

This evening we will hear the word of God from Colossians 1:5b-8. Last time we looked at verses 3-5a and reflected on Paul's thanksgiving for the faith, love and hope of the Colossians. I figured that was enough for one sermon. Thanksgiving, faith, love and hope are all weighty terms in the NT teaching about the Christian life and so we spend a little time thinking about them. The half-paragraph that we are going to consider this evening is not as packed, but there are a few weighty ideas that that worthy of close attention.

In these verses, Paul refers back to the way in which the Colossian believers first encountered the gospel. He mentions Epaphras as the one who had brought the gospel to them. "Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing – as it does along you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made know to us your love in the Spirit."

The way in which Paul refers to the gospel here is very significant. He refers to it as "the word of the truth, the gospel...." The gospel claims to be the truth. It is "the word of the truth." The gospel is the good news of what God has done in Christ for the salvation of sinners. That good news is embedded in the truth-claims of the whole Bible. The Bible claims to give us the truth about the nature of reality. The Bible teaches that the God who reveals himself in both creation and in the Bible is real and that he created everything else. That is the most fundamental truth-claim of all – the existence of the God the Bible reveals and the claim that everything else is the result of his creative power and wisdom.

From there the Bible teaches what it means to be a human being and our role in God's creation. It teaches about the rebellion of Adam and Eve and claims that that is the origin of sin and evil and suffering in this earthly realm. It teaches that all human beings are accountable to God. It teaches that God has a plan for the salvation of his world and that that plan is the meaning of history. It teaches that Jesus and his death and resurrection are at the heart of that plan and that those who submit to Jesus as saviour and Lord are saved from their sins and belong to the kingdom of God which will one day be the only kingdom when God brings to completion his plan for the renewal of his creation.

This is a summary of the truth-claim that the Bible makes, and it is all part of the gospel message – the message that Paul was preaching throughout the ancient world and which Epaphras had brought to Colossae. The gospel is "the word of the truth." That claim was being made wherever the gospel was being preached and it was being made in a context of many other claims to truth. There were many other ways of thinking about the nature of reality in the ancient world. There were many other religions. And there were the speculations of the philosophers who tried to explain the truth about the nature of things – the truth about reality.

So the gospel was being preached in a context of many competing claims to truth. And Paul is reminding the Colossians of that. The message that they had heard from Epaphras was not one way of looking at life which

could peacefully coexist with the other possibilities on offer. The gospel was not presented as a collection of insights that may be helpful for some people, but had no bearing on those who did not find it to be attractive or to their taste. The gospel is a claim regarding the fundamental truth about the world. The nature of the biblical claim to truth is that anything that contradicts it is necessarily false. The other religions of the ancient world could exist peacefully with one another. You could mix and match and combine and no one cared. Christianity differed from all other religions in that regard except Judaism. Because the gospel message claims to be “the word of the truth,” by its very nature it condemns all other religions and accounts of reality to be false insofar as they contradict the word of the truth.

This is one of the things about the Christian gospel that is so very unpalatable to those who do not accept it as the truth. This is where a great deal of the hostility against Christianity comes from. Religions that are happy to be part of the mix are welcome. Religions that do their thing quietly in their little corner do not bother anyone. But Christianity is irritating and even enraging because it claims to be the one and only truth. It claims that all people everywhere are accountable to the one true God. It cannot leave people alone because Jesus has sent the church into all the world with the message that all who believe on him will be saved and every single person who rejects him will be punished forever.

It is no wonder that Christianity is hated by so many. It rejects the pluralism that is the hope of so many for peace in a world of conflicting truth claims. That does not mean that everyone should not be free to practice their own religion. Christianity is about persuasion, not coercion. But it rejects the pluralism that says everyone is welcome to their own version of truth and no one has the right to tell people that their way of looking at the world is false and that they must convert to Christ or perish. That claim to be the only truth about the meaning of life in this world is deeply offensive especially today when the hope of many for peace on earth is rooted in the conviction that no one should claim comprehensive truth about the nature of things. Today in the west at least, everyone’s truth should be respected, and no one has the right to say that they are right and everyone else is wrong – except of course, Christianity with its claim to fundamental truth which is often considered to be oppressive and arrogant.

But how do we know that the gospel is “the word of truth” and it is the only true account of the world? How can we be sure that what we have in the Bible is true and that every word that contradicts the Bible is false and evil?

Now to put the answer to this question in a broader context, I want to make the point that every single worldview is rooted in beliefs that cannot be proven. This is one of the most helpful truths that has been explored and disseminated by Christian apologists and philosophers. Let’s just focus on the most powerful and influential worldview in our culture which is sometimes called the scientific worldview. The basic claim of this worldview is that there is nothing more than the natural material world. There is nothing beyond the stuff that can be observed and measured and explored by the scientific method. It obviously deals with things that are invisible

to the naked eye, but claims that there is no immaterial spiritual world – all that exists is the physical material world.

