

Colossians 1:3-23

- Exegetical focus 1:5-6a -

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Form and structure

- ❖ 1:5 is part of Paul's prayer and forms a unit together with verse 1:3-4.

Exposition

- ❖ The key word of this verse is the word hope. Three things about hope are communicated to us in this verse:
 - The nature and security of this hope – “hope that is stored up for you in heaven”.
 - This hope is the basis of faith and love, which we read about in verse 4.
 - How this hope came to the Colossians – through the word of truth of the gospel.

Verse 5a: *because of the hope that is stored up for you in heaven...*

- ❖ There lies a challenge in translating this verse, because it starts with a preposition. The question among commentators is: to what does this preposition connect? The challenge is increased by the fact that it seems as though Paul is using hope as the grounds for faith and love, which we read about in verse 4. To some, this is strange, because often in his writing Paul mentions them together, all finding their basis in God. Here hope is presented as the basis of the love and faith of verse 4. Hence there are three views on translating this verse:
 - There are those who are of the opinion that since the object of this preposition is in the accusative case, this preposition must be connected to the verb in verse 3.

Meaning that the text will have a reading like this, *since we heard about your faith and love ... we thank God for the hope ...* There are two main arguments against this reading: first is that the connection with verse 3 is very tenuous. As this letter was read aloud to the church, it would have been difficult for the hearer to make such a connection in relation to all that is being said from verse 3-5. The second argument is that such a reading breaks apart the trio of faith, love and hope that commonly occurs in Paul's letters. Though it is clear that the way in which this trio is expressed in these verses is different from the typical way Paul writes about them.¹

- There are those who argue that the preposition must be connected with the last word of verse 4, which is love. If this reading is accepted, then the text will read something like... *of the love which is due to the hope*. Read in this way, only love is connected with hope, and hope is treated as the basis of love. Though such a reading has merits, it is still difficult to argue why it is that only love is connected to hope and not faith as well. It is clear that in verse 4 faith and love are mentioned together.²
 - There are those who are in favour of connecting this preposition to both faith and love, thus making hope the grounds of both faith and love. Thus the text will read: *faith and love that springs from hope*... This reading makes sense even though one has to acknowledge that it is not common for Paul to write in this way. Though it may not be common for him to write in this way, it is however not strange, because in Titus 1:2 Paul makes the hope of eternal life the grounds of faith and knowledge.³ In Colossians, Paul does not mention eternal life; however, this does not mean that it is excluded when one considers the content. So this reading is the preferred one.
- ❖ Because of the **hope**... Hope has to do with expectation – this can be an expectation of good or ill. However, when used in a Christian sense within the New Testament context, it is a hope in a good sense – a joyful and confident expectation of eternal salvation.⁴ Paul's use of the Christian hope is unique in his style of writing because for Paul 'Christian hope rests on God's eschatological act of salvation in Christ. The eschatological dimensions of Christian hope provide the framework for Paul's thinking. Christ's resurrection marks the beginning of the messianic age, the presence of the Spirit is evidence that the end has begun and the Christian hope waits for the complete manifestation of the kingdom of God at the Parousia. In Paul's letters the church is addressed as an eschatological community of hope: grounded in God's act of salvation in Christ, living in the power of the Holy Spirit and moving toward the full realization of the purpose of God...Hope is the source of present strength for believers because it is grounded in what God has done in Christ, is experienced in the power of the Spirit and moves toward the glory that is to be revealed.'⁵

Understood in this way, it means that by using the trio of faith, love and hope – and in our context the focus is hope – Paul is not only showing us what characterizes the

church; he also indicates to us the way he thinks about the church. He sees the church through the eyes of the past, present and future. This hope is grounded in what God has done, what He does, and what He will do in Christ through the Spirit. This is made clear by the way Paul speaks about this hope.

- ❖ It is the hope that is **stored up** for you in **heaven**.... The word translated with store up (avpokeime, nhn) expresses the idea of putting something away for safekeeping.⁶ A beautiful illustration of the use of this word is found in Luke 19:20 – the servant who hid his mina under the ground did so for his security, that it should not be lost.

