

HOPE AND HAPPINESS

COLOSSIANS 1:3-8

HAPPINESS IN LIFE CAN ONLY BE EXPERIENCED BY LIVING IN HOPE

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Hope and Happiness

Colossians 1:3-8

It seems to me that I have said this a thousand or more times during my years of ministry but I think it's worth repeating yet one more time. In the preamble of "The Declaration of Independence" this phrase appears:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And that pretty much describes the philosophy we have adopted for our own personal lives.

Here is the problem. First of all, that may make us great Americans, but lousy Christians. To say that the God of the Bible created us with the unalienable rights of liberty and the pursuit of happiness is just plain false doctrine. We were born slaves to sin and death. In fact we were born alienated from our creator. As we studied through the book of Leviticus, we saw that the only way to be liberated from sin was to place our faith in Jesus Christ. Liberty was a gift not a right. And further, the Bible defines liberty much differently from the authors of "The Declaration of Independence." In fact, the Apostle Paul defines liberty in terms of becoming slaves to Jesus and righteousness.

Secondly, the Bible never commands us to pursue happiness nor does it say it is an unalienable right given to us by God. The Bible commands us to pursue holiness.

However, the Bible does tell us how to receive peace, joy, and contentment in this life. In this morning's text we will find out that true happiness is grounded in hope. In particular, this hope is directed towards our heavenly eternal homes. That sounds funny doesn't it? Our happiness in this life is built on our life after death.

I'm sure you have all heard the story of a long and rough Atlantic crossing during which the seasick passenger was leaning over the rail of the ocean liner hurling and turning different shades green.

A steward came along and tried to cheer him up by saying, "Don't be discouraged, sir! You know, no one's ever died of seasickness yet!"

The nauseated passenger looked up at the steward with sad eyes and said, "Oh, don't say that! It's only the hope of dying that's kept me alive this long!"

I. THANKFULNESS (VS 3)

Hope Is The Foundation For Thankful Living.

And let me just remind us of another saying I have repeated several times over the years. If you pursue happiness, you will never catch up to it. If you pursue holiness, happiness will catch up to you. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **HAPPINESS IN LIFE CAN ONLY BE EXPERIENCED BY LIVING IN HOPE.** We will be examining this hope from several different angles. The first is found in verse 3. Thankfulness is a way of life Christians ought to pursue. **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR THANKFUL LIVING.** In other words, Biblical hope becomes the catalyst that ignites a life of thanksgiving.

A. NOT DEPENDENT ON CIRCUMSTANCES

The first thing to know about godly thankfulness is that it is not dependent on circumstances. When Paul says that we always thank God, we must remember that he is writing this from prison.

This giving thanks for Paul is a common theme for him. In fact, he makes it a way of life. Listen to what he says about living in thankfulness no matter what the situation:

"¹⁶Always be joyful. ¹⁷Keep on praying. ¹⁸No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:16-18 / NLT).

We find it easy to be joyful and thankful when things are going our way, but not many of us have learned to be joyful and thankful in the midst of difficult situations when we don't seem to be getting what we want. This kind of thankful and joyful living is the Bible's answer to narcissism. This kind of joyful and thankful living is dependent on keeping our focus on God.

B. ONLY ONE SOURCE

And that brings us to the only one source of the hope that leads to thankful and joyful living. This verse contains one of my favorite descriptions of the God we worship. There is only one true and living God. The God we worship is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are not many paths to God. All religions are not as good as any other. In the city of Colosse, Paul is dealing with Roman and Greek religions, Eastern mystical religions, and good old fashioned legalistic Judaism. The letter to the Colossians is going to be all about the truth of Who God is, Who Jesus is, and Who the Spirit is. To make sure there is no mistake from the beginning, Paul makes it clear that there is only one source of hope, one source of joy, and One person to thank. That is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

C. PRAYER

Hope that gives rise to joy and thanksgiving is expressed in the context of prayer. Let's keep this in mind as well. Paul did not found this church. Even though Paul did not plant it, he and his fellow workers want to see it do well and succeed. Let me just remind us of this one more time as we close this first section. There is only one source of hope, peace, joy, and thankfulness and this kind of hope, peace, joy, and thankfulness is not dependent on circumstances:

"⁴Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ⁵Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

⁶Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

⁸And now, dear brothers and sisters, let me say one more thing as I close this letter. Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. ⁹Keep putting into practice all you learned from me and heard from me and saw me doing, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:4-9 / NLT).

