The gospel was on the move and God used people to spread it. Where the gospel goes, there is faith and love. Epaphras was a faithful servant; he experienced the love of the Colossians and brought that report back to Paul. So the gospel grows into new areas and buds of faith and love sprout from the hope it creates.

This is the story that the Colossians were a part of. It's the story that we are a part of. All of us, 2000 years later, are evidence that the gospel is at work in the world. God is in the process of fixing the world back to what it was always meant to be. This is our hope; the hope in Christ that comes from the gospel.

Conclusion

My trees may or may not make it. I'm not sure and I won't be sure for at least another year or more. But I do know that Christ will return. He will fix everything. The gospel of Jesus Christ is moving throughout the world and restoring this creation back to what it was originally intended to be. He is redeeming the earth and he is redeeming our relationships with God and each other. This hope gives us faith in Christ: it establishes us as Christians. It allows us to love one another. This is the truth of hope in Christ that we need to hold on to in the midst of nice-sounding, but ultimately empty, ideas of hope from our world. We need to focus on Christ.

Christians throughout the history of our faith have realized that we simply tend to forget. What we need regularly is to remember. As part of my preparation to preach this series in Colossians, I've been trying to memorize the entire book. I've gotten through about half the book by now. I'm telling you this partly so that I have the accountability to finish up. As long as the idea stays in my head, I can change my mind. Making it public means I have to follow through. So I've been trying to recite the portions of Colossians that I've memorized and I'm constantly amazed at how foreign it always sounds to me. I may know it by heart, but when I say it aloud, I almost always have the experience of "Wow—that's an interesting idea. That seems really important to remember." It's like every time I say it, I'm hearing it for the first time because

I forget so easily. So my encouragement to you is to find a way to remember.

So as we start out the season of Advent, we begin a season of hope. Not the generic hope of a shopping mall Advent display, but real concrete hope of Christ's return to fix this world. We know that we are prone to losing hope or hoping in a vague hallmark notion of good things to come. We know that we need to focus our hope on Christ and nothing else. We know that the gospel we have believed is at work in the world. We just need to remember all those things as we wait for Christ. May God help us to remind each other.

Interpretive Translation by Paul Taylor

Colossians 1:1-8:

(1-2) It was God's idea to make me an apostle, not mine. But here I am, Paul, writing you a letter along with my brother Timothy to our spiritual family in Colosse. You live transformed lives and have been true to Christ day in and day out. May you always have the assurance that God our Father favors you and the well-being that this assurance brings.

(3-8) I pray for you all the time. When I do, I can't help but give thanks for you to God. The God that we call Father is also the Father of the one we serve: Jesus Christ. Even though I've never met you, everyone keeps telling me about your rock-solid faith in Christ and your over-the-top love toward each other. Faith and love like that can only grow out of the absolutely certain hope for what God is bringing about in the

world. When you heard the Truth first presented to you, you finally had a clear glimpse of God's Story. That started changing everything in your life. But not just your life: you saw God's Story spreading like a vine over the whole world. This Story has such a simple truth at its core: God shows favor to people. It was Epaphras who first let you in on it. He's a great guy. I'm so glad he's on our team: sharing the same message that we are. He told you about God's love and he told us about your love for each other.

NOTES

¹Chuck Jones & Ben Washam, Directors, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, 1966. ©The Cat in the Hat Productions. All rights reserved.

²Ralph P. Martin, *New Century Bible Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Eerdmans Publishers, 1982), 48.