Therefore in Col 1:5 it is used figuratively to refer to the certainties of man's future as established by God. The fact that this one is in the passive expresses the idea that the one who is doing the storing is God, not the believer. This hope is not dependent on man, but on God. Moo expresses the same idea by pointing out that the fact that this hope is stored up for them has the implication that it does not depend on them, someone has set it aside for them. This is the certainty of the Christian hope. It rests in God's character, He is the one who has secured this hope in Christ, and Christ is this hope. It points to the fact that the ultimate reality of the Christian salvation already exists.⁷

This hope is stored up for you. The word **you** here expresses both the individual and communal aspect of this hope. It is one hope that is held by the individual Christian and by the church as a whole.

In heaven points to a place where God is, but also where believers hope to be. How can hope be stored up in heaven? The idea of hope stored up in heaven refers to the glorious reward, that is, the future heavenly blessedness of the people of God.⁸

- ❖ What then is this hope? It is clear that by pointing to **hope that is stored up for you in heaven**, Paul does not have the grace of hope in mind which is worked in the believer. He has the objective of hope in mind – that which the believer hopes for. However, it is also impossible to separate the grace of faith from the objective of faith. Spurgeon expresses the relationship very well when he said that when Paul speaks about 'the *objective* of hope' it is clear that in his mind that the grace of hope as well as the objective thereof must have been intended, because that which is laid up in heaven is not a hope except for those who hope for it. It is clear that no man has a hope laid up in heaven unless he has hope within himself. The truth is that the two things—the grace of hope and its objective—are here mentioned under one term, which may be intended to teach us that when hope is worked in the heart by the Holy Spirit, it is the thing hoped for, even as faith is the thing believed, because it realizes and secures it. Just as faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, so is hope the substance of the thing it expects and the evidence of the thing it cannot see.⁹

- ❖ The question that remains is how is this hope the basis of faith and love? Hendriksen explains this relation as follows: “Understanding that Christian hope is not mere wishing; that it is a fervent yearning, confident expectation, and patient waiting for the fulfilment of God’s promises, a full Christ-centred (Col 1:21) assurance that the promises will indeed be realized. It is a living and sanctifying force (1 Pet 1:3; 1 John 3:3). Understood in this way, it should not be a problem to see how the hope of glory can strengthen faith in the One who merited all these blessings for us, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. It should also not be a problem to see how this hope enhances our love for those with whom we are going to share this bliss everlasting. In this sense then believing, hoping and loving always react upon each other. The more there is of the one, the more there will be of the other.”¹⁰ How is this possible?

- ❖ A reading of Colossians 1 gives us an explanation of why Paul makes this hope the basis of love and faith. In 1:23, he calls this hope the hope of the gospel. So we need to ask: what does the gospel offer? The answer is that the gospel offers Christ, and in 1:27, we are told that it is Jesus who is the hope of glory. So what Paul is saying is that that which we hope for which is our glorification, that which we are looking forward to, rests in what Christ has accomplished for us. Therefore, Christian hope is as real as Christ is real; without Christ there is no reason for hope. Christians can have the assurance of what they hope for because Christ’s work is a reality and not a myth. Therefore, hope in Christ comes from having faith in Him and this faith is expressed in the unity of believers, which is characterized by love. The implication is that it is impossible to understand the love between believers without understanding the hope they have. At the same time it also means that without this hope there is then no basis for true love. Piper expressed it well when he said: “A person’s conduct (whether toward an enemy or anyone else) can seldom be accounted for by a single motive. Part of the answer to the question of why we act the way we do is found by analysing those dominant and decisive forces that have shaped us into the kind of people we are. Therefore, to understand Christian motivation we must take into account the transforming gospel by which a person becomes a Christian...Perhaps what we can safely say is that the word “hope” makes explicit the fact that trusting Christ or God always involves trusting him for the future...Genuine faith is an undying hope in God...As hope in Christ replaces the “former desires,” so the old conduct which conformed to those desires is replaced by conduct which conforms to the experience of this hoping.”¹¹ This conduct is the conduct of loving other believers, which we did not have before. When Paul explained our situation before we became Christians he put it this way: “...we were being hated and hating one another...” (Tit 3:3). Meaning that if love is the product of this hope, then hatred is a product of hopelessness.

- ❖ Therefore, as Paul starts by praying for this church, he makes it clear that he thinks about the church as people who are rooted in this hope, but also as a community that displays this hope. It was this hope displayed by the church which puzzled the world. This letter truly expresses what people thought about the church then: “For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in

customs. For they do not dwell somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life. (...) [They] follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all."¹² How is it possible for people to live in this way? Verse 5b explains how such a hope is possible.

