

“The Foundation of True Thanks”
Colossians 1:1-8
May 30, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We begin a new series this morning, and with it, we’re going to try something new for us in the months ahead.

This morning we begin in Colossians. And we’ll stay in Colossians from now until September. And in September we’ll pause the series in Colossians to start a series on a book of the Old Testament – maybe Deuteronomy. And we’ll continue in Deuteronomy until Advent or Christmas, at which point we’ll pause the series on Deuteronomy and spend from January to Easter or Pentecost in a Gospel – maybe Mark. And then, when we get to Pentecost we will pick up where we left off in Colossians, and in September we’ll pick up where we left off in Deuteronomy, and so on.

The idea is to continue our practice of preaching through whole books of the Bible in the morning, but to give us something of a seasonal rotation that lets us spend part of each year in the Old Testament, part in a Gospel, and part in another book of the New Testament. If we like it and stick with it, we may make some adjustments. And if we don’t like it, we can go back to long stretches in single books. We’ll see.

But this morning we start our post-Pentecost season with the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

With that said, please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

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

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ 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, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, look upon us and deliver us,
for we do not forget your word.
Be our advocate and redeem us,
and give us life according to your promise.
Great is your mercy, Lord,
and so we ask you to give us life according to your law.
Help us now to love your word,
and give us life according to your steadfast love.
The sum of your word is truth,
and every line of your word endures forever.
And so help us to attend to it now, and grow in your truth,
in Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:153-154, 156, 159-160]

Introduction

Over the past couple years I've done a good bit of reading and thinking and talking with those more experienced than I am, on the topic of leadership, and how to lead an institution. It's an important topic for a pastor, I've learned, and one which seminary gives little to no training for.

And in that context one of our elders introduced me to the "Five Whys" approach to problem solving that was developed by the Toyota Motor Corporation. It's a method to identify the root cause of something. The idea is that when a problem comes up, you keep asking why. And usually after around five whys you arrive at the root cause.

So if a car won't start, you ask why. You find out the battery is dead. Then you ask a second time: Why? Because the alternator is not working. A third time: Why? The alternator belt is broken. A fourth time: Why? Because the belt was used beyond its useful service life. A fifth time: Why? Well, because the manufacturer's recommended maintenance schedule was not followed. You arrive at the root cause. Five whys to get there is not magic – but it is common.
[Steven Spear]

This morning I want to use the five whys method to find the root cause – and the other causes along the way – not of something negative, but of something positive.

Paul begins this letter by acknowledging he is thankful. He writes to the Colossians: "We always thank God." And as we read this paragraph, we get the sense that Paul is not describing a grudging thanks, born out of duty, but thanks expressed towards God that grows out of true thankfulness. A thankfulness we could all use to have more of.

If we know ourselves at all, we know we are not as thankful as we should be. We know how often grumbling seizes our own hearts. But Paul here is thankful. And he gives us a model of thankfulness. And he explains to us the source of his thankfulness. As one commentator puts it, Paul here explains to us "the ultimate cause of [his] thanksgiving." [Moo, 73; also Wright, 48]

And that is what I want to consider this morning – asking “Why?” five times, in order to get there.

Another way to think of it might be like this. Paul’s thankfulness is like a rooftop garden on a five-story building. We want to start on top, and go down, one level at a time, to see what is supporting the layers above. In the end, we get to the ground floor and see the foundation it all rests on.

That is our plan for this morning.

First Why

So, with that said, we come to our first why: Why is Paul thankful?

And we find the answer in verses three and four. There Paul writes: “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.”

Paul is thankful because he has heard of the Colossian Christians’ faith and love. If we have started on the rooftop garden of Paul’s thankfulness, then when we drill down to the level underneath what we find is that the source – the basis – of Paul’s thankfulness is the faith and love that he has heard of in the Colossian Christians.

That faith, of course, is not just generic faith. It is specifically “faith in Christ Jesus” as he says in verse four. It is not just intellectual ascent to an idea, or a philosophy, or a worldview, but it is faith in a person. It is faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth, who lived the life we should have lived, died the death we deserved to die, rose from the dead, and has now ascended to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God the Father, where he reigns over the universe.

That is what the Colossians have placed their faith in – or, more accurately – that is who the Colossian Christians have placed their faith in. The Colossian Christians are living their lives trusting in Jesus. And that leads Paul to thankfulness.

But that’s not the only thing that leads Paul to thankfulness. The other thing he gives thanks for, he says, is the love that they have for all the saints. Paul identifies that in verse four, and then he brings it up again in verse eight.

