Faith, Love and Hope
Colossians 1:4-5

It is good to be back with all of you. If I was feeling particularly insecure at this moment, I might ask "Did anyone miss me?" But that would be very self-serving so what I really want to say is that I missed all of you -- that is I missed you after the first few days of rest where I didn't think about you or the relentless deadlines of Sunday masse! There is nothing wrong with deadlines. In fact, we usually get more done with deadlines. But when they become "relentless", it is time to make sure we are keeping God's "rhythm of rest". Daily taking some time to be away from noise, media, screens & to-do lists simply to be with God (10-15 minutes daily is special!). Weekly taking one day where you purposefully don't do regular work -- taking extra time to worship God and spend time with His spiritual family. Then yearly weekly breaks like a festival week God established for the Israelites in the OT. Rest helps us get ready for the next day, week or year!

Today we are heading back to the book of Colossians because it is still summer and that is what we will do the next 6-8 summers. So far this summer we have made it all the way through the first 3 verses of chapter one. Now if I were feeling insecure today, "I might ask for some applause of this tremendous progress!", but instead I just want to thank you for allowing me to go at this slower, more in-depth pace of a verse or two each week during the summer. Remember part of that is so you can get out a little earlier and I actually finish by 9:10 or noon!

Last month we spoke about the power of thanksgiving in our own lives. Today we will focus on what the apostle Paul was thankful for in the lives of the believers in the Colossian church. It has nothing to do with any gifts they sent him, any help they provided him or any things they have done for him. Instead it has to do with the faith, hope and love seen in their lives -- although this time it is faith, love and hope. Faith, hope, and love are mentioned many times in the New Testament as sort of an "apostolic shorthand" for genuine Christianity. Faith looks upward to Jesus, love looks outward to others and hope looks forward to the future. Faith rests on the past work of Christ; love works in the present; and hope anticipates the future. All three are essential for Heb 11:6 says "without faith it is impossible to please God"; Romans 5:5 tells us "hope does not disappoint us" and 1 Corinthians 13:13 reminds us "the greatest of these is love". The easiest way to see where we are spiritually is looking at these three virtues in our lives. And remember from the virtues listed in II Peter 1:8, it is not by the amount you have compared to others, but whether we personally are growing in these virtues over time. Because that is what God does!

PROPOSITION: Faith, love & hope are a part of every true Christian’s life in growing amounts.

I. Faith
Paul first thanks God for the Colossians’ faith. READ v 3-4. What does it mean when you "hear of" someone's faith? It means we have heard of some outworking or result of their trust & confidence in Jesus. That starts with "coming to faith", it is seen in standing in faith and it grows to overcome in faith.
A. Coming to faith

Notice this is not just “any faith”, it is specifically “faith in Christ Jesus”. In our day people talk about faith without mentioning what the object of that faith is. “You have such strong faith.” The value of faith does NOT come from the intensity of feelings, but it comes from the reliability of what we put our faith in. Let’s say that it is winter and you need to get to the other side of a lake. A person can feel very strongly that it is safe to walk across thin ice (2 inches thick) – but those strong feelings won’t keep the ice from breaking and causing the person to crash through, never getting to their destination. On the other hand, you can feel very tentative about thick ice – 12” thick – but if you are making any effort at all, you will eventually get to the other side because that ice will not break through despite your lack of strong feelings. And as we are slowly crawling across the ice in constant prayer – we can gain confidence when an ice fisher drives by us on the ice in their huge pick-up truck. The primary key of faith is the reliability of object of our faith (which has nothing to do with us) and then secondarily on how much we are willing to act or rely on the object of our faith. So as Christians the most important aspect of our faith, is not how much WE have but how reliable Christ Jesus is to carry out His promises. That is more sure than the sun rising tomorrow!

So every true Christian must first “come to faith” – we must come to the point where we believe Jesus really is God come down in human form, who willingly died on the cross for our sins and bodily rose from the dead. Jesus did this so we could be forgiven of our wrongs and eternity in heaven could be made available to us. As we begin to have faith that Jesus’ words are true, we start acting on those truths which will bring great good into our lives. This transforming faith includes BOTH a belief that certain things Jesus said are true AND a personal trust and commitment to Jesus.

B. Standing in faith

Coming to faith is just the beginning. The construction here suggests the practice of faith more than its mere presence. “We always thank God when we pray for you because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.” (v 3-4a), then specific examples of the Colossians faith will be commented on later in this letter. God calls us to “stand in faith”. It is by faith that we stand strong for Jesus in a world that thinks we are foolish and ignorant. It is by faith that we choose to live life as Jesus wants to rather than what is easy or popular. It is by faith that we step out of our comfort zones for the Lord. After we COME TO faith, we will STAND in faith, if our faith is genuinely in the Jesus of the Bible.