Verse 5b: ...and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel

- ❖ Verse 5b links with 5a because it explains how the believers in Colossae came to possess this hope. Paul tells us that this hope came to them through hearing, and the source of this hearing was the word of truth, and this word of truth comes from the gospel or is the gospel.
- ❖ **...which you have heard before.** This phrase can be interpreted in two ways. First, it can mean that Paul refers to the fact that they had heard about this hope before he wrote his letter.¹³ Secondly, it can also mean that Paul is giving a hint about the necessity of the believers in Colossae to hold on to the truth of the gospel against the false teachers. Hendriksen expresses this idea in this way: "A warning can easily be read between the lines, to this effect, 'O Colossians, I gratefully testify that with respect to this glorious hope you have heard a message that was true, uplifting, and fruit bearing. Hence, do not allow yourselves to be led astray by teachers of false doctrine. Cling to the truth that was proclaimed to you in the gospel.'"¹⁴ Both readings make sense when taking into account what Paul also says in 1:23. There is an emphasis on the foundational nature of the gospel message. What is it that they heard before?
- ❖ **...in the word of truth, the gospel.** This phrase can be translated in two ways. First it can be translated as "the word of the true gospel". Secondly, the word "truth" can be taken to be an adjectival modifier of "word", and then it will be rendered "the true word of the gospel". As Moo argues for understanding the importance of the concept of "truth" in both the OT and NT, it might be better to give independent significance to the word: "the message that is the truth, the message that is, of the gospel". In this sense a "word of truth", then, is a word or message that can be relied upon. Therefore, the gospel, as Paul implies, is to be contrasted with the false teaching, which cannot offer a reliable basis for hope.¹⁵ Therefore, what Paul is expressing by this phrase is that the preaching

of the gospel, which resulted in the conversion of the Colossians, was the source of their hope.

Application

Verse 5a

- ❖ The first thing that must be said as we think about the application of this verse is to realize what the bigger picture is here, which is that the existence of the church has always been God's witness from one society to another. Though faith, love and hope should characterize every Christian, they are also regarded to characterize the community of believers – the church. The existence of the church as people who share this hope together is in itself a witness. The coming together of the believers in Colossae served to express something that was greater than the believers. It spoke about another world, it witnessed another reality, which was not known to the culture around them. What is this reality? If hope is the power of the Christian life which is viewed as a pilgrimage, a journey through this present time and place to a better city and country, then hope is the power that keeps the Christian on that pilgrim's way and encourages him along.¹⁶ Then this witness is the witness of another world. The culture we live in needs such a witness for the following reasons:
 - The impact of secularism is that it has produced a culture which has accepted that it is only in the self – its needs, feelings, and desires – that we have access to meanings. The world above is gone; only the world within remains.¹⁷ The teaching of evolution and the practical manifestation of it in materialism has brought along a mindset which holds the view that there is nothing but matter: there is no spiritual dimension, no moral world, no supernatural, and no God.¹⁸ Man does not know how to look upwards anymore, he is taught only to look within and downwards. The church exists in this culture.
 - Not only has man been taught to look down and within to find a sense of meaning, man has another different outlook as he looks at himself and others. The only way in which the new hope of materialism can be obtained is through economic activity. Therefore, in the economic world people are defined by their function: value is considered, even the value of human beings, in terms of economic productivity. It is an impersonal world where values are pragmatic and fluid. In this world, character is subjugated to productivity, ethics to performance, what is right to what produces the heftiest bottom line. There is economic accountability but little moral accountability.¹⁹

What then is the impact upon the life of so many even in the church? The impact is twofold:

