

August 10, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *The Hope Laid Up For You in Heaven*

### Colossians 1 Introduction

This letter is addressed to the church in the city of Colossae in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor, east of Ephesus. At the time of writing, Paul had not visited there, and very probably never did go there in person. He was writing this during one of the periods of imprisonment he experienced in Rome. The church had apparently been established by the gospel preaching of a man named Epaphras who was evidently from Colossae, but well-known and loved by Paul. Problems, however, had arisen, brought on by teachers who emphasized Christ's relation to the cosmos. Their teachings stressed angelic worship, mystic ideas of principalities and powers, which were connected with astral deities and cultic practices, and they were hung up on rules about food and drink and ascetic disciplines. All of this Paul insisted, detracts from the work and person of Christ – and consequently the gospel. There were also relational issues within the church that Paul spoke to. And his implication all throughout the letter is that these things were a direct result of their low appreciation of the centrality and incomparable value of Christ. And so to renew their thinking, correct their direction, and ignite their hearts with hope – Paul gives them a stunning revelation of the supremacy of Christ in all things. ***The major theme of Colossians is the revelation of the transcendent Christ.***

I am convinced that the deepest reason we struggle with doctrinal issues in the church; the reason we struggle against lust and anger and unforgiveness and bitterness and depression and pornography and all the other soul-sapping things of life is that **we do not treasure this Christ**. Our lives are spent in trivial pursuits of pleasure and comfort and money and success and happiness and we are totally unaware and distant from the soul-staggering immensity and beauty for which we were created. **Our souls have shrunk to encompass the trivial instead of embracing the eternal.** We live as though this world was our home and all that counts is what we can see or taste or touch or hang on to, **when in fact we were meant for better things**. To bask in the sunshine of God's glory; to revel in the presence of His Son; forever discovering new heights, fresh horizons, stunning revelations of this supreme Christ.

Paul paints this picture in chapter one: *We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels - everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe - people and things, animals and atoms - get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.*  
Colossians 1:15-20 The Message

Christ reigns supreme over all the wind and the rain and the snow and sunshine, from the top of Mount Everest in the Himalayas to the bottom of the Marianas Trench in the Pacific. He is sovereign over the most distant stars and galaxies of the universe, and over the descending minuteness of the cells and molecules and atoms, and things we have not yet seen, that are just building blocks for all of this. He reigns over death and disease, sickness and health; over AIDS and cancer and heart attacks; and over all the things that help to heal these things as well. He is over all your regrets for yesterday, all your hopes for today, and all your fears for tomorrow. He is sovereign over kings and rulers and governments and dictators; over all knowledge and all learning and all the professors of education. He reigns over all the affairs of men and all men are ultimately accountable to Him alone. And though we do not yet see all things subject to Him – one day accounts will be settled; justice will be dispensed and He will be vindicated – it is only a matter of time until He is revealed descending in power and glory and flaming brightness, and we see Him whom our soul loves.

As Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch theologian once said, ***'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'*** And if He cries out 'Mine' over us – our response is 'His!' and we consciously bring all of our life under His authority!

O saints, do not rest until you get such a vision of the glorious Christ. **This will hold you, this will keep you, this will inject your soul with hope and glory.** I like the picture John Piper shares of our solar system with the massive sun at the center that holds all the planets in orbit. Just so, the supremacy of Christ at the center of our lives holds all our planets in perfect and stable order – all our desires and aspirations, all our meditations and convictions, all our behaviors and thoughts, all our labor and all our leisure, all our relationships and our solitude – are held in perfect check by the brilliant beauty and massive influence of Christ. And if He is not the satisfying center of our lives, all our planets fly into confusion and disarray, and our lives will be out of control and we will find ourselves on a path to destruction – **without Christ and without hope.**

**And along with the revelation of Christ – one of the first things Paul directs the Colossians toward is the hope laid up for us in heaven.** Look at the first 5 verses. *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 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, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.* Colossians 1:1-5

**Paul says that this hope in heaven inspires faith, generates Christian love and is the message of the gospel.** Listen again: *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, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.* The gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of hope. Hope means that there is something to look forward to – some great thing to anticipate. And the gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that yes indeed there is something transcendent to fix our hope on – something so great that any suffering that may be required of us will seem light and momentary by comparison. ***It is a hope laid up in heaven for us in the future that inspires faith and confidence and boldness in the present and causes our hearts to overflow with Christian love.***

To deal with the Colossian's issues, Paul directs their hearts towards Christ who is the measure of all things, and the hope that is laid up in heaven for those who trust in Him. Hope is important because we live by hope. If I didn't have hope that life was worth living – there would be no reason for me to get out of bed one more day. **Hope is the anthem of the Christian.** Hope when everything seems hopeless; solid assurance when everything around is crumbling, reckless faith in the teeth of adversity. *Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!* [Habakkuk 3:17-18] Hope is not simply a strong desire to that things will have a certain outcome. **Hope is a certain, sure, expectation of the good things to come to those who trust in God based on all the promises of God.** Its foundation is the very character of God who causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

