

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 6, 2019**

**STALWART
(GIVING THANKS FOR YOU)**

Colossians 1:1-8

God's Word comes to us this morning from the opening verses of Paul's Letter to the Colossians in the New Testament. I invite you to turn with me to Colossians 1, as we look together at verses 1-8. May we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Over the next several weeks, with a detour here and there along the way, I want to walk with you through the Letter to the Colossians in order to better understand the truth of the gospel and how we are to live it out in our lives today. Like me, you may have read the Letter to the Colossians many times over the years, but you may not know much about Colosse itself or the particular problems that prompted Paul to write this letter.

Colosse was a city in the Lycus River valley of the Roman province of Asia, which today is part of Turkey, where EPC pastor Andrew Brunson was held for two years on terrorism and conspiracy charges before his release from prison last October. (Andrew Brunson's book, *God's Hostage*, will be released on October 15. Our church library has an advance copy. I encourage you to get the book and read his remarkable story.)

Colosse was about 100 miles inland (east) from Ephesus, where Paul had spent almost three years during his third missionary journey. Ephesus was a much more prominent city than Colosse. Along with Rome, Alexandria (Egypt), Antioch (Syria), Athens and Corinth (Greece), Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire.

Not so Colosse. It was dwarfed in influence not only by Ephesus, but also by the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were both just 10-12 miles east of Colosse. At one time, Colosse had been a more prominent and prosperous town, but by the time of Paul it was a city in decline, not unlike so many cities and towns in America's Rust Belt, whose best years are behind them, unless they can somehow manage to reinvent themselves.

God, however, did not consider Colosse or its people to be insignificant. They mattered to Him as much as people in Jerusalem or Rome or anywhere in the world. In all his travels, Paul had never been to Colosse. Ephesus was probably as close as he ever got to Colosse. But that did not stop the gospel from reaching the city. While Paul was in Ephesus, a native son of Colosse named Epaphras came to Ephesus, met Paul, heard the gospel, and believed in Christ. Then Epaphras took the message of the gospel back home with him and shared it with the people of Colosse. The result was the establishment of a new church that took root and grew as people in Colosse came to faith in Jesus.

Not all was well in Colosse, however, or in the church at Colosse. Word came to Paul from Epaphras that false teachers had managed to infiltrate the church, threatening its peace, unity, and purity. Some in the church were being led astray. They were in danger of jettisoning the truth of the gospel in favor of more popular philosophies, or at least of diluting the truth of the gospel with unbiblical ideas.

Part of the relevance of the Letter to the Colossians for us lies in the fact, as the author of one recent commentary on Colossians, David Garland, says, that “the situation facing the Colossians is ... similar to ours today. They faced opponents who challenged and belittled the sufficiency of Christ and their hope [in Him]. Christians today live in a secular society, which regularly scoffs at Christian faith. Many Christians in the West” – meaning us – “have become increasingly uncertain of (our) faith and consequently hold it uncertainly. The acids of criticism can eat away at the foundations of a weak and vacillating faith. There are also fewer cultural forces to keep people in the church. When confronted with the laughter and scorn of the modern-day scoffers, nominal church members may be tempted to capitulate. They will abandon their faith or trade it in for the latest craze.” We see that happening across America, as well as Canada and throughout Europe. “In Paul’s language, they return to the darkness where the rulers of this age hold sway.

“When Christians do not understand (our) faith, (we) are likely to water down the gospel and accommodate it to cultural expectations. (We) will cut out any offending articles of faith or append (fallacious) ones more in accord with the fashion of the age. Paul wrote to the Colossians to help them grasp ever more firmly who Christ is and the rich glories of all that God has done in Him.

“When Christians have little confidence in (our) faith, (we) will be overly tentative with (our) claims and easily shaken by challenges. Paul hoped to fortify the Colossians in their assurance of the hope they had in Christ. The letter affirms that God’s creation has a divine purpose, which is brought to fulfillment in and through Christ. It affirms the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ as the fullness of God and as our Creator and Redeemer.

When Christians do not live with a deep sense of gratitude for what God has done for (us) in Christ, (we) will become engulfed in anxieties and will be tempted to look for security in something other than Christ. Paul repeatedly urged the Colossians to be thankful for the victory already won for (us) by Christ’s cross and resurrection. Salvation can be found only in Christ, and Christians do not need something else or something more. The cross brings redemption, the forgiveness of sins, and triumph over all the powers that would oppress human life. Every believer is made complete when placed under the complete claim of Christ, and all the spiritual curses of our world find their only cure in Him.

“When Christians live no differently from those around (us) who do not know God or who defy God’s commands, (we) bring discredit to (our) faith and cause others to think that (our) claims are false. The letter to the Colossians argues that Christians must not only be solidly grounded in (our) faith. (We) must also be ... above reproach [in our conduct]. Discerning, confident, grateful, and ethical Christians lead lives worthy of the Lord, are pleasing to God, and will bear spiritual fruit in a spiritually blighted world. Paul intends in this letter to help

form this kind of believer” (David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon*, 32-33).

That is a long quote, I know. But it is extremely well said, I think. And it is important for us to hear in order to understand Paul’s purpose (and the purpose of the Holy Spirit) in this letter, and to at least begin to see how Colossians relates to our lives as followers of Jesus in the midst of an increasingly secularized, spiritually-relativistic world that rejects the notion of absolute truth and the historic claims of the gospel.

Another author (Curtis Vaughan) gets to the heart of Colossians when he says it “proclaims the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ.” In this central focus it is comparable to another New Testament letter, the Letter to the Hebrews, which also sets forth the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus in its appeal to Jewish Christians to persevere in their faith and not to abandon it when the going gets tough.