And the kind of love that Paul gives thanks for is even reflected in Paul’s greeting. In verse one Paul identifies the believers in Colossae as the “faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.” (The Greek word included both brothers and sisters, as the ESV footnote indicates.) We can tend to overlook how striking this statement was: Paul, a Jew, referring to Gentile believers as his “brothers and sisters.” That was a strange thing for him to say in his day. But Paul knew that the love between them in Christ overcame the divisions of the world. He loved those whom the world expected him to hate. And he not only loved them, he identified them as his truest family.

[Wright, 50] That was shocking. And that was a picture of the kind of love he praises the Colossians for, and the love we are supposed to value in the church as well.

One commentator writes: “For Paul, the sure sign of grace at work was the fact of a loving community created out of nothing: of a *love* not restricted to those with whom one has a natural affinity, but which extends to *all the saints*.” [Wright, 55; also Garland, 43]

It is that love, combined with their faith in Jesus, that leads to Paul’s thankfulness.

Which should lead us to the question: Is that what leads us to thankfulness as well?

What sort of things in our lives, and in the lives of those around us, are most likely to lead us to thankfulness?

When it comes to your close loved ones: Your good friends ... your family ... your parents, your children, your siblings – what leads you to the greatest thankfulness in that relationship? Is it when you see their faith and their love for God’s people? Or do you tend to focus on more superficial things? Do you tend to overlook their faith and the love they show because you’re more focused on something else – on what they do for you, or on how they help or hurt your reputation, or on how they are succeeding or failing in worldly pursuits? What do you tend to focus on? Is it what Paul focuses on ... or is it something else?

What about our church? What are the most important things you look at here to determine whether or not you’ll be thankful for our congregation? Is it whether we, as a community, are walking in faith in Jesus Christ, and showing love for one another and for “all the saints” ... or do you tend to focus on something else? Do you tend to care more about other things?

Interestingly, looking at and caring too much about the wrong things can lead to two opposite results. It could lead to discontentedness because you’re focusing on things that we lack but that are not that important, *or* it could lead to a false sense of self-satisfaction and smugness, because you are content about how good we are over something relatively superficial, even if we are not really walking in faith and love as we should.

What do you most value here? Is it the intellectual rigor of our congregation? Is it the rich heritage of our church? Is it the wonderful music we have in our worship? Is it the preaching? Is it our commitment to Christian education? Is it some other program or achievement of our past?

Look, those are all good things – I care about those things. But if we have all of those things but we lack active living faith in Jesus, and true, genuine, lived-out love for one another and for all God’s people, then we have neglected what is most important, and any contentedness we do feel about our church is really just smug self-satisfaction and false confidence.

Or maybe you focus more on what we lack. Maybe you are upset about a program we lack, or a theme you think should be more present in our sermons, or the resources being lost in our generational transition, or something else. And maybe you’re right. Maybe you should work to help us grow in that area you have in mind. But if you care more about that than about whether

or not we, as a congregation, are trusting Jesus and truly loving one another, then you have gotten things turned upside down. Because as important as other things are, nothing should be more important than whether we are trusting Christ and loving his people.

What about in your own life? What leads you to give thanks for how you are doing? Is it when you see evidence of increased faith, and increased love for God's people, in your heart and life? Or do you tend to get even more excited, and feel even more thankful about getting a raise, or succeeding at work, or losing ten pounds ... or doing something that may have real value, but not nearly as much value as true faith and true love.

Paul has true thankfulness. Why? Because he has heard that the Christians in Colossae – his brothers and sisters in Christ there – have faith in Jesus Christ and love for their fellow believers. And so the first thing for us to realize is that if we desire true thankfulness, we need to be thankful for the right things – for the presence of faith and love in ourselves and those around us.

So that is the first why: Why is Paul thankful? Because the Colossian Christians have faith in Christ Jesus and love for one another.

Second Why

That then leads us to the second why: Why do the Colossian Christians have faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints?

Paul answers that question in verse four and the first portion of five. There we read: “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.”

What is striking here is that Paul often groups faith, hope, and love together, but this is the only place where he makes hope the basis of faith and love. [Moo, 85; Garland, 48; Gupta, 41]

Which leads to a few follow-up questions.

First, what is the hope Paul here speaks of?

Tim Keller writes: “The biblical word *elpida*, translated as the weaker English word *hope*, means profound certainty.” [Keller, xix]

The hope Paul speaks of here is not wishful thinking or even probable expectation. It is a profound certainty of what is to come. It is a confident assurance about what they can expect.

