

Title: *What Hope Does*

Text: Colossians 1:1-8

Earlier this year, *New York Times* editorialist Nicholas Kristof wrote a column praising the work of many evangelical Christians. Kristof begins by noting that at times evangelical leaders act hypocritically and don't reflect Christ. However, he also goes on to write:

But in reporting on poverty, disease and oppression, I've seen so many others.

Evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate 10 percent of their incomes to charities, mostly church-related. More important, go to the front lines, at home or abroad, in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison rape, obstetric fistula, human trafficking or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics, similar in many ways) who truly live their faith.

I'm not particularly religious myself, but I stand in awe of those I've seen risking their lives in this way—and it sickens me to see that faith mocked at New York cocktail parties.

We are embarking this morning on an expository study of the book of Colossians. Paul is writing from a prison in Rome to a church which he did not found, but to a church which is very prosperous and is in danger of allowing other non-Christian beliefs to be blended in with the doctrine of Christ and to contaminate the church.

In many ways, as Paul writes the letter, he is using the ordinary letter-writing conventions of his time, but in other ways, there is not a wasted word or an insignificant word in what he says.

These words come to us through the pen and through the thoughts of the apostle Paul. He's the one who was set apart and was uniquely equipped and qualified to take the Christian faith to the Gentile world. His mind was one of the sharpest of his day if not of any day. He was uniquely qualified to translate the good news of a Jewish Messiah into terms that would be understood and appreciated by a Gentile world. His letters always have a purpose. That may sound like an obvious statement, but if you can discern his purpose in writing, you have the context and the major clue you need to understanding what he says, why he says it and the way that he says it.

There is a gnostic heresy that is taking hold that basically said, "The key to salvation is acquiring enough of the right kind of knowledge." Matter is evil and the body is evil but the spirit is good and salvation comes by acquiring the right kind of knowledge. Paul counters all of that basically by saying, "The knowledge you really need is the knowledge of Jesus Christ." "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creation."

He addresses the recipients of the letter as the holy and faithful brothers in Christ in Colosse. He thanks God for them and he wishes for them to know the fullness of the grace and peace of God.

Paul says, “This gospel that you believe is bearing fruit and its growing and all of this springs from the hope that is stored up in Heaven.” We’ll come back to say more about that in a moment. He says to them, “You have hope because of this gospel and this gospel is now bearing fruit all over the world.”

If this were a Sunday or a Wednesday evening teaching time, I might, at this point try to get some discussion going about what is hope and how does hope shape our behavior. It seems like I use the image of Mother Teresa a lot. That is because she is such a compelling figure and one of the greatest Christian examples of our time. She said of her work with sick and the dying and the poorest of the poor, “We want to create hope for the person . . . we must give hope, always hope.”

Think about what she’s saying here. She wants to give hope. How can you give something that you don’t have? Wouldn’t it be the thought that you do have hope that would make you want to share that hope with someone else? Martin Luther said, “Every thing that is done in the world is done by hope.”

Robert Schuller said, “Some one once said to me, ‘Reverend Schuller, I hope you live to see all your dreams fulfilled.’ I replied, I hope not, because if I live and all my dreams are fulfilled, I’m dead.’ It’s unfulfilled dreams that keep you alive.”

I was looking at different quotes that center on hope and I found something interesting. Those who come at it from the perspective of Jesus Christ are positive about hope and those who are not believers in Jesus Christ – some who are famously, militantly opposed to Christ, such as Friedrich Nietzsche – are cynical about hope. Isn’t cynicism the opposite of hope?

Hope fills us with thoughts of what the possibilities are. The way things could be. Robert F. Kennedy said, “There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask *why*? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” That quote is a variation on something said originally by George Bernard Shaw. Paul realizes that it is hope that makes the church at Colosse and it is hope that can enable them to take their eyes off of themselves and to go out and serve a world in need.

He’s thankful to God for them. It is a kind of standard convention in Paul’s letters that he will express thanksgiving for the people to whom he’s writing in his letters. There is one notable exception. He doesn’t give thanks in Galatians because he’s really ticked off that they have deserted the one true gospel and are turning back to things that are not the gospel. He could have taken a similar tack in addressing the issues that he will have to address in Colosse. He could have said, “You’ve heard the gospel.” You’ve had it presented to you who Jesus Christ is. Can’t you just think that one through? If you do, you’ll agree with the aspiring young theologian in our church who said, “Once you discover who Jesus is, there’s no going back.”

Paul had serious issues to address but he does at least let these people that he’s never met before that he is thankful for them. He’s thankful to God for the work that has taken place and that God’s grace has reached this group of people even though he’s never met them before.

Paul is able to say, “We’ve heard about your faith in Jesus Christ and we know that you have love for all the saints.” Even though they were getting fuzzy on understanding just who Jesus Christ is, they still had some faith and they did have a love for all the saints. That is something to be thankful for.