Again, let me point out that if our hope is in Jesus, if we believe God is in control, if we fill our minds with God's truth, and conduct ourselves in agreement with this truth, then will enjoy the hope, peace, and joy that He has promised. As we receive these gifts no matter what the circumstances we face, we will be able to give thanks to God and consistently develop the habit of thankful living. An easy formula to remember if you are not experiencing the peace, joy, and contentment that God promises is this, "Right thinking combined with right behavior leads to peace, joy, and contentment." Therefore we could sum this section up by saying **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR THANKFUL LIVING**. But it is critical to reassert that this hope cannot be in our wishes and desires. Our hope is to be placed in the God and Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

II. HOPEFULNESS (VS 4-6a)

Hope Is The Foundation For Healthy Living.

This next section, verse 4 through the first half of verse 6 will describe hopefulness more thoroughly. **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HEALTHY LIVING.** Again I have to say that this kind of hope and recipe for happiness has nothing to do with worldly ideas. It goes against all of our self-centered, self-absorbed, narcissistic lifestyles.

A. LOVE FOR GOD

First of all, it starts with love for God. Before we get to that, the beginning of verse 4 fascinates me. Remember, Paul is probably imprisoned in Rome and no doubt preoccupied with his upcoming defense. In this context he has not only heard of this very small, out of the way church, he takes time to sit down and write them a letter. Paul was interested in the growth and health of all the Christian churches. It would be somewhat comparable to Billy Graham sitting down to write a letter to Willow Creek and one to our little church, and then asking us to exchange these letters with one another. You remember from last week that in chapter 4 we learned that Paul wrote one letter to the mega church at Laodicea and one to the little church at Colosse. Then he asked them to exchange letters. What is further really interesting is that the letter he wrote to the little church survived while the letter he wrote to the mega church did not.

At any rate, the first thing Paul notes is their faith in Christ Jesus. There is only one legitimate way for us to express our love for God. That is for us to place our faith and trust in His One and Only Son, Jesus Christ. When the Bible talks about faith in Jesus, it means total commitment and total allegiance. Listen to how Jesus put it:

²⁹ ... *"The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength'"* (Mark 12:29-30 / NLT).

I'm sure that many Christian churches have lost sight of this. We give God a couple of minutes a day, a couple hours per week, obey a bunch of rules and think that we are right with God. We do all sorts of stuff and think God is okay with us. We should live with a healthy fear of God and a realistic view of what we deserve. Let me just quote three passages; two from Jesus and one from the Apostle Paul:

In responding to fake Christians who are calling Him Lord at the judgment day Jesus responds like this:

²³*Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* (Matthew 7:23 / NIV).

Listen what Jesus further says about Who is the proper object of our fear:

⁴*"Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill the body; they cannot do any more to you. ⁵But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill people and then throw them into hell"* (Luke 12:4-5 / NLT).

And here is how Paul suggest we approach our life in Christ:

¹²*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose"* (Philippians 2:12 / NIV).

B. LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

So the first way we develop the hope that leads to healthy living is to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior in faith. We do that by loving Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus went on to describe the second greatest commandment like this:

"³¹The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these" (Mark 12:31 / NLT).

In other words, hope comes from loving one another. If you look carefully at this last phrase in verse 4 it uses the word *agape* for love and *agious* for saints. In other words, we are to have godly love for the holy ones.

Again, I think the church in the United States has exchanged the world's idea of love for the Bible's idea of love. Bible love is never, "let's get along regardless of the truth." Bible love is extremely tough and honest love. Jesus told the rich young man to sell all he had, give it to the poor and to follow Him. Further the Bible is clear that Jesus loved this young man. The young man couldn't part with his riches to follow Jesus. The Bible records the young man leaving sad. Jesus never went after him to say let's compromise or talk about this. Bible love never overlooks sin or the consequences of sin. The idea of love in modern day churches mirrors our culture's view of love. I know many people have very wrong views of what Biblical love is all about. Love for one another must be based on truth. Only that kind of love can lead to the hope described in this passage.

C. LOVE FOR HOME

The main point of this section is found here in the first half of verse 5. It talks about hope that is based in our love for home. The NIV starts out verse 5 with the words faith and love being repeated. The Greek text does not repeat the words. Now keep in mind that verses 3-8 in the Greek are one long, run-on sentence. The NLT and NASB follow the Greek structure in this case. However, the NIV does that to point out the truth of this passage. The kind of faith and love that are being described here get their energy from hope. Faith, hope, and love are often connected in Paul's writing. Just as people misunderstand what love is, people have not a clue as to what Biblical hope is all about. Let me give you an example.

