Keeping the faith till the very end

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0:00] An apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.
Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of this you have heard before the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among 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 known to us your love in the Spirit.
And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.
May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy. Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, he has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
[1:55] Well, may God bless his word as we come to it after we've sung this next song. I want to ask you a moment, as we begin this book of Colossians, that your Christian life went from following Jesus to simply believing in Jesus.

Now, there is a distinction there to be made between following Jesus and believing in Jesus in that you can believe what Jesus said, you can believe what Jesus did, you can believe what Jesus said to do, but then you can stop right there.
What Colossians wants to do is not to question whether or not you believe, but whether or not you are continuing to follow, whether or not you're continuing to follow Jesus.
And the letter is full of encouragement, though it does have its challenge throughout. And one of the things you'll notice from the first 11 chapters, sorry, 11 chapters? Yeah, if you went, oh yeah, that's right, I read it this afternoon.
Yeah, naughty, naughty. One of the things you'll notice from the first 14 verses, especially the first 11 in which Epaphras is mentioned, is that there's obviously a communication between Epaphras and Paul.
[3:12] In other words, Epaphras has spoken to Paul and therefore told Paul certain things about the church that we don't necessarily know what he's told, but we can have a good guess at what Paul has written back. So it's a bit like listening to one side of the telephone conversation. You ever done it? And you know that you pick on the phone and they're speaking, you go, I know exactly who that is. Right? Because you can guess it from the one side of the telephone conversation. You can also guess half the time what the conversation is actually about because even though you've only heard half of it, you can guess what's being said on the other side. But in the same way, there's this kind of communication between Epaphras and Paul where Epaphras is obviously writing to Paul saying this is what the church is, many good things about the church. But then when Paul writes back to the church and he mentions the things that he does, you can begin to perhaps guess, an educated guess, some of the things that Epaphras might have told them. So Paul addresses some of the issues. Why is Paul saying that for? Well, could it be because of these reasons? And so it's a tiny letter in many ways in that it's only a few chapters long or four chapters long in length. It's not as long as like Romans, but nevertheless it does have a big hearty message full of hope. In fact, Christ is the hope of glory. As I said on Wednesday evening, you have to receive this in the same

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way as the Thessalonians receive their letter, and that is you must receive it as the Word of God and not as the Word of men. And the moment you do receive it as the Word of God and not as the Word of men, the Word begins to do a work in you. You don't have to do anything with it.

The Word does the work. In fact, if I ever get an opportunity to write a lengthy book, rather than the little ones that I do for groups and what have you, but if I ever get an opportunity, I think I might title it, Let the Word Do the Work. On the premise that if you receive God's Word as God's Word, according to 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 13, it gets to work in you. It just gets to work in your life. You don't have to then go away and apply it. It just does a work within you. But having read through Colossians a number of times over the years, there are several things that need addressing. The one thing, most importantly, is this, that God has a point to all of this.
You ever woken up in the morning or had, you know, something happen over a period of a year or whatever, and you go, what's the point to all of this? Well, good news, God has a point to all of it. Life can be hard. The Christian life can be confusing. But Colossians wants to say, you need to remember that however hard it may be, however confusing it might be, God has actually got a point to all of it. There is actually a point to all of it. Now, you may have to suffer the points through life. I've always said that, to use an illustration that I've used before, a good thing can lock you into a bad relationship. So the law of marriage, which is good, okay, doesn't necessarily mean that the marriage is good. So a good law can keep you in a bad marriage, okay? And sometimes being a Christian and being united with Christ does keep us in a bad world, okay? We've got all these good things in Christ, but we have all these good things in an environment where things are not great. [7:03] And so we do suffer, in many ways, by the very fact that we are Christians. Because now that we are Christians, we live in an environment differently than we did before we were Christians. One of the things that we will not be allowed to forget as we make our way through Colossians, and especially here at the beginning, is that it is a letter that wants to focus our attention on the fact that Jesus is our certain hope. Now, I want to say this, that hope is as much as a Christian experience as love is.