But that is a belief. It is an article of faith. It is a belief that nothing exists beyond what is accessible to the scientific method. That is not something that can be proven. And there are many problems that come with believing that nothing beyond the physical material world exists. It does not have a good answer for where this physical material world comes from. There is a lot of sophisticated-sounding language about the big bang and evolution, but these do not answer the question of why there is anything at all. There is a huge leap of faith at the very heart of the scientific worldview and there are many other leaps of faith along the way. The claim that there is not a God is just as much a matter of faith as the belief that the God of the Bible is real.

The denial of the existence of a spiritual world is a faith-claim. All worldviews are rooted in faith-claims. The problem is that many secular people have not considered very deeply why they believe that they believe. They assume that it makes perfect sense that there is no spiritual reality and that the physical material world is all that exists, but there are huge problems with that view. It cannot explain why there is something rather than nothing. It does not have convincing explanations for the fact that humans have deeply held convictions that some acts are good and other acts are evil. That does not follow from the belief that the material world is the only reality. And there are many other problems.

The biblical view of truth is rooted in revelation. The Bible teaches that we can know the fundamental truth about the world because God has revealed it to us. He has revealed it in the creation. And he has revealed it in his word. Our confidence in knowing the truth comes from faith that God has revealed himself to us. That is why Paul speaks as he does in this passage of the gospel. “Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel”

The gospel is a message given by Jesus to the apostles with the instruction to proclaim it to all the world. The preaching of Epaphras in Colossae was in fulfillment of Jesus’ command. The gospel was declared to the people as a word from God. It was proclaimed as the word of the truth. It claimed to be good news about salvation in Jesus and the overall message was that its way of looking at the world was known to be the truth because God had revealed it to man.

This is the concept of revelation. Hebrews 1:1-2 gives a good summary of the idea of revelation. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....” God has spoken. He spoke by the prophets. He spoke by his Son. Jesus claimed to be the truth. John 14:6 he said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” In John 8 he says. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” In John 8:31-32 he says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Jesus claimed to be sent by God. He claimed to be the truth. He claimed to be the light of the world. He claimed that the way to the truth was to abide in his word. This is how the gospel was proclaimed throughout the world. It is a claim to be the word of the truth. It is a message of salvation for those who receive Jesus as their saviour and Lord; but it is rooted in the whole biblical worldview which teaches that the God of the Bible is the creator and king and saviour of the world.

We live in a time in which the claim of the Bible to be the truth of God is made fun of and ridiculed as a superstition. The way that the terms “science” and “faith” are used in everyday speech constantly reinforce the widely accepted view that science discovers truth and faith has to do with superstitions and fairy tales. This way of thinking is assumed in much of what we hear in the language of the people who shape and reflect the secular way of looking at the world. Because it is so common, it is intimidating. We may feel foolish and embarrassed to be people who believe in the God of the Bible. We are a minority. Our worldview is not respected. And that is a challenge for us – it is a temptation to accept the view of the majority and bring our thinking into line with the culture.

Think back to this little congregation at Colossae. They were also living in a world of many different ideas about truth and reality. Colossae was a city in the ancient Roman empire. It was full of temples and religions and philosophers. The Christian message was the message of a minority. The church as a whole was very small. It was not the kind of message that your average Gentile would be inclined to believe. Receiving it would mean being disrespected by your friends and family. Paul, the main missionary for the spread of the gospel through the world, was in prison when he wrote this letter. There were many reasons not to believe.

And yet when Epaphras came and brought the gospel to the people of Colossae, some of the people of that city believed. Probably not a huge number. But enough to form a house church or a number of house churches. Why did they believe? Paul has told us back in verses 3-4. He says there that he is thankful to God for their faith in Christ Jesus. He does not attribute their faith to something special about them – some special ability to perceive truth or some greater intelligence than others. He does not attribute their faith to the skill and persuasiveness of Epaphras in presenting the message. He attributes it to God. He thanks God for their faith.

This is crucial to the biblical account of why some people believe and others do not. This is what Paul says about nonbelievers in Ephesians 4:18, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their heart.” The Bible teaches that those who don’t know God are spiritually blind. They are darkened in their understanding. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, we read, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of the visible God.” And then he goes on to say in verse 6, “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

This is why Paul thanked God for the faith of the Colossian Christians. God had shone his light into their hearts to take away their blindness so they could see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. This is why some believe, and others don't. Later on Paul will speak about Satan's kingdom as the domain of darkness. Darkness is a symbol for evil, but it is also a symbol for blindness. This is the biblical account of why some people believe and others do not. God has opened the eyes of believers in Christ. He has given them the gift of faith. And those who do not believe that the gospel is the word of the truth, do not believe because they are still blinded by Satan. They are blind. They are darkened in their understanding.