And what is it exactly that they expect? What is the content of their hope – of their profound certainty about what is to come?

It is, as one writer puts it: a confidence of “the glorious future that Christ has established for believers.” [Garland, 48] – the “total [...] blessing that awaits the Christian in the life to come.” [BDAG, quoted in Moo, 85].

This hope, Paul stresses in verse five, is stored up for them in heaven, where Christ is. It’s not something that they have possession of yet. [Moo, 85] But it’s something they will be given.

It is the promise of the gospel that all who trust in Christ will, when they die, go to be with the Lord. And even more than that, when Christ returns, they will be raised from the dead, and they, and all of God’s people – all who have trusted in Christ – will live forever with God, in a new heaven and a new earth, with no sin, or sickness, or pain, or death, for all eternity. That is the Christian hope Paul here speaks of.

And he says it leads to faith and love in the Colossian Christians. How does it do that?

Well, this confident hope leads them to faith in Christ because if Christ has given them such a future, they know that he can also be trusted with their present. If Christ has both the power and the love to die for them, and overcome sin and death, and guarantee them a place in the new heavens and the new earth – if this is the future he has freely given them out of grace, then surely, he can also be trusted with their present struggles, whatever challenges they may face. In fact, even when they don’t understand what he is doing in the present, they can trust him, because the future he has secured for them proves his power and his love for them.

Does your Christian hope for the future lead to that kind of faith regarding your present circumstances? And if not, how do you need to meditate further on the hope you have in Christ?

So Christian hope leads to further faith in Christ.

But how does the hope of the Christian gospel lead to loving other believers now?

Well, C. S. Lewis answers that question very effectively in his essay “The Weight of Glory.” In this essay, Lewis argues that many of our problems with how we treat those around us come about because we fail to live out the implications of our Christian hope: the promise that every single person – every man, woman, and child – will exist for all eternity, either glorified in God’s present, or, if they reject God, turned grotesquely inward on themselves, for all of eternity.

And realizing that should affect how we treat one another now – especially how we treat other believers. Lewis puts it this way – he writes:

“The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else [they may one day be] a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or [the] other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all

our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.” [Lewis, 45-46]

Lewis is right. But we so often fail to live as if this is true. The hope of the gospel means that our relationships with fellow believers are eternal. Yet we break those relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ over nonsense *all the time*. We do it all the time. Sure, we maybe saw more of that in the past fifteen months as friendships, and family relationships, and church relationships, were broken over the strains of 2020 – but that wasn’t a new phenomenon, it was just an acceleration of what we do all the time. We break off relationships with fellow believers, whom we are called to be in relationship with for all eternity ... and we most often do it over petty nonsense that will pass away.

Of course sometimes relationships break for weighty reasons, and we can only achieve so much reconciliation in this life. But much more often we break them over eternally insignificant things. Think of what Lewis said. Your career will pass away. Your family ties, in a sense, will pass away. Your nation, and therefore your politics will pass away. Our denomination, and our congregation with its unique preferences and culture, will pass away. But your relationships to the people in this room will *never* pass away. Your relationships to fellow believers outside of this room will *never* pass away. Those relationships are eternal.

Do you love those fellow believers as if that is actually true? If you don’t, then you need to take more seriously the hope of the gospel, and you need to intentionally work out how that hope relates to each of your individual relationships to other Christians.

So, as we zoom out again: why is Paul thankful? Because of the faith and love of the Colossian Christians.

Why are the Colossian Christians walking in faith in Jesus and love for all the saints? Because of the certain hope that is laid up for them in heaven.

Third Why

That then leads us to our third why: Why do the Colossian Christians have this hope?

What has caused them to have this certain hope – this confidence – in the future they have in Christ?

And Paul answers that question in verse five. Paul speaks of their hope. And then he says, “Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.”

Paul uses three words there to describe what they have heard: word, truth, and gospel. [Moo, 86]

First, what they have heard is gospel. It is good news. It is the proclamation of who Jesus Christ is, what he has done, and what it means for us. While it has many implications for how we should live, it is not fundamentally self-help, but news – news of Jesus. [Wright, 56]

Second, the gospel they have received is the word – in this case, the word of God. It is a message from God, communicated to them by his ministers, and later written for us in the Scriptures.