***What does this view of Christ and this kind of hope do in our present day lives?*** The acknowledgment of the supremacy of Christ over all things, and the solid foundation of a hope laid up in heaven does two main things: ***it inspires faith and confidence to joyfully persevere in the faith all the way to heaven – and it is the source of Christian love here on earth.***

**First of all it inspires faith and confidence to joyfully persevere in the faith all the way to heaven.** *since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.* In the book of Hebrews we read of one man's confidence in the supremacy of Christ and joyful expectation of heaven that caused him to live contrary to all that the world holds dear: *By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.* Hebrews 11:24-26 ***This view of Christ – this hope of heaven inspires radical, risky, faith-filled living that the world cannot understand or appreciate.***

The strong, solid hope of Heaven will give us strength to go on and fill our souls with a deep and abiding joy when it all seems so impossible. It is an anchor of the soul as Hebrews 6:19 says. Only a soul that is anchored in Heaven will endure all the way to the end. Only a soul anchored in the solid Rock of Christ Jesus will see the glory in the midst of suffering, the joy in the midst of pain, the pleasure in the midst of tears – and say to the Lamb of God – ***'Every moment was worth it.'***

It is Alan Gardiner at the age of 57, dying of starvation and disease, with no evident fruit of ministry to be seen, alone and at the very end of the earth writing ***"I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God."*** Only someone whose hope was laid up in heaven could write those words.

It is 28 year old John Stam, missionary to China, being led away with his wife to execution by the communists, responding to someone's question: 'Where are you going, John?' laying hold on the strong and steadfast hope that anchored his soul saying, **'We are going to Heaven!'**

It is this strong confidence in the promises and character of God and the passionate preference for the joys of heaven over the fleeting pleasures of the world that free our hearts from the debilitating trap of self-centeredness, from the paralyzing effects of regret and self-pity, from greed and fear and bitterness and despair – it is this hope that inspires faith and confidence to joyfully persevere in the faith all the way to heaven.

***This high view of Christ and hope of heaven is also the source of Christian love here on earth: since we heard of... the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*** Colossians 1:4-5 The hope of heaven will cause our love to grow. Christian love is the love that is the accurate estimation and adequate supply of another's need. It is a love that is other-centered. If our hopes are tied to anything that is passing away – anything in this world – all our love efforts are ultimately self-directed, not other directed. Heaven is the ultimate expression of love – it is a world of love. And the more our minds are occupied with the hope we have laid up in heaven – the more our hearts will overflow with Christian love.

The problem with the church today is not that there are too many people who are engaged and passionate about their hope laid up in heaven – it is that we have become too earthly-minded to be any heavenly good. It is that we are too busy about our own interests that we have little time for His. Our passions are spent in the pursuit of comfort and security and personal pleasures that sap our energy and suck up our time. Where are those saints whose hearts are so in love with the hope laid up in heaven that they live like exiles here on earth? Where are those Christians whose appetite for the eternal glories of heaven leave no room for the fleeting pleasures of sin and the empty promises of this world? In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis observed that: ***If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.*** C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Only one thing satisfies the soul whose hope is laid up in heaven – doing the labors of love of heaven here on earth. And one expression of that love is the love we have for the people of God. If we say we love God, whom we have not seen, but do not love our brother who we see – the Bible says that we are liars. **The first expression of love inspired by hope is love for one another.**

**The other expression of love inspired by hope is the gospel.** That is the love inspired by the hope of heaven will overflow with the gospel. *Of this [i.e. the hope laid up in heaven] you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel; which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing* Colossians 1:5-6a At the center of the gospel is the message of hope – it is a message of the promises of God to people who will stop hoping in the promises of the world and start hoping in Him. When Paul hears of the faith and love overflowing in the church, he sees it as evidence of the power of hope expressed in the gospel. A transcendent view of Christ and hope of heaven generates a passion to make others glad in God.

*If we consider the greatness and the glory of the life we shall have when we have risen from the dead, it would not be difficult at all for us to bear the concerns of this world. If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: "O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!"* Martin Luther

There is no more powerful witness of the gospel than a church overflowing with love for one another and love for the lost. There is no more potent testimony of the power and greatness of God than a people who center and circumference is the transcendent Christ – who treasure Him more than all the things of earth

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*Fill our hearts and minds with the glory and grace that is in Your Son, Jesus. Let our hearts be fully satisfied with Him. O Christ, be the sun at the center of our worlds that lines up our hearts with the desire of the ages and cause all our planets to orbit around You. O Jesus, lover of our souls, capture our hearts in the grip of Your affections; let all those things we count as dear to us be swallowed up in the brilliance of Your love. Generate in our hearts the deep desire for that far country that eclipses the light and attractions of this present earth. Grant us to see a glimpse of the eternal glory and joy and satisfaction that is Heaven. Help us break free from the outlines and shadows that define our perceptions of You and our true home. Fill us with a vision of Heaven that will make the things of earth grow strangely dim, in the light of Your glory and grace. In the precious and mighty name of Jesus we pray, Amen*