Maybe you have someone that you care about. You’ve been witnessing to them at work and somehow or other and God’s work is not complete yet in their life. They’re growing and they’re asking questions but their questions sometimes to come out of left field but they ask because they want to learn and they want to grow. Are you thankful for the work that God is doing in their life?

Where do the faith and love come from? Paul says it comes from the hope in heaven that is stored up for them in Jesus Christ. Maybe the best way to understand hope is to look at it in contrast with what hope is not. What is it like to have no hope? To face all of the stuff that we face in this life and wonder what’s the meaning of it all? You can withstand a lot of difficulties if you have hope. Hope comes from seeing God’s hand at work and knowing that there is redemption in our suffering and adversity. God will use it for some higher and greater purpose in our life and one day it will make sense. That realization is one of the greatest benefits of being a Christian.

As I was working and struggling with this sermon, I read an e-mail prayer request about a young woman who is being tested for lymphoma and for lupus. She’s 25 years old, has 2 small children and has just been devastated by a miscarriage. Hope doesn’t presume to go to her and tell her why things are happening the way they are. Hope says, “God loves you. You’re his child. This hasn’t taken Him by surprise and though I wouldn’t presume to offer up easy answers, I do know that He will hold you close and he will use it somehow for His glory and your good.” That gives peace.

One pastor wrote, “As I was writing the end of my sermon yesterday, the telephone rang and a student said, “Last night my child died.” What could I say to him? I will say to him what I would say to anyone. It’s captured in this gospel song: When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace; when all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.”

Not to have hope can fill you with bitterness and resentment. Can cause all kinds of emotional distress and despair and can cause you to withdraw and say “I no longer care,” because what do you have to offer anyone else?

But Paul tells the Colossians, “You have hope. You know that in Jesus Christ, there is a promise of a better tomorrow and a brighter future.” Henri Nouwen says, “Hope prevents us from clinging to what we have and frees us to move away from the safe place and enter unknown and fearful territory.” Hope because of the gospel says whatever God has for us is good because it is from God.

You’ve heard about this hope through the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel that is bearing fruit all over the world. I had never stopped to consider just what a powerful motivating

force hope is to get us to act in a loving way and to take great risks for the gospel. A John Piper sermon gave me some great new insights.

In Hebrews 10 we read words of encouragement to believers who had endured great difficulty and a call to them to keep on keepin' on and not to lose heart or to give up. The writer says, <sup>32</sup> "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. <sup>33</sup> Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. <sup>34</sup> You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."

You may ask, "What does that have to do with hope?" The church was experiencing persecution. The writer to the Hebrews is writing to believers who were turning away from pure faith in Jesus Christ and were turning back. To understand this, you have to ask who was in prison and why were they in prison? These were fellow believers in prison simply because they were believers. Some may have been more outspoken than others or may have been "in the wrong place at the wrong time and been the ones who were arrested and thrown into jail. The idea of prison ministry wasn't viewed as nobly then as it is now. If you visit someone in jail, it must be because you were somehow in cahoots with them. To go and visit a fellow brother and sister in jail was to risk identifying with them and getting arrested because you would be declaring yourself guilty of the same offense as they were – being a Christ-follower. Why would you do that? The writer to the Hebrews tells us, "You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions." That's hope. Confiscation of property in this life will hurt for a little while but I'm living my life with the perspective of eternity because that's where my hope really is. If it's not a renunciation of worldly possessions, it is at least a detachment from them.

In a similar way, the same writer to the Hebrews makes a similar observation about Moses. In Hebrews 11:24-26 he says, <sup>24</sup> "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. <sup>25</sup> He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. <sup>26</sup> He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." He could shun the treasure of Pharaoh's palace because he knew one day there would be better and more lasting treasure waiting for him.

Paul reminds the Colossians who are getting confused about the true nature of the gospel and who are being tempted to water down their gospel somewhat that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that gives them a hope that waiting in heaven. It is the gospel you received – not some gnostic other gospel that gives you hope. There may be other things that are trendy and fashionable that seem right and sound good but offer no real substance.

Just as this gospel has come to you and is bearing fruit and spreading all over the world. It will set you free from self-absorption and fear that paralyzes you and keeps you from making any

difference when talking about the hurt in the world.

Notice just a couple of more things. One is the role of grace in initiating this. It is all of God's initiative. There is amazing, awesome power in the simple proclamation of the gospel in its simplicity and there truly is something amazing about grace. Notice then that they learned this from Epaphras. There is a human agency to the spread of the gospel. Someone hears the story, is amazed by the grace and because of the hope that fills their heart is able to take a risk and do something radical.

It is often said, "That person is so heavenly-minded they are no earthly good." The truth is once you understand your hope in heaven, you're able to take great risks for the cause of Jesus Christ and do things that you could never do before.

Preached at Salem Avenue. September 25, 2011 a.m.