- First it means that people have nowhere to stand cognitively in the world, no way to get their bearings, that life's experiences fall like pieces of confetti with no relationship to each other. Life is made up of a multitude of separate experiences that are without interconnections or meaning. We are without a framework within which their moral, aesthetic and spiritual significance can be grasped.²⁰ Man has been left without meaning, except only to live for today and for now.
 - Second, this impact has produced the empty self or the depleted self. It is a self that is not rooted in place, community, or family. It is the self that has become hopeless. The only hope that this self has is that of one day, but this one day is not rooted in the expectancy of the coming of the Lord, but on the chance of being successful.²¹
- ❖ It is in such a culture that the church is to live as those who possess this hope. Those in whom this hope shapes their view of each other will first of all be heavenly minded; for it is in being heavenly minded that true love can germinate and grow amongst God's people. As Piper expressed: "It is not heavenly-mindedness that hinders love on this earth. It is worldly-mindedness. And therefore, the great fountain of love is the powerful, freeing confidence of Christian hope!" The word "hope" here refers to the content of our hope — to the thing hoped for, to the actual joys laid up for us in heaven. It does not refer to the feeling of hope in our hearts. However, if you ask how a distant future benefit causes love in the present, the answer is that the hope laid up for us in heaven inspires hope, confidence, and freedom in the present. The link between the objective hope laid up in heaven and the active love for the saints on the earth is the subjective experience of hope welling up in our hearts. It was hope that drove them to love. Put it another way, heavenly-mindedness broke the power of worldly love for furniture and houses and security, and freed the saints to risk their lives in love. Therefore, I say it again, it is not heavenly-mindedness that hinders love. When religious people fail to love, it is not because they have fallen in love with heaven, but because they are still in love with the world."²²
- ❖ The truth is that this hope is not just wishful thinking, and hence uncertain; rather, it is the solid ground of a certain expectation of future realities. To hope in God's word is to know with certainty in the present that what God has promised will happen in the future. Patient waiting and hoping go hand-in-hand. So we learn from this that hope waits patiently, confidently, and expectantly for the Lord to fulfil His gracious promises.²³ The Christian can be certain about this hope because:

- Of the one who is keeping it laid up for us. The reality and fulfilment of this hope rests not in us, but in our faithful Father. He is the One who is keeping it safe for us, and nothing will change that.
 - The certainty of this hope rests in what was done to make this hope a reality for us. It has already been indicated that this hope comes through the gospel, and that in the gospel Christ is presented to us. So the work of Christ is what made this hope possible for us. Christ's work is complete, we have nothing to add. Therefore our hope is certain.
 - The certainty of this hope rests in how we come to embrace this hope. If this hope comes by hearing the gospel, then we know that it is only God who can make us embrace this hope in true faith. God is the one who causes us to take hold of this hope in Christ, and this work of God in us does not depend on us, but on Him. We have the seal of the Holy Spirit for this great salvation – Ephesians 1:13.
- ❖ It is this hope that will guard us from being apathetic and cynical. As we are trying to bring about change and seeing no visible results for the good, we conclude that people will never change, and prayer doesn't work – God mustn't want to bless His church or certain people with godly growth, so we give up on them, thinking "What's the use?!" Apathy and cynicism are twin brothers. The one says, "Who cares anymore about trying to do well? It's not worth it." And cynicism says, "Yeah. It doesn't work. I tried, and all I got was trouble for my efforts. People won't change. The church won't change. Things will never get better. So don't bother trying. I certainly won't! And if anyone thinks differently they are just naive idealists who will soon enough find out the reality, and change their views." I have heard or seen that attitude at work, to varying degrees, in many of our churches over the years. I will guarantee that it has come about by people running ahead of God, trying to change things and minister in their own strength, trying to manipulate people and circumstances, but finding that doesn't work, and so concluding that things are a lost cause.²⁴ The Christian does not hope for a total change in this life. In this life we can only hope for a substantial change. However, we know that total change will come and we look forward to it. This keeps us doing good.
- ❖ One thing that can be added is that we are in a better position than the believers in Colossae were. In chapter 4:16, Paul encouraged them to read the letter from Laodicea and they had to share this letter with the Laodiceans. We are in a position to read all of Paul's letters known to us from the Bible. So we can sincerely ask, why is it that Paul really thanks God in prayer for this hope? Paul was thankful for this hope because he knew that it is this hope that has a practical effect in the life of the Christian. Without this hope, much of the Christian life will lack substance. The reasons are:²⁵
- The Christian hope forms the basis for substantial mutual encouragement.

This is what Paul had in mind when he called upon the Thessalonians to encourage each other (1 Thess 4:13-18). What do Christians do when one among them is facing death, or has lost a fellow brother or sister who is dear to them? When this sorrow clouds our eyes that we see only darkness? When this hope which was supposed to uplift us it is put down by grief? That is when other Christians should help us to raise our eyes to look up and encourage us by this hope we share. When things go wrong, this is the call to other believers to remind one another about this hope.