Colossians, in the words of A. T. Robertson, is “Paul’s full-length portrait of Christ.” In Colossians, as Vaughan notes, Paul affirms that Jesus “is God’s Son (1:14), the object of the Christian’s faith (1:4), the Redeemer (1:14), the image of God (1:15), Lord of creation (1:15), head of the church (1:18), [and] reconciler of the universe (1:20). In Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead (2:9), and under Him every power and authority in the universe is subjected (2:10). He is the essence of the mystery of God (2:2), and in Him all God’s treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden (2:3). He is the standard by which all religious teaching is to be measured (2:8) and the reality of the truth foreshadowed by the regulations and rituals of the old covenant (2:17). By His cross He conquered the cosmic powers of evil (2:15), and following His resurrection He was enthroned at the right hand of God (3:1). Our life now lies hidden with God in Christ, but one day both He and we will be gloriously manifested (3:3-4)” – He as the Lord of all and we as His beloved sons and daughters. “In short, the central thought of the Epistle is summed up in the lines of Charles Wesley’s hymn:

You, O Christ, are all I want.
More than all in You I find.”

(Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 11: Ephesians to Philemon*, 168)

That, in a rather large nutshell, is what the Letter to the Colossians is about and why it matters today.

Colossians was written by Paul with an assist from his protégé, Timothy. Paul identifies himself in verse 1 as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” An apostle (Greek, *apostolos*) is one who is sent on a mission. In biblical context, it refers to a person commissioned and sent on a mission by the Lord Jesus Himself – such as the 12 disciples and, later on, Paul. Colossians was written around 60 AD from Rome, while Paul was in prison awaiting his day in Caesar’s court. It is addressed to “the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse” (1:2, NIV). While the NIV interprets the word *hagiois* as an adjective – “holy” = some English versions translate it as a noun – “saints.” Either way, it refers to God’s people

to all of those in Colosse (and everywhere) who belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. The saints are all of us who have been called and set apart by God to be His holy people, His witnesses and ambassadors and servants in this world.

The word “saints” does not refer only to the Christians in Colosse. It refers to Christians in Kingstowne, too. It refers to Christians in Franconia and Springfield, in Rose Hill and Alexandria, in Fort Hunt and Mount Vernon, in Lorton and Woodbridge, in Fairfax Station and Fairfax, in Burke and Annandale, in Arlington and Falls Church, in D. C. and Maryland and everywhere the gospel is known and believed.

Here is the thing to understand about our status as “saints”: We do not belong to Jesus because we are saints. It is not because we are saintly that God accepts us as His children. We are saints because we belong to Jesus. We are not the objects of God’s grace because we are saints. We are saints because we are the objects of His grace. Pure and simple. We are not saints because of anything we have done. We are saints because of what God has done for us, because of Jesus and His saving work for us.

In addition to calling the Colossians “saints,” Paul also addresses them as “faithful brothers in Christ” (1:2). In our more inclusive language today, of course, we would say “brothers *and sisters*.” We can be confident that this is what Paul means, since the church in Colosse, like every church in the New Testament, included both men and women. We also know that both the teachings of Jesus and the practice of the church in the New Testament elevated women to a place of greater respect and dignity than they had ever enjoyed since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin.

I say without reservation that I am thankful for the saints here at Faith Church. I am thankful for all my sisters and brothers in Christ who are part of our church family and who follow the Lord Jesus Christ faithfully. *The Message* paraphrase refers to the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colosse as “stalwart followers of Christ.” I like that. A stalwart is someone who stands firm and strong, someone who is loyal and trustworthy, someone you can count on to keep on keeping on. I am grateful for the leaders and members of our church family who have demonstrated perseverance in the faith, whose love for one another and for others outside the church is a reflection of the love of Jesus, and who look forward to the hope that is stored up for us in heaven.

Faith, love, and hope. Sound familiar? It is the triad of Christian graces most famously expressed in 1 Corinthians 13:13, where, at the end of his magnum opus on love, Paul says: “Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Here in Colossians, though, the order is changed. Instead of faith, hope, and love, it is faith, love and hope. Paul says: “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 that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you” (1:4-6a).

As Paul was thankful for the faith, love, and hope evident in the lives of the Colossians – graces in their lives he had only heard about – so I am thankful for the evidences of these graces I see and witness first-hand in your lives. In the life of our church.

I give thanks and praise to God for your faith in Jesus that endures in the ups and downs of life, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow. I give thanks to God for the love I see in action in the lives of so many of you. The love Paul commends here – the love to which Jesus calls us – is not a feeling. It is not based on feelings or emotions. Love, like forgiveness, is an act of the will. It is a decision you make to act in a loving way. I am thankful for the ways I see love made visible in the life of our church family as you care for each other. We don't have the luxury of holding onto grudges in the body of Christ. We don't have the luxury of waiting until we feel like forgiving someone who has hurt us in some way. Nor do we have the luxury of withholding love from one another, when God loves us so lavishly.

I am thankful, too, that the hope of the gospel is real in your lives. The hope stored up in heaven for us serves to remind us that the salvation we enjoy through faith in Jesus has a future aspect. Heaven is promised to us. Our destiny is assured. But it is not because of the quality of our faith in Jesus. It is not the quality of our faith that saves us. It is the object of our faith – *Jesus* – that saves us. Jesus is the source and substance of our hope of heaven. So, as it says in Hebrews 10:23, we “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.”

There is much more I want to say about faith, love, and hope. Perhaps I will touch on them in more depth next Sunday. But, as Paul gave thanks to God for His grace in the lives of the Colossians, so I give thanks to God for you, my church family, whom I love and cherish.

May we continue to be stalwart followers of Jesus. May we continue to grow in our faith in the Lord Jesus, our love for one another, and the hope whose magnificent fulfillment awaits us in heaven.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.