But love seems to get talked about a lot more than hope. And I also want to say that hope is as much as a Christian experience as faith is. But again, faith seems to get much more attention than hope does.
We have that triune faith, hope, and love, and yet out of the three, hope seems to be the one that doesn't get talked about that much. It doesn't seem to be the one that even enters our mind that much. We wake up in the morning, we may think of God's love, we may think of the importance of faith, but hope?
What happens when you, when your mind doesn't think about a future hope? When you've got, you've got nothing to look forward to. There is actually, you know, the grass is greener on the other side, but it's way, way over on the other side. It's called heaven. It's called glory. The grass is greener there, but it's going to take a long time before we get to lie down and enjoy that kind of grass. But the only way to picture it is to have hope. Viktor Frankl, I think I told you this before, a Holocaust survivor in Auschwitz, came out of Auschwitz, started practicing medicine again, a Jewish psychologist or a psychiatrist, one of the two, and he treated people who wanted to commit suicide, and he began to realize one thing about them, that there were people that he had seen in Auschwitz that survived Auschwitz and didn't want to commit suicide. And the people that he was then ministering to, or sort of doctoring to, being the patient, his patients, they wanted to give up. They wanted, and he couldn't figure out that the person in front of them had nowhere near a bad his life as a person that he survived Auschwitz with, and yet this person wants to give up.
[9:39] And it took him a while to figure out what it was. And he began to realize that it had nothing to do with their past, but it had everything to do with their future. Okay, they didn't want to live because they'd never had any hope. They didn't see any point in living tomorrow. Okay, it wasn't the past that was giving them the problem. It was the fact that they had no hope for the future. And so, if hope is that powerful, if the future hope is that powerful, then it shows that it can have a dramatic effect on what you think and how you live today. And so, when a person loses hope, then it's no wonder why they might want to give up on tomorrow. In fact, stop enduring in the Christian life. To give up living the Christian life. That, you know what, this is hard. Is it really worth it?

And so, the moment you forget hope, those questions become very, very difficult to answer, and whether or not they even get answered in the right way at all. Paul puts it like this in Romans, where he says, nobody hopes for what he already has. Hope, by definition, means you don't have it yet.

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You have it in the sense that it is certain, but you don't have it in the sense that it is real. Do you remember when I gave you that illustration, when we did Romans 8, of the son who had been legally adopted, but was still awaiting to move into the adoptive home? All the paperwork had been done, everything had been set up, everything had been written, but he was still waiting to move into the adopted home. But in the same way, the Christian experience is exactly like that. All the legal side is done. Christ the victor has died on the cross, rose from the grave. The legal side, the legal demands are taken care of, but we've not yet moved into the Father's home. That's hope. It's a certain hope, but it's still a hope that we have to wait for. And so, we think about love a lot and the importance of that. We think about faith a lot and the importance of that, but it seems to me that hope is crucially important for continuing in the Christian faith. And if you lose hope, it seems as if you're in a whole world of trouble. You've got nothing to look forward to. Well, I've got three points this evening. There are three fairly short points. The first is this. What are the things that we're to be thankful for?
Secondly, what kind of attitude are you exhibiting to others in the congregation?
And then thirdly, why are God's reasons so much better than mine? That includes yours as well, not just better than mine, but why are God's reasons better than yours as well? Ours. So, here's the first one. What are the type of things that we ought to be thankful for in a congregation? Ought to be thankful to God for. One of the things I find interesting about Paul is that when he gives thanks, he's very specific about what he's thanking God for. It's not a general thanks, but he's very specific in what he wants to thank God for. The first thing that he thanks God for is the fact that he is what he is because of the will of God. You'll notice verse 1, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God. In other words, Paul, how did you get to be the way that you are? By the will of God. And he sees the same grace exhibited in the fellowship, verse 2, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. In other words, how did you get to be the way that you are? He says, well, Paul, we got to be the way we are in the same way you did, by the will of God. And so, it's a wonderful sense of unity that all of us have here this evening as we sit, that guess what? You got to be the way that you are in Christ, and exactly the same way I got to be the way I am in Christ, by Jesus. That we are what we are because God has made us this way, in Christ, that is. And so, Paul goes on to give thanks, verse 3, that we always thank God the Father of our Lord
[14:17] Jesus Christ when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, verse 4, and the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before the word of truth, the gospel. And so, what he's thanking God for is for a congregation that God has actually created. He's saying, God, I thank you that there's a church in Colossae. I thank you, God, that there's actually a church in Westerhales. I thank you, Father God, that there's actually believers sat in a church right now in Westerhales. I thank you, God, for that. I thank you, God, that I'm able to come into this building and leave this building knowing that there are people that share the same faith that I do. I thank you, God, for that. I thank you, God, that there are people who love one another, who have faith and who have hope. I thank you, God, for that.