Third, the word of the gospel they have heard is true. It is true in that it accurately represents reality. The news proclaimed about Jesus in the gospel is not Paul’s truth, or Epaphras’s truth, it’s *the* truth – *true* truth, as Francis Schaeffer called it. It can be relied on. It is a solid, reliable basis on which to build your life.

And the fact that it was true truth was important because the Colossians faced opposing truth claims. Colossae was a cosmopolitan city, and the people there were familiar with a range of cultural and religious movements. [Moo, 77; Wright, 54]

The Colossians were facing rival teaching. They were not a cloistered church or an isolated church, and Paul did not tell them to become one in order to avoid rival truth claims and temptations to false teaching. Instead, Paul tells them that the way to strengthen themselves against the threats of the unbelieving world – the threat of rival spiritual and philosophical claims – is to focus on the truth they have. Because if they really understood that they had already received the ‘true word of God’ then the false teachers would hold no appeal for them. [Moo, 82]

So, why does Paul give thanks? Because of the faith and love of the Colossian Christians. Why do the Christians in Colossae have this faith and love? Because of the hope they have in heaven through Jesus Christ. Why do they have this certain hope? Because they have heard the word of truth, the gospel.

Fourth Why

That brings us to our fourth why: Why did the Colossians hear this word of truth, the gospel?

They have heard this good news of the gospel because God sent it out to them, through his messengers.

That’s what Paul says in the beginning of verse six. He points out that the Colossians did not seek out this word of truth, but it came to them. And it came to them because God sent it out to them.

God sent out the proclamation of his gospel. But he has done it in a specific way. He has done it through his messengers. In the case of the Colossians, that messenger was Epaphras. That’s what we read in verse seven – Paul says that the gospel is the truth “just as you learned it from Epaphras.”

Little is known about Epaphras. It would seem likely that he was in many ways a fairly ordinary minister in Colossae. But Paul highlights him. Paul calls him a “beloved fellow servant” along with himself. Paul goes on to praise him as a “faithful minister of Christ.” [Moo, 90-91]

Though Paul is an apostle, and though Paul is much better known in the broader Church than Epaphras, and though Paul was a genius of his day, who spoke before governors and kings, Paul stresses his unity with Epaphras, and speaks of them as being on the same level – as “fellow servants” of Christ. One commentator writes: “[Paul] does not view Epaphras as one of his underlings but treats him as his collaborator and clarifies that both serve Christ. Epaphras does not have two masters, Christ and Paul. He has only *one* – Christ.” [Garland. 50]

Epaphras is remarkable not because of any great skill noted in him, but because he was a faithful servant of Christ, and God used this ordinary but faithful man to send out his word of truth to others.

So who are the Epaphrases that God has sent to you? Who are the ordinary people God has sent to you, to speak the word of truth to you – the gospel? Who are those people in your life ... and do you listen to them? Do you recognize that God is working through them in your life in just the same way as he worked through the Apostle Paul? Do you recognize that hearing them is key to your faith, your love, and the thanksgiving that God could bring to you and those around you?

And if you’re not listening to the Epaphrases that God is sending you, who do you tend to listen to instead ... and why? As we will see, the Colossians were dealing with false teachers. And successful false teachers are often quite intelligent, and quite charismatic. But even if their false teachers seemed more impressive, it was Epaphras that God was working through. So who are the Epaphrases that you need to hear?

And then, with that, in whose life is God calling you to be an Epaphras? Maybe you think you are too ordinary to speak truth into others’ lives. Maybe all you have to say seems too basic and obvious. But God may still be calling you to that. In all likelihood he is. It’s not glamorous usually. It’s often mundane. But it is the way God so often works: an Epaphras speaking God’s truth to others. Reminding them of gospel truths. Encouraging them with God’s promises. Confronting them with God’s commands. Appealing to them with God’s gospel. Epaphras is not praised for his skill or cleverness. He’s praised for his faithfulness and his willingness to be a servant of Christ. And so God works through him. The result is hope, faith, love, and thanksgiving.

Fifth Why

Which brings us to our fifth and final why: Why did God send out his gospel?

And the answer is because of his grace and love.

That is what is at the foundation of this all: God’s grace. That is what Paul mentioned they heard and understood in verse six ... but, of course, God’s grace is not only the content of what they

heard, but the reason they heard it – the reason God sent out his word: because of his grace and love.