- It is this hope that creates a powerful incentive for the maintaining of Christian unity.

Imagine that you meet a believer who tells you so much about his longing for being with the Lord and the hope he has for meeting Christ. Then you realize that you also share the same hope based on the truth of the gospel. Will you not want to show the reality of your hope by being one in the work of faith? Read Eph 4:4.

- This hope provides a vital piece of the Christian armour in his warfare with the world.

The Bible constantly portrays the Christian life as a battle. We are reminded that this world is hostile to our Lord and his followers. So how can the Christian stand firm and never lose his head? In 1 Thess 5:8, we are told that this hope is the helmet. When the world frowns on you, it is only when you can look forward with anticipation to the smile that Christ will show you, that you can bear such a frown from the world. How can we stand firm against the tempting pleasures of sin? It is only by imagining the pleasures that are ours in God's right hand that we want to remain pure and clean from sin. It is only when you are otherworldly that you can avoid being too worldly.

- This hope should be the source of inquiry for the world. When unbelievers mock and abuse you, why is it that they do not see you returning fire with fire? Why are you not avenging yourself? The world will see the fruit of your hope, and they will want to know why can you endure such a suffering without retaliating. Then 1 Peter 3:13-15 is made real in your life.

It is for this reason that Paul thanks God for such a hope.

Verse 5b-6a

- ❖ What is clear is that the church has a huge role to play in the world. The key to true hope is entrusted to the church, for it is the church which is the custodian of the gospel. If this hope can only come through the truth of the gospel, it means that:

- The church denies the world true hope in its failure to evangelise and preach the gospel. The church also denies the world the opportunity to share in this hope if the truth of the gospel is twisted.
 - The call to the church is to faithfully make known the truth of the gospel; for it is in preaching it that the world can come to know of this hope, because the church has the answer for the hopelessness and the meaninglessness that has engulfed the world.
- ❖ Therefore, as the church, let us make it our habit to join Paul in thanking God each time we see this hope. Let us together raise our voices and proclaim that:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

¹ Peake, A.S. 2002. *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* Vol 3. The epistle to the Colossians. Hendrickson, USA, p 497.

² Patzia, Arthur G. 1990. *New International Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*. Hendrickson, USA, p 18.

³ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Eerdmans, Michigan, p 85.

⁴ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon – Bible Works 7.

⁵ *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*...hope is not defined by present realities but by God’s purposes for the future Letters, p 415-416.

⁶ Louw-Nida. *Bible works*.

⁷ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Eerdmans, Michigan, p 85.

⁸ Vaughn. *The expositor’s bible commentary*. Volume 11, p 175.

⁹ Spurgeon, C. S. Sermon – The hope laid up in heaven - <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols22-24/chs1438.pdf>

¹⁰ Hendriksen, William. *Colossians & Philemon*. Banner of Truth, p 49.

¹¹ Piper, J. Hope as the motivation of love. <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/hope-as-the-motivation-of-love-1-peter-39-12>

¹² Letter to Diognetus, quoted by Colijn J. 2012. *From Marginal to mainstream to marginal*. Lux Mundi Vol 31, p 32.

¹³ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Eerdmans, Michigan, p 86.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, William. *Colossians & Philemon*. Banner of Truth, p 50.

¹⁵ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Eerdmans, Michigan, p 86-87.

¹⁶ Kuiper, Dale H. Hope. <http://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/hope>

¹⁷ Wells, David F. 1989. *Turning to God: Biblical conversion in the modern world*. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, p 120.

¹⁸ Ibid, p 119.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 121.

²⁰ Wells, David F. 1998. *Losing our virtue: why church must recover its moral vision*. Eerdmans, Michigan, p 123.

²¹ Ibid, p 89.

²² Piper, J. 1986. *The Fruit of Hope: Love*. <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-fruit-of-hope-love>

²³ Rademaker, E. 2013. *Hoping and waiting, or why Christians aren’t apathetic cynics*.

<http://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/hoping-and-waiting-or-why-christians-aren%E2%80%99t-apathetic-cynics>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The following points were taken from an audio sermon by Martin Albert, titled: *Practical Effects Of Hope*. 2 sermons. Available for downloads at: http://www.sg-audiotreasures.org/ephesians/44am_ephesians.mp3
http://www.sg-audiotreasures.org/ephesians/45am_ephesians.mp3