And yeah, when was the last time that we had a prayer meeting that actually felt like that? Lord, I know there's not many out tonight, but forgive us, Father.
No, thank you, God. Because if it wasn't for you, there wouldn't be anybody out tonight. So, Paul's incredibly thankful to God because the church wouldn't be the church without God.
So, he says, I am the way that I am by the will of God. You are the way that you are by the will of God. We're all in Christ Jesus. We're filled with faith, hope, and love because of God.
These are things to be thankful for to God. To emulate this when you go home tonight and you have a cup of tea or whatever it may be is to simply say, thank you, God, for the church tonight.
[16:16] Thank you, God, that I have believers to sit with. Thank you, God, I have believers to sing with. Thank you, God, I have believers to fellowship with. Thank you, God, that I go to a church where there are people who sing and who pray and who believe the same things that I do.

Because I'm going to have to go to work tomorrow and be amongst people who don't. So, thank you, God, that at least you've given me a moment in which I can taste what heaven will be like. Thank you, God, that you've given me a place in which I can actually taste and see the things that are to come. So, what are the things that we are actually thankful for?
I've got so much to be thankful for. That I can actually go home tonight and thank God for you. And just thank him that you believe what I believe. You think what I think. In the sense that we follow Christ. Every reason to be encouraged.

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[17:25] And so, while it's possible to perhaps give love more attention than faith. And perhaps faith more attention than love, depending on what day we're on.

And the fact that hope comes a distant third. We hardly ever think about the importance of hope. At the same time, it's quite possible that we never stop and thank God when we get home from church for church.
Thank you, Lord, that I've got people to sing and believe and pray with. Thank you so much.
There's another thing here that I want us to focus on. And that is that when Paul focuses on giving thanks, he gives thanks to God for them.
He doesn't give thanks to them to God. Notice that. In other words, he's saying, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, we thank God.
[18:24] God. So, he doesn't say to the Christians first, you know, thank you so much for being a good witness at Colossae. No, he doesn't say that. What he says is, I thank you, God, that you as a church are such a good witness at Colossae.

That's what he thanks God for. It's the completely other way around. He's just totally thankful to God. God. And so, I guess it's true here, as it could be true anywhere, that you just don't know what you've got until you've lost it.
And when it's gone, and it's gone for good, oh, how you wished you appreciated it so much more when you had it.
As if it can make it come back. So, secondly then, what kind of attitude are you exhibiting to the congregation that you're in?
Now, there is a type of, that person's always known for being thankful. You know, some people can just plaster it on like they do. I don't know anybody who plasters makeup on, but let's just imagine a person who does, for a moment, plaster, although I've seen a few.
[19:43] Plastered on with it. It's sort of an artificial joy. It's sort of an artificial happiness. And almost, they have to tell themselves that they're happy because actually they're depressed.

And that the only way they can get themselves out a bit is by to keep lying to themselves. No, I'm really okay. I'm really, and they do this mantra of, no, everything's fine. Everything's, everything's not fine. But the only way they can deal with everything not being fine is by saying everything's fine, everything's fine.
And that kind of false joy, that kind of, do you know what? It saps anyone. You can't keep it up. It's impossible to sustain that type of, you know, mimicky joy.
It's impossible. It's impossible. So, you know, I've got no problem if you're miserable and you come to church and you want to let me know that you're miserable. That's completely fine. Because you only have to read the Psalms and you'll begin to realize that the Psalms is full of a full range of human emotion.
Some Christians are happy. Some Christians are miserable. But not all Christians are happy all the time and not all Christians are miserable all the time. Hopefully, not all Christians are miserable all the time.
[20:59] Though I've met a few of them as well. Like, have you forgotten about the grace of God? You know, I can understand some Christians getting miserable some of the time.