I hope ... I really hope ... I really, really hope the Cubs win the World Series this year. I don't want to jinx us, but how has that worked out for us in the last one hundred years. For us, hope has come to be synonymous with wishful thinking. That is exactly the opposite of what hope means in the Bible. Hope in the Bible means more of a future certainty. In other words, I know that I will spend eternity in heaven with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is preparing a place for me and waiting for the right time to bring me home.

Jesus also tells us that we should be making deposits in our heavenly bank accounts. When the Apostle Paul was living on top of the world as a Pharisee, I imagine it was difficult for him to even think about heaven since his life on earth was so good. But when he became a Christian, when he was beaten, tortured, and jailed, it became a lot more easy for him to think about his heavenly home since going there at any time became an immediate reality. I have noticed that the most unhappy people I have come across in my life are the ones who are always looking for things in this world.

They always want more money; they want more power, more prestige, more success, etc. Here is another equation for us to think about. Our happiness and contentment in this life grows in direct proportion to leaving it behind while focusing more on our heavenly home and eternal destinies. I know that sounds strange but if you think about it, it makes all the sense in the world.

Here is a given. People are not always going to do what we want them to do. Circumstances will cause us to lose things and people. We will all get sick and die. The world is not a place that we can manipulate and control. The more we try, the more frustrated we become. Our peace, joy, and contentment all disappear. So if we place very little value on and confidence in the things of

this word, we will be able to receive all of life as a gift. We are in this world for only a short time. To overvalue our desires and wishes for things in this world will inevitably lead to depression. People who undergo great persecution like Christians in China and Muslim countries around the world tend to focus on their eternal homes. We on the other hand spend our lives pursuing happiness, only to find ourselves constantly disappointed, frustrated, sick, and angry.

Hope in the Bible sense is this eager expectation of when we are going to meet our Lord. As the spiritual goes,

"Soon and very soon, we are going to see the Lord." Is that our outlook on life? Could we say with the Apostle Paul, "For to me, living is for Christ, and dying is even better" (Philippians 1:21 / NLT).

D. LOVE FOR THE GOSPEL

This certainty comes from a true and deep love for the Gospel. It is clear for Paul that this certainty of heaven is something that is laid out in the gospel message. I would like to spend a lot of time here talking about the Gospel. The word gospel means good news. But in order to understand how good the good news is, we must first understand the bad news. The bad news is that we are all born into this world physically alive but spiritually dead. Now we will remain physically alive for about 80 to 100 years. But spiritually, we either live for eternity or die for eternity. I know I have also described this concept for us as well. Death in the Bible never means that someone ceases to exist. Death in the Bible means separation. For example, in physical death, the soul is separated from the body. Spiritual death means that we are separated from God for an eternity. That means that when we were born into this world our eternal destination was hell. And through our sinful behavior, we continue to confirm our reservations in hell. Many of us forget that. We become so self-righteous that we forget that our eternal destiny was hell and that if somehow we have deceived ourselves into thinking we are Christians when we are not, we are still headed there.

It is only by admitting this in a very personal way that we can place ourselves in a position where God can change our eternal destiny. I know that in the United States, we like to spread blame around so no one really ends up taking personal responsibility. That has clearly spilled over into the modern day church. When we Christians talk about being born into sin, we talk generically. We say, "We were all born into sin. I confessed my sin, gave my life to Jesus, and now I'm saved." In order for us to place ourselves in a position where God can change our eternal destiny, we must come before Him and make our sin personal.

Let me give you an example. I'll make it personal. Over the course of my marriage, I have said one or two things to my wife that were extremely harmful. I could go to God and simply say, "God for saying harmful things, amen." I may somehow think I am now good to go. But how about the parts of her being that I destroyed with a couple of words? My wife has forgiven me, God has forgiven me, but how do I ever make restitution? I can never go back and repair the damage I did. In order for me to really understand the good news of the Gospel, I must come before God and admit that I have murdered a part of my wife. I can never fix that. I cannot pay that price. I deserve to die for eternity. I deserve to be separated from Him and from my wife for an eternity. If my wife chooses to forgive me, that will be a huge gift as well.

