

June 17 Col. 1:1-8 (Father's Day) **Title: Back to the Future**
Pastor Brad Smith

The sermon in a sentence: Right convictions about the future enable us to live wisely in the present.

Why I am preaching it: So that the congregation might live wisely in the present based on our hope in Jesus.

Today Pastors Wayne and Howard and I begin a preaching series on the letter to the Colossians that will take us through the summer. I have mentioned before that reading one of the letters in the Bible is something like hearing one side of a telephone conversation. (That is getting to be a more and more common experience as cell phones become increasingly popular.) It takes some guesswork to figure out who the person is talking to, and what questions or comments are being responded to.

Before we get to the heart of today's passage, I would like to fill in a few of the blanks as to the recipients of this letter. Some of them we can get from the letter itself, while others we can discover from history. Who were the Colossians? Why did Paul need to write to them? We will fill in more details as we work our way through the letter over the next months, but here is a broad overview.

We know from historical evidence that by Paul's time, Colosse was a small, unimportant Gentile town, overshadowed by its larger and more prosperous neighbors, Laodicea and Hieropolis. From the letter itself we can tell that the church in Colosse was not founded by Paul, but probably by Epaphras during the time that Paul was ministering in Ephesus to the west.

As far as we can tell, Paul was in prison in Rome when he received news from Epaphras about the church in Colosse. Some of it was good news. The same Gospel that was spreading and growing all over the known world was at work in the little town of Colosse as well.

But we will also find as the letter progresses that the church was troubled by a fair amount of religious confusion. They had been given accurate Gospel teaching by Epaphras at the beginning. But they were becoming influenced by new, supposedly more advanced teachers who were introducing a mixture of Jewish legalism, angel worship, some kind of Eastern ascetic mysticism, and a general belief that Jesus alone was not enough. Paul needed his best

pastoral skills to protect this church in Colosse against teaching that could end up cutting the heart out of the faith that had given them new life.

Now that we have a general background on the letter to the Colossians, we can move into today's passage. How do you begin a relationship with a group of people who are putting themselves in spiritual danger? Paul is a masterful leader at this point, and we would do well to learn from him.

In the verses that we have just read, Paul said everything genuinely positive about the Colossian believers that he could. His greeting to the "holy and faithful brothers" leaves no doubt that he considered them to be genuine Christians. He and they belonged to the same family, they were on the same side of the great divide between light and darkness, life and death. He freely acknowledged the growth of the Gospel truth in their midst, and that the Spirit was producing love in them.

But he was not going to sidestep tough issues just so he could be popular. He was not afraid to address them not only as a brother, but also as an apostle. He was sent by Jesus Christ, and he was writing with the authority of Jesus Christ. And then, before he refuted the false teachers in the rest of this letter, he laid out the rock-solid basics of Christianity that would keep them on track: faith, love, and hope.

Just as coaches in sports or piano teachers keep going back to the fundamentals, so Christian pastors and teachers must do the same. That's what Paul was doing, particularly in verses four and five. I see those verses as the heart of this morning's passage, and perhaps of the whole letter of Colossians. Listen again to why Paul thanks God for them: "...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..."

Faith, love, and hope. We have seen that combination in other writings of Paul, such as the famous 1 Corinthians 13 love chapter. In that chapter, Paul said that love was the greatest of these three wonderful qualities. In Colossians he wrote that faith and love spring from the hope we have stored up in heaven. Our hope regarding the future lays the foundation for our present faith and love.

At first, Paul's thinking struck me as strange. I would have expected him to say something like, "Because we have faith in what Jesus has already done on the Cross for us in the past, we can have hope for the future." Or maybe he would say, "The love that we have for one another in the present gives us hope for the future." We expect to build on our past and our present and from those experiences develop a hope for the future. How can we build our lives based on the future? Everybody knows that the future hasn't even happened yet.

Some of you may remember the movie, "Back to the Future," starring Michael J. Fox. It is about a teen-ager who manages to go back in time to when his parents were in high school. It was fun to see how he lived back then, already knowing what would happen in the future. And of course time travel has always been a popular theme in science fiction. Probably everybody at one point or another has wanted to travel into the future to see how things will turn out. We would make wiser decisions, we would live differently in the present if we could just be sure about the future. That's why people are willing to spend so much on horoscopes and fortune telling.

Well, when Paul wrote of the hope stored up in heaven, he was saying that the Colossians could know some significant things about the future. The future was not a complete mystery to them, any more than it is to us. The Colossians' convictions about the future shaped their present, just as our convictions about the future will shape our present. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Paul was right.