I find it very difficult to understand a Christian who claims to be a Christian that can be miserable all the time. So, what kind of attitude are we exhibiting in the congregation that we are in?
Well, you would never have guessed it with the amount of thanks that Paul gives to God for this church. And how thankful he is for Epaphras, the faithful minister among them.
And how joyous he is with the message that he's got to give them. That he's actually writing this letter from a prison cell. Unless you were told, you would never have known it.
You would think that he's having a well of a time wherever he is. That everything's going jolly well for him. And yet, here we have a man who's clearly full of the joy that he speaks of. Writing this letter to this church from a prison cell.
[22:03] And yet, you would never know. You would never know. And so, now we begin to see how important Paul considers it to be to not show face, but to actually show what real Christianity does in all circumstances.

I'm going to exhibit to this church, even though I am in prison, exactly what it is to be a Christian wherever you are. I may be down, but there's a gospel answer to that.

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I may be miserable, but there's a gospel answer to that. In other words, he encourages himself, if I can quote the psalm, in God. You would never have known that Paul was in prison upon writing this letter.
Now, one of the things that I'm guessing that Epaphras would have told Paul, and we know from other documents that this type of thing went on in the early church, is that this church here felt that Epaphras was not giving them the full gospel.
That either he was incapable in giving them that everything God had to give them, or that he had forgotten to give everything that God had for them, or that they'd got it, but they weren't quite happy with it.
[23:26] And so, Paul deals with a church who wants more and more of the Spirit, more freedom, more fullness, more spiritual power, more of these things, and he doesn't take it as godly ambition.

In other words, what Paul is assuming is that any time you want more, there are two things that seem to have gone wrong. The first is, you're dissatisfied with what you have.
The second is, you don't realize what you have. And so a person who constantly wants more, and wants this to happen, and that to happen, and whatever to happen, it's not godly, it's not ambitious. You're dissatisfied. It could be a form of godly ambition, but it's very unlikely. Secondly, it could be nothing more than the fact that you don't actually realize what you have.
It's a bit like the miserable Christian. They've forgotten that they've got God's grace in their life. In other words, if you're unhappy with the life that you have in Jesus Christ, then you clearly don't understand the life that you have in Christ.
[24:33] You just can't. It wouldn't be possible to. Because the life that you have in Christ is a joyous life. And so what I think is happening in this church, hence why Paul speaks about hope, and phrases hope so strongly, is that they have dissatisfaction in hope.

In other words, that the future is not happening quite as quick as they thought it would. And so what do we do in the meantime? You know, if God has promised us all of these things, where is it?
And so when you start asking that type of question of God is, you know, if God can do it all, and he says he's going to do it all, and it's not happening, you become dissatisfied in hope. You kind of hope for it, but it's not exactly happening.
And so here's the question, an all-important question. Are you dissatisfied? Or why are you so dissatisfied? What is it that actually makes you dissatisfied with living a Christian life or coming to church?
What is it that actually just labours a dissatisfaction upon you? In other words, what more do you want? In other words, what did you expect God to do for you that he hasn't done?
[25:57] Do you really think that God has shortchanged you? Do you really think that God has not come up trumps for you? Do you really think God is holding things back from you?

Do you think God has given you less than he's given other Christians? And that's exactly what was going through these Christians here at Colossae. That they felt as though that they hadn't received what the rest of the world had received.
Hence why Paul says in verse 6, that the gospel which has come to you, as indeed the whole world, is bearing fruit and growing as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God and truth.
In other words, the gospel you received is exactly the same gospel that everybody else has received. And so if they've received the same as everybody else, why is there a possible dissatisfaction?
Why is there a longing for more? When they have everything? Well, there can only be two reasons. Either they don't realize what they have, or what they have isn't enough, or necessarily what they want.
[27:09] And so what kind of attitude do you exhibit to those around you? You know, what kind of attitude do you exhibit to those around you?

Thirdly then, and this week sort of wrap it up, why God's reasons are so much better than ours.
Now, I want to suggest that in this church there is a form of dissatisfaction in the sense that Paul mentions the things that he does.
When we get on to the latter part of the letter, he's encouraging these Christians to continue in Christ in the same way that they received Christ. In other words, they want to go on to a higher super spirituality, and he's saying, no, just carry on in Christ in the same way that you began in

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Christ.
But whenever a Christian wants something more than what they have, something higher, something more spiritual, something more powerful, then they become automatically dissatisfied with what they've got.
Suddenly what they got is not what they thought it was, and yet God must have a reason to all of this. And so Paul begins to pray for them.
[28:21] He gives thanks to God for them. And then in verse 9, notice what he prays for them. And this is where we get the indication of what's lacking in the church. Why else pray for this if the church didn't need it?