The problem with the Gospel today is that people do not want to ever accept the horror and damage of personal sin. Bill Clinton got up on television and said he was sorry. Jimmy Swaggart cried and asked for forgiveness on national television. All sorts of celebrities in our day do horrific things, apologize and move on with life. I'm not sure he even apologized but our former governor George Ryan became the target of a federal investigation that was launched after six children in one family died in a fiery accident on a Wisconsin expressway involving a trucker who may have bought his drivers license. But even if the governor got up and cried and apologized and begged for forgiveness, and even if the mother and father of these six children forgave him, he could never undo the damage he did.

In the model of true Biblical sorrow, Governor Ryan should have given himself a life sentence. He should have financially taken responsibility for this atrocity. However, in our society, one only needs to say sorry. No one can receive the good news before first acknowledging the bad news. If any of us ever get to the point where we think we deserve salvation or have somehow earned it, then we have taken ourselves out of a position where Jesus can change our eternal destinies from death to life. We must acknowledge not only that none of us are righteous, we must come to the place where we personally say that I am in no way righteous.

The Gospel here is further referred to as the word of truth. If you ever want to talk about this phrase, please let's get together and talk about it. I could talk for hours on the words *logos*, which means word, and *alethia*, which means truth. These words were rich in Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity. In Greek philosophy, the word was that which ordered all of reality. In the Gospel of John we learn that everything that exists was created through the Word, the Word was Jesus, Jesus was God from the very beginning. In his "Heraclitus Lectures," Martin Heidegger did a great study on the words *logos* and *homologeïn*. Heidegger goes into great depth telling how the *logos* orders and directs the world. It is amazing how closely he comes to describing the Pre-Socratics' view of the *logos* in terms that are very consistent with the Biblical view of the Word. I'm pretty sure this is purely unintentional since I'm not aware of any Christian ties with Heidegger.

But here is where it gets even better. Heidegger felt the duty of human being as described by these Pre-Socratics was to align themselves with the Word. That process was known as *homologeïn*. We get our English word Homiletics from this. Homiletics in theology is the methods developed to prepare passages for preaching.

Literally the word *homologeïn* means to say the same thing. *Homo* means the same *logeïn* from *logos* means to say. So *homologeïn* should mean for Heidegger to be in tune with the Word. For us, we should be maneuvering our lives and steering our lives so that they find themselves in synch with the Word. Instead of asking "What would Jesus do?" we would do better to ask, "What is Jesus doing and how do I fit in? How do I get in tune?" I could go on forever, but I hope you get the idea.

Secondly this Word is the Word of Truth. Jesus said:

"6 ... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 / NLT). Jesus is truth. Jesus is the Word. The Bible is the Word of God. The Gospel message is true because it comes from God. Again, there are not many ways to God. There is only one.

I want to deal with the word for truth, *aletheia*. Again, let's go back to Greek philosophy. In Plato's book The Republic, he described the soul's journey from heaven to earth. In other words, for Plato, there are a bunch of souls in heaven, in the presence of the *logos* and of other forms. The soul sees perfectly in heaven. They know perfect truth. However, it's a long journey from heaven to earth. Right before the soul is born, it comes to the River Lethe. The soul is tired, hungry, and thirsty. Now very disciplined souls will only take a small drink, less disciplined souls will take a long drink. Here's the kicker. *Lethe* means forgetfulness. In other words, before their birth in this world, souls must cross the River of Forgetfulness. For Plato, intellect, success, and morality were all known perfectly in heaven. But based on how much lack of discipline, and how much forgetfulness the person swallowed, the dumber he or she would be. So for Plato, stupidity, immorality, and other evils were related directly to people's inability to remember the good.

Now the word for truth puts the negation letter "a" before the word for forgetfulness. So for Plato, truth was the ability to remember the forms as they are in heaven. Then the person will be able to understand life as they are able to match the particulars in life with their corresponding forms in heaven. I know that's an oversimplification but stay with me.

For the Christian, all truth comes from heaven and specifically from the nature and being of God. If we have lost the hope that leads to peace, joy, and contentment in life, then we have forgotten

the source. We all know the story of the Prodigal Son. He demands that his father give him his share of the inheritance. He goes off to a foreign country and forgets about all that he was taught about life and morality. He squanders his entire inheritance on wild living and finds himself starving, feeding pigs, and even catches himself being jealous of what the pigs are eating. Listen carefully to the wording here:

"¹⁷When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man'" (Luke 15:17-19 / NLT).