What Paul applied to the Colossians is true of everybody else as well. Seeing how people live in the present is a good indicator of what hope or conviction they have about the future. You have probably read about those cases where people were mistakenly diagnosed, and told that they had only a few months to live. Based on their convictions about their future, they made present decisions. There are people who went on wild spending sprees based on the misdiagnosis, and ended up stuck with a huge debt that they had to pay off over many years. Their present actions sprang from their convictions about the future.

Often we are completely unconscious of how our convictions about the future shape our lives in the present. You know, you get sermon illustrations in the strangest places. Earlier this week I was downtown helping someone get a State ID card. As we stood in line, a stranger began talking about his

divorce. He said something along these lines: “We had been married for twenty years. One day my wife said that she wanted to talk with me. I thought she had caught me cheating on her. But she just said, ‘You know, I think we are both young enough that we can still find happiness with someone else. Let’s call it quits.’ So now we’re divorced.” Now I don’t know what that man or his ex-wife believed about heaven. Most people at least in theory believe in some sort of afterlife. But in practical terms, they believed that happiness could only be found in this life. If they did not create happiness in their years on this earth, they would lose their chance forever.

Every marriage will have its stresses. But I wonder what different decisions that couple might have made if their hope, or conviction about the future, had been something like this: “We already know that in Jesus our eternal happiness is guaranteed. We don’t need to worry about creating happiness, or missing out on happiness. If we commit ourselves to this marriage it might very well get better. But even if it doesn’t we will not have missed out on anything from the standpoint of our eternal hope.”

What do we know about the hope stored up in heaven for us? There are scattered teachings in different parts of the Bible. We know that death, mourning, crying, and pain will be a thing of the past. We know that the suffering that we endured in this life will not even come to mind. We know that we will spend eternity worshiping the Father and the Son. We know heaven will be a place of great beauty. We will see Jesus; we will know him in a way we have never known him before. We will actually have authority in heaven. If you want an idea of the hope stored up in heaven for us, read Revelation 21-22, the last two chapters of the Bible. If we trust in Jesus, that is where we are headed.

How will that hope stored up in heaven affect believers in this life? Paul highlighted two areas for the Colossians. It would impact their faith in Jesus, and their love for one another.

Remember that the Colossians were beginning to get confused by teachers who implied that Jesus was not enough. They were told that they needed to keep the Jewish Law, they needed to punish themselves with unhealthy self-denial, they needed to worship angels. NOT TRUE. The hope stored up in heaven was all about Jesus and his work done on their behalf. Faith in Jesus Christ. That’s what the Colossians needed. Not faith in Jewish laws, or in angels, or in anything less than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of

the world. The letter of Colossians has been known throughout church history as one of the great statements of the supremacy of Christ. Any teaching that does not exalt Jesus above all creation is not Christian.

The hope they had stored up in heaven would motivate them to deepen their faith in Jesus right now in preparation for heaven. I remember that before Becky and I moved to Japan in 1973 we took a Japanese class at adult school. I remember reading “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” the classic book about Japanese culture. We befriended a couple from Japan. We were eager to learn all we could about our future home. We wanted to adapt well. In the same way, the clearer our vision is of the hope stored up for us, the more motivated we will be to follow Jesus faithfully in this life.

Besides impacting their faith in Jesus, the hope stored up for the Colossians also affected their love for one another. How would heaven affect our love for one another in this life? I think I mentioned in a previous sermon that sociologists have studied how different societies deal with interpersonal conflict. Russians tend to have a big blowup, and then work it out. The French back off for a while, and wait for an appropriate occasion like an annual family gathering to get things worked out. Americans tend to drop the relationship that is causing conflict, and move on to new relationships. Secular Americans overall do not see relationships as lasting.

The clearer we are as Christians on the hope stored up for us in heaven, the less we will be tied to the secular American model. Look around you in the pews. A million years from now you will still be with those people. C.S. Lewis once wrote that if we could catch a glimpse of what the most ordinary Christian will be like in the new heaven and the new earth, we would be tempted to fall down and to worship him or her. These relationships are far too valuable to just drop. We are surrounded by awe-inspiring beings whose full beauty will be revealed for eternity in heaven. That is part of the hope stored up for us. You can see how the hope stored up for us in heaven can have very practical implications for how we treat our spouses, our children, our fellow church members, and will increase our desire to give and receive forgiveness so as to maintain the bond of Christian love.

Christian hope. What a gift! May the hope stored up for us in heaven overflow into a joyous faith in Jesus, and into an ever growing and deepening love for one another.

Let us pray.