And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you. Well, what did you hear? What did you hear, Paul? Asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will.
Well, that must be a lack in the church. For spiritual wisdom, that must be lacking in the church. Understanding, that must be lacking in the church. And why are you praying this for the church, Paul?
Verse 10, So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.
And so what Paul is saying here is, look, I'm praying verse 9 because of verse 10. I'm praying verse 9 because of verse 10.
[29:20] And the reason I'm praying verse 9 is because verse 10 is at stake. What's at stake? Well, God's glory. I'm praying for you to be filled with all knowledge of his will, spiritual wisdom and understanding.

So as, verse 10, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. In other words, the reason you need this is to live a life that glorifies God.
In other words, God's glory is at stake in this church. This is a church where God's glory is at stake. And the way to deal with that is to pray for spiritual wisdom and understanding and the knowledge of God's will.
These believers, verse 11, also need spiritual power. He says, May you be strengthened with all power according to the glorious might for all endurance, with patience and with joy.
Verse 12, In other words, endurance and patience. Again, there's obviously a problem there with not continuing. There's obviously a problem there with impatience.
[30:30] The only reason why you would pray to God for a church to have patience is if the church is full of impatient people. The only way, the only reason you would pray to God for the church to endure is because you might have a feeling that the church is not enduring.

And so Paul is praying what he's praying because he's obviously got an indication about this church. The trouble is, is that like all Christians today as well then, that people look for a quick fix to their impatience.
And so they ask God for something to happen. Let's have more of something. You know, something to happen, more of the Spirit, more, Lord, just make something happen because I'm getting impatience.
I'm getting impatient. But God knows that the only way to deal with impatience is with patience. In fact, you can't deal with impatience without patience. It's a bit like repentance.
You can't deal with unrepentance without repentance. You just can't. There's no solution to unrepentance than repentance. And in the same way, there's no solution to impatience other than patience.
[31:41] And so here we have a church who's probably not enduring, who's probably impatient. And so Paul prays for spiritual power that they may endure and that they may be patient.

There is no quick fix. The only solution to impatience is patience. And that's God's reasoning. My reasoning is, Lord, deal with my impatience by making something happen.
May the year of 2016 be a year where many things happen because I'm getting impatient. And God says, you want me to deal with your impatience? You will have more of the same until you become patient.
Okay? The only solution to impatience is patience. Patience. And the only solution to not enduring is being caused to endure. Okay? If you give me the option of moving the finishing line, all right, the finishing line's at the back of the church and I'm here, and you're saying, look, just endure.

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It's there. It's there. And you're pointing to it. That would be encouraging me to endure. But if you said, hey, do you know what I can do? I can move the finishing line so it's just an inch in front of your foot.
[32:55] Well, that gets rid of endurance, but it doesn't build any endurance in me. It gets rid of the need to endure, but it doesn't build any endurance in me.

And so God's finishing line, God's crown of life stays exactly where it is. And so the encouragement is, there it is. It's a hope, verse 12, and verse 5, that you will one day share in the inheritance. There's the finishing line. There it is. Keep enduring. And so when the temptation comes, and with this I'll conclude, to be impatient, and it will, and when the temptation comes not to endure, and it will, you need to pray, and we need to pray for each other to be strengthened.
And this is why we need to pray for each other to be strengthened. because it could just be the case that you this evening have got to the stage where you can't pray it for yourself. You're so spiritually weak, you will not pray for yourself to continue.
And so the only way for that prayer to be answered is if somebody else prays it on your behalf. what you do with people who are too spiritually weak to pray for themselves to continue in the faith.
[34:17] Will you pray that God will grant them spiritual strength to continue in the faith? And so we go back to what we pray for and give thanks to God for each other.

So we pray for strength for ourselves and each other before we get to the stage where we have no strength to pray for strength. And remember, God strengthens our impatience with patience, and God strengthens our endurance by saying, you've not finished yet.
but the promise is, you will. You will, but it's not yet. Amen.

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