That is the biblical account of why some people believe and others do not. God give faith to some and he does not give it to others. Is there proof for this? Is there any way that the truth of the gospel can be demonstrated scientifically? No there is not. But as I have already said, there is no way to scientifically demonstrate any world-view. It is in the very nature of things that our foundational convictions about how the world came to be and what it all means are beyond the reach of science. Everyone lives by faith that their way of looking at the world is true. There is no way to reason all the way down to the fundamental nature of things. There is no way to prove or to disprove that there is anything beyond or above or outside of this physical world. Everyone lives by faith and not by sight.

But the Christian message is that God has spoken. We cannot reason our way to God. But God can and has revealed himself to us. We can't find God by the scientific method, but God is able to cross the line between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm and reveal himself and his truth to us. And that is what he has done both in creation, but especially in the Bible and through giving faith in that word to those whom he has chosen to save.

Now this does not mean that reasoning and thinking has no role to place when it comes to believing that the gospel is the word of the truth. We cannot find the truth about the fundamental nature of things by reason and the scientific method. But what we can do is observe how well the biblical account corresponds with the world as it is and the world as we experience it. Faith in the Bible is a gift of God, but faith can be confirmed and strengthened by seeing how the truth of the gospel explains things about the world and our experience of it. It explains how the world came to be. It explains the longing for meaning that most people have. It explains why humans have such a deep sense that there is good and there is evil. It explains the almost universal conviction that human beings are more than just physical – that there is a spiritual part of us that defies rational explanation. It explains why we feel guilty. These are not proofs, but they do confirm that the biblical account of reality is true.

Now in his letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions one of the ways that "the word of the truth, the gospel" is confirmed. In verse 6 he says this about the gospel: it "has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing – as it also does among you...." Now Paul's purpose of mentioning this here is just to express his joy and thanksgiving for the fact that the gospel was bearing fruit and increasing throughout the world. But

in the nature of the case, the fruit that the gospel bears, confirms its truthfulness. And this is a very significant part of the gospel message.

One of the great confirmations of the truth of the gospel is that it actually changes people. The gospel claims to release believers from the bondage of sin and empower them to live lives of love. Later on in this chapter Paul will tell the Colossians that he is constantly praying that they might be “strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.” The gospel bears fruit in the lives of those who respond to it in faith and that fruit is real and observable and as such is a strong confirmation of its truth.

Think of Jesus words to his disciples in Matthew 5:14-16, “You are the light of the world..... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Or John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Or Peter’s words in 1 Peter 2:12 “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good works and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

The fact that the gospel actually changes people’s lives is a confirmation of its truthfulness. Unfortunately that confirmation is not as powerful as it could be because the lives of those who claim to be Christians are not as changed as they should be. There are, of course, vast differences among those who claim the label of Christian. And the visible church is known for many attitudes and behaviors that detract from the persuasiveness of the gospel. The reality is that reputation of the church as a whole is not stellar.

However, it is not all bad either. There are many examples of lives of love that are empowered by the life of Christ in the gospel. And we can still say with Paul in our text that the gospel is “bearing fruit and increasing” “in the whole world.” The gospel does bear fruit. And it is a great encouragement for us when we see it. We all know people whose lives are a confirmation of the truth of the gospel. And it should be one of our goals as Christians that our lives may confirm the truth of the gospel to all who observe them.

It is also thrilling and confirming to hear about what God is doing through the gospel in many places of this world. There is lots that is discouraging about the church in the West, but there is lots that is encouraging as well. There are faithful churches and faithful Christians. We may meet with them on our travels or heard about them in books or on the internet. And in other places of the world, Christianity is bearing fruit and increasing sometimes in spectacular ways. Think of the fruit in the willingness of so many Christians around the world to lay down their lives and suffer in other ways in the cause of Christ. Think of the growth of the church in China and South America and Africa and even in some of the Muslim nations. Paul was very thankful for the fact that “the word of the truth, the gospel ... in the whole world [was] bearing fruit and increasing” and that is still the same today.

And at the same time this does confirm that the gospel is indeed “the word of the truth.” It does produce fruit. And we know this to be true in the faith, love and hope that there is in our own lives and in our fellow believers in our own church and in many other churches.

It is a great blessing when we can live with the confidence that the gospel is the word of the truth. Such confidence comes by faith which is a gift of God and yet it is not a blind irrational faith as the world claims it is. Many who are so confident in the scientific worldview have never examined the foundations of that confidence. The Christian faith rests on the revelation of God, but it is confirmed in many ways when we see how well it explains the world in which we live and why it is as it is. And the biblical gospel is truly good news in that those who receive it come to know, love and worship the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That relationship with God is at the heart of true life – meaning, satisfaction, joy and hope. One thing about the apostle Paul that radiates from this letter, including the words and phrases that we have focused on this evening, is that he was enthusiastic about life in the gospel and there is every reason for us to share in that enthusiasm and in the desire that more and more people might come to share it as well.