And that is the bottom floor – that is the foundation of Paul’s thankfulness: the root of it all. It is what supports this whole paragraph here in our text. At root, this paragraph is about how God’s grace works in the world. [Wright, 53]

God’s grace leads God to send out his word of truth – the good news of the gospel – through his servants. His servants speak that gospel to others, which leads them to hear the word of truth – the good news of Jesus Christ. That good news of Jesus Christ gives hope, because it tells them of the future that is secure for them in Jesus, if they give their ultimate allegiance to him. That hope makes them able place their faith in Jesus for their lives now, and to act in love towards their fellow believers, with an eye towards eternity. And that faith and love leads the people of God to give thanks. That is the foundation of Paul’s thanksgiving.

For ourselves, we need to ask if we think and act in accord with that. Do we give thanks for the right things: for the increase of faith and love in us and in others? Do we root our faith and love in the right things: in the future hope that Jesus has secured for us? Do we base that hope in the right word – the word of God in the Scriptures? Do we receive that word of truth from those God has sent: from ordinary believers all around us, seeking to be faithful to Christ? And do we see that the fact that that word has even come to us all grows out of the unmerited grace and love of God?

That is where we get thanks. That is how we tune our hearts to overflow in thanks as Paul did.

Conclusion

And that is also how we get eyes to see the world aright.

Verse six is an interesting aside that Paul makes. In the middle of what Paul is saying about the Colossians, Paul suddenly draws a parallel. [Moo, 81] He says: “indeed in the whole world [the gospel] is bearing fruit and increasing.”

Now, this is an odd statement, because while it is, of course, true that the gospel is going out ... from a worldly perspective, Paul’s words seem like a bit of an exaggeration.

As one commentator notes, at this point in history most people “would not have called the advance of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world a triumphant success.” He writes: “The church was not taking the world by storm. The Jewish historian Josephus, penning his history of the Jewish war and of the Jews at the end of the first century, hardly gave mention to the Christians. The Roman historian Tacitus mentions Christians only as Nero’s scapegoats for the fire of Rome.” [Garland, 49-50]

Christians don’t really register as newsworthy in the first century. And so how then could Paul say that the gospel was “bearing fruit and increasing” in the whole world?

Well, Paul knew the word of truth from God. Which meant that he knew the beginning of the story, he knew the end of the story, and where he fit in between.

Multiple commentators point out how Paul's description in verse six of how the gospel is "bearing fruit and increasing" seems to be an allusion to Genesis 1:28, when God created Adam and Eve and called on them to be fruitful and multiply. [Gupta, 42; Moo, 88; Wright, 57]

The story of the Bible begins with God making the world, making humans in his image, and calling on them to be fruitful and multiply all over the world – filling the world with his image. The rebellion of humanity was a rejection of God's plan. But it was not the defeat of God's plan. God would accomplish what he set out to do. Only now he would do it through the gospel.

As one author put it: "God is doing through the gospel what he always intended to do. He is sowing good seed in the world, and preparing to reap a harvest of human lives recreated to reflect his glory." [Wright, 58]

Paul knew the beginning of the story.

Paul also knew the end of the story. Paul knew that God had said that his work would not end until every family of the earth – every nation of the earth – was blessed by God's work in the world. That was what he promised to Abraham. Paul knew that that was how the story would end. And so Paul knew that the reports he was hearing of the gospel taking root in small communities of different cities was all, in some way, leading towards God's promised conclusion, where Jesus would make disciples of all nations.

And so even as the church remained tiny, even as it remained small in the eyes of the world, Paul is overflowing with thanks for it. Paul is speaking of its fruit. Because he knows what God intends to do in his world, and he knows the ultimate harvest God will bring from his gospel.

Paul sees his situation through the lens of Scripture – through the word of truth – and that changes his perspective, and causes him to give thanks.

And we must do the same thing. We get far too easily discouraged. And our discouragement poisons our thankfulness. We see challenges in the spiritual lives of others, and we despair when we should give thanks for the work God is doing in them, knowing that God will complete what he started. We see setbacks in our own lives, and we complain, when we should give thanks for the hope we have and the knowledge that God is with us to the end of the age, until he safely brings us to his side in glory. We get panicked because we see faithlessness and hostility in our culture, when we should give thanks for the growth of the gospel in other parts of the world, and have confidence that whether now or later, God will do the same again in our land one day too, because the day will come when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Our deepest thanks cannot rest on what we see – on our immediate circumstances. But it must be based on the presence of faith and love, founded on the certain hope we have in Christ, rooted in

the gospel, which we have heard from those whom God has sent to us, because, in his grace he loved us.

And that is a solid foundation for thanksgiving.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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