Now that doesn’t mean our faith will always be strong or perfect. Don’t hold that false idea for yourself or others. The most important part of faith is the reliability of who that faith is in. So if the “feelings of faith” weaken – if they are genuinely on the Jesus who is revealed in the Bible – we will make our final destination. We may be taking the longer, harder way of crawling across the ice, but it is Jesus who makes and
carries out the promise of the wonders of heaven. Faith is being persuaded or convinced that something is true and then acting on that.

C. Overcoming in faith
So we first come to faith in Jesus, then we start living by that faith – standing firm in that faith when things get crazy around us. But God’s transforming goal for us in faith is even greater than this – the Holy Spirit is working in each of our lives so that we regularly overcome in faith. Or as I have often said this year – “keep overcoming in the power of Jesus.” As we go through life, we start to see past problems and present difficulties differently. Christians with cancer, let go of insisting God take it away and instead just want to glorify Jesus in how they go through it. Christians whose marriages fail, stop blaming others or trying to desperately get another mate, but let God use that time to transform some area of their sin and draw them closer together with Jesus. Christians who have been disabled by stroke or heart-attack come to see that God brought far more positive from that eternally than the physical set-backs they have. What is it that you are struggling with the most now? Let’s give that area back to God, stop insisting things change right now and instead trust Jesus is going to bring more good out of this time than we can imagine. Let’s keep seeing the struggles of this life as challenges to overcome in the power of Jesus!

II. Love for others
“love ... for all God’s people”
Paul also thanks God for the Colossian believers’ love. In this case, it is specifically their love for other Christians. READ v 3-4. This love was not just for those who we naturally get along with, or who are the same economic or ethnic group we are in – but this love is “for all God’s people” – Barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, male, female, Jew, Greek, learned and ignorant joined hands and worshipped Jesus TOGETHER as their Lord and Savior.

A. Those in church
A sign of God being at work in Christians lives is a growing love for those in the local church you are part of. People who would not be friends otherwise in life work together to advance Jesus’ work in this world and encourage each other. The church is not the place YOU get all your needs met, but it is the place that you practice helping others different than yourself with God providing the grace and love to do that. To paraphrase President John Kennedy in the early 1960’s – Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for the other believers in that church.

While it is not unusual for Paul to use the Greek word “agape” for love, notice here there is also an article – “the love”. That means the emphasis is on a specific expression or action of love – “the love you have for all God’s people” is going to be seen through specific sacrificial and caring actions for other true Christ followers.

True love is seeking the best for a person for the long run. That is why so much of what is called “love” today – from sex outside of marriage, to co-dependency, to enabling, to lack of consequences, to going by immediate feelings – much of what is
called “love today is actually the opposite of real love. Some simple challenges to change our perspective towards God’s desire for us to love others: if you feel others should be doing more for you, turn that around to “love” and show some practical action for another – that which is best for the person for the long run. When you start to wish you were doing something more valuable with your life, don’t focus on coming up with a big plan, but start by simply coming alongside a Christian who would not ordinary be your friend. If you feel ‘unloveable’, take the focus off yourself and talk to someone you notice standing alone by a wall in the church building.

B. Those in other Bible-believing churches
Back to verse 3 & 4 – “We always thank God... because we have heard ...of the love you have for all of God’s people.” Let’s focus more on that word “all” which definitely calls us to go beyond our own local church. We are to love those in other Bible-believing churches. Turn to Colossians chapter 4, Notice that there is a surprisingly high level of interaction with Christians in other places in a time when most people never left their home town and there was no mass communication.
- In v 7-8, Tychicus is personally delivering the letter so he can let them know what is happening in Paul’s life as he is in prison
- In v 8, Onesimus, who is from the Colossea area, is coming back and will tell them all that is happening for Jesus in another area of the Roman empire
- In v 10-12 – Aristarchus, Mark and Justus send special greetings although they are all Jewish and the Colossian church has a majority of Gentiles in it.
- In v 12-13 – Epaphras, who is also from the Colossea area and planted that church, is working just as hard for the Hierapolis & Laodicean churches as he is for his home church in Colossea.
- In v 14 – Greetings come from outsiders Luke and Demas
- In v 15 – they are to pass on Paul’s greetings to the Christians in the city of Laodicea and also Nympha & those meeting at the church in her home
- Finally we see that Paul wants his letters shared with other Bible-believing churches & letters written to those churches shared with the Colossian church. READ v 16.

We are so fortunate in our area that the pastors of the Bible-believing churches get along so well. God has blessed us with that since the early 1990’s. Enjoy, get to know and don’t be afraid to work with believers in other Bible-believing churches even though you may not agree with everything that church stresses. We do need the basics to be the same or they aren’t a Bible-believing church.