When the Prodigal came to his senses, he remembered home. He recognized the truth of the word and agreed that the word was true and right. He submitted to the word and aligned his life humbly with the word. That is the only way we can find the hope that leads to happiness. **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HEALTHY LIVING.**

III. FAITHFULNESS (6b-8)

Hope Is The Foundation For Holy Living.

The second half of verse 6 through verse 8 describes faithfulness. More to the point **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HOLY LIVING.** As I look at the modern day church I do think one of the things we do lack is a good knowledge of the Bible. However, like Mark Twain said, "I'm not so worried about the parts of the Bible that I don't understand as I am about the parts I do understand and am not obeying." I think that the modern day church has lost a desire to pursue holy living. How can we know if we are authentic Christians? Well one way is to see if our lives are bearing fruit and if we are growing in the Lord. Again let me point out one of the problems that we moderns and some of the people Paul is writing to share. Many people substitute belief for faith. James the brother of our Lord put it this way:

"¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?" (James 2:19-20 / NIV).

There ought to be clear and decisive growth in our faith and behavior. There are only two options: either we are growing in the faith or we are dying. I'm going to just summarize this point by quoting from Hebrews:

"¹¹There is so much more we would like to say about this. But you don't seem to listen, so it's hard to make you understand. ¹²You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. ¹³And a person who is living on milk isn't very far along in the Christian life and doesn't know much about doing what is right. ¹⁴Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right.

¹So let us stop going over the basics of Christianity again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start all over again with the importance of turning away from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. ²You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.

⁴For it is impossible to restore to repentance those who were once enlightened—those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come—⁶and who then turn away from God. It is impossible to bring such people to repentance again because they are nailing the Son of God to the cross again by rejecting him, holding him up to public shame" (Hebrews 5:11-6:6 / NLT).

A. HOLY LIVING

It seems pretty simple to me. If we are not growing we are dying. If we remember that death in the Bible means separation, then if we are not pursuing holy living and if we are not really growing then we are dying. In other words, we are separating ourselves more and more from God and the way this passage sounds, it could be leading us to an eternity that is separate from God, in other words, hell.

B. HUMBLE LIVING

Next faithfulness is described in terms of humble living. In order for us to hear and understand God's grace, we must again be humble enough to accept the Bible's description of us and our need for constant humility, repentance, and submission.

C. FAITHFUL LIVING

Faithful living means that we are always ready to be used by God. It seems as if a local citizen from Colosse happened to be in Ephesus when Paul was preaching and teaching there for three years. Epaphras was faithful to God, to Paul and to his fellow citizens by bringing the Gospel message to them. Perhaps if this guy had not happened to hear the message of the Gospel, received it, and had the courage to share it back home, there may never have been a church in Colosse.

I know we support missionaries who bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. But we are called to be faithful in bringing the Gospel to our friends, coworkers, neighbors, and all we come in contact with. The Gospel was spread throughout the whole world not only by the Apostles, but by ordinary common folk who had the courage to share it.

D. SPIRIT POWERED LIVING

And we share the Gospel not only by words but by our actions. That can only be done by Spirit powered living. Paul mentions their love in the Spirit. We can only live the Spirit-filled life as we submit to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. We'll get into this deeper as we get deeper into the letter. But for now we could say that **HOPE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HOLY LIVING.**

IV. EPILOGUE

The Declaration of Independence says that we have the right to pursue happiness. That's fine, but in reality the only way to find happiness is to pursue holiness. **HAPPINESS IN LIFE CAN ONLY BE EXPERIENCED BY LIVING IN HOPE.**

I know this is not politically correct nor is it very patriotic. But the truth is this. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one will ever be right with God in any other way but through Him. Unfortunately the church in the United States is not often willing to stand up and say that. Listen to what David Garland says in his commentary:

"Fewer Christians today take for granted that Christianity provides the standard of truth and morality by which all life and all other religions can be assessed. Many assume that we all worship the same God and that whatever a person chooses to believe about that God is valid or just as good as another's belief. To question one's belief system is to be unpardonably judgmental and intolerant. Most generally now adhere to the principle that whatever works for me or works for you must be true."

Christians in the United States have to get back to living Biblical Christianity not some made up idea. Just because someone says it's so or feels that it's so, doesn't make it so. We must learn to live by the Bible.