C. Those in other cultures
Turn back to Colossians 1 – this time let’s read next week’s verse – Colossians 1:6
READ. So the love they have for all God’s people includes people who are different from them in their own local church, people who are in other Bible-believing churches and now those in other cultures all across the world. Now we can’t know everything
that God is doing, but we can be open to show practical love to those we have never met that are far different than we are. That is why we regularly support missionaries and help sister churches around the world. And when a representative comes back from those areas, we give them more time to share with us so our hearts can open to more different Christians around the world than we will meet personally here in Central Vermont. God will always bring the knowledge of other believers into our lives so our love can grow.

III. Hope

Finally Paul thanks God for the Colossians’ hope. READ v 3-5.

A. Faith & love “spring from”

Hope is placed last here because there are key aspects of faith and love that spring from, or grow out of, true Biblical hope. Before they heard the gospel, the Colossians were without the true God and without hope in this world. The “feelings of hope” they had were not built on solid ground. But as they heard the good news of Jesus and the promises of God for heaven, there was an inner joy that arose from that hope. That joy of salvation and hope of Heaven naturally enlarged and strengthened their faith & expanded their love. Why have faith in Jesus Christ if there is no hope for a glorious future? Why sacrifice to love others if it doesn’t matter in the end?

Think of it this way. On-going loyalty to Jesus is going to require effort, opposition, sacrifice and loss. Why not put all our effort into our happiness now which our culture says will make our lives meaningful. Because of the hope God sets before us. Just as your life is going to go much better if you practice saving up for things before purchasing them, so also our only real, lasting joy & meaningful life comes through what Jesus has promised us not by just focusing on temporary happiness now. Loyalty to Christ will bring trouble in this life—but that is not the last word. Our Christian hope is the confidence that God has something far, far better coming.

B. Focused on heaven

Notice that transforming Christian hope is focused specifically on our future in heaven – “the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven.” The focus is on what we will receive in heaven. Now, there is a joy that we already have from our personal relationship with Jesus, as well as His guidance, truth and power in our lives. Don’t stop there. Let your appreciation of what God has for us in heaven keep growing so it positively encourages us. Don’t be so earthly minded that you are of no heavenly good. A robust picture of what is coming in heaven has allowed Christians in all ages and in every country to sacrifice things in the present for something infinitely better in the future. Like Jim Elliot, the missionary and martyr to the Auca Indians, how powerful it is when we realize that “he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”
Having said that, I want to again remind us that it is not the “feeling of hope” that is most important here – because that “feeling of hope” cannot be stored up in heaven for us. Like faith, what is most important is that what we put our hope in WILL ACTUALLY happen in the future. Again that is totally God! The total blessings of God are reserved, ensured and guaranteed for us in heaven. Jesus verified that in a tangible way by rising bodily from the dead to prove His words are true. So don’t have some false expectations about the intensity of hope you or other Christians should have – instead keep seeking to grow in your understanding of the greatness of heaven and what God has stored up there for us – because it is a solid hope that will also help in our growth in faith and love!

C. Founded in the gospel (Good news)
Finally we see that the transforming hope that is being spoken of here is first known when they heard the gospel. READ v 5. The gospel is simply the good news of Jesus. All humans are imperfect and sin which disqualifies us to heaven. But God so loved us that He sent Jesus down to this earth to die on the cross for our sins and to make us qualified for heaven. It is all the work of God and it is available to anyone who will turn and make Jesus their Savior and Lord. Then Jesus rose bodily from the dead to prove that His message is true and a reliable place of hope. The gospel is “good news” – it brings refreshing, happy and joy-filled news to us.

But there are times in our own lives where doubts arise – we don’t feel worthy, we mess up yet again, we fall short or get selfish. These times can take away any hope and we can wonder if we will make heaven. Again, it is important to remember that at the core of the good news or gospel of Jesus is God’s initiative. He calls us, He wakes us up spiritually, He sends people & proof of His message and He is the one who saves or converts us. The depth of God’s love and reliability is seen in Jesus who gave up the glories of heaven to become a man – a simple, obscure man at that. Jesus willingly died on the cross for us while we were yet enemies. And then God didn’t put us on a performance basis we could not succeed at but is necessary for heaven to remain a paradise – living a perfect life. Instead God asks us to repent of our sin and believe Jesus will forgive us and open heaven to us. The power of repentance is greater than we can imagine. Repentance is more than feeling sorry about something. True repentance always has three parts – (1) turning away from something sinful, (2) turning towards God and (3) the intent or first step to obey God. I love the picture that comes from root parts of the Greek word for repentance – metanoia. The first part of that word means “after” and the second part means “to understand” – it is a picture of us doing something, then after understanding what we did was not right we both confess the wrongness of the action as well as turn to take the first step to live differently. To be technical the repentance brings us right up to the action which is called the fruit of repentance – that is why it is false to say “repentance” is “a work”, yet repentance is so powerful in the hands of Jesus there will always be a positive result. Repentance restores hope – which strengthens faith in Jesus and love for other Christians! Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus!