

GRADUATION

Colossians 1:3-8

Robert Orci, one of the screenwriters for the successful *Transformers* movie that came out in 2007 once was asked if, after they started making sequels, whether they might go back and change the name of the original movie the way George Lucas did with the original *Star Wars* movie when he changed its name to *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. He said he didn't know, but if they did he would change its name to *Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye*.

Ah, now that rings a bell for anyone who was either a child in the 1980's or the parent of a child during those years. So many years later we can all still remember that tune: "Transformers, robots in disguise. Transformers, more than meets the eye." While that was a television show created mostly to promote a line of toys, there is actually a message there that speaks to all of us. Don't you find that you feel like there's more than meets the eye when it comes to you? Or at least don't you wish that would be true, that you would be more impressive than you appear?

As we take our next step in our study of Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae I want you to think about the theme of transformation with me. It is an appealing theme. There have been a series of television shows about transformations, like *Extreme Makeover*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not To Wear*, *Restaurant Impossible*, *Hotel Impossible*. In all of the shows the payoff is seeing the person, the house, the restaurant, the hotel, totally changed and to see them in all their newfound glory at the end. That actually is a hope that lies within all of us. Today we are going to see what happened to a group of people who were truly changed in Colossians 1:3-8 to see how the transformation came about, and perhaps learn how we can be transformed also so that there can be more than meets the eye to us.

IT STARTS WITH TRUTH

The message of this little section of Paul's letter is complicated in its grammar (it is one long complex sentence), but simple in its message. Paul, as was his habit, gave thanks for his readers. Notice that he says he and his colleagues continually gave thanks for the Colossian Christians "because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus." Paul did not have firsthand contact with them. He did not personally know these people because he had never been to Colossae. So he had only heard about their faith.

We see in verses 7-8 that Epaphras was the guy who took the good news of Jesus to them. He apparently had been won to faith in Jesus while he was in Ephesus and he encountered Paul. When he went home to Colossae he shared the great news of Jesus with friends and family and a church was planted. What Epaphras told Paul was that his

friends back home were a little confused about some things they were hearing and needed Paul's help to get it all straightened out, but that they had eagerly believed in Jesus and they really loved each other.

Paul talks about the effect the Gospel had on them and thanks God for it, but I want you to notice that it all started with truth. They had put their faith in what Paul calls in verse 5 "the word of truth" or the message of truth. He mentioned this again in verse 7 where he says they "understood God's grace in all its truth."

That concept of "truth" is radically counter cultural in our society. It was in first century Colossae too. Most people in the first century were polytheistic. They believed in many gods. If your particular favorite god was named Jesus that was fine, they would just add him in there with Zeus and Apollo and all the rest of the divine gang. The Romans were masters of realpolitik. They didn't really care about gods, they cared about power in this world. So when they conquered people they mostly let them have whatever religion they wanted. If having their own gods to worship kept people relatively calm in a conquered area, then let them worship away. There was a little bit of the "we all worship in our own way" approach to the thing. To them there was no single truth, there was mostly only power.

Dr. David Garland, in his commentary on Colossians, informs us that the ancient Christians were accused of being atheists because they only believed in one God and denied everybody else's. In fact one man claimed Christians were haters of the human race because in their refusal to acknowledge the gods they might bring down wrath on not only themselves but their innocent neighbors as well. Today Christians are once again starting to be accused of being haters of people because they are "narrow minded," insisting there is truth, there is right and wrong and there is one God.

The most common thinking in our society is that there is no one truth. But we see in this passage Paul's claim that the Colossians started their new life as Jesus followers by putting their faith in the truth. Such a claim produces howls of protest in our culture because here people believe there is no absolute truth. Consider this idea that there is no one truth. If it is "true," if you'll excuse the expression, it invalidates all that Paul says here. To have no truth would be like knocking down one of the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge. If you do that the whole thing is going to collapse. If being transformed hinges on believing the truth, but there is no truth, then there can be no transformation.

However, to say there is no truth is absurd and self-contradicting. If it is true, then it is not true. If there is no truth, then that statement is not true, so there must be truth. You see the problem.

Everyone makes truth claims. Everyone believes there is truth. The person who says there may be truth in some physical senses, but in the moral realm or the supposed spiritual realm there is no absolute truth, is making a truth claim. He is making a dogmatic assertion about the nature of reality in the moral and spiritual realms. That is a claim to truth. The amazing thing is that those who typically assert this truth state it as though it were a given. They offer no evidence for their assertion. Typically the only rationale they have is that people so widely disagree. But disagreement of opinion is no evidence at all.

Consider the case of Malaysian Air flight 370 that disappeared last March. There are now many claims and theories about what happened to that aircraft. Some believe that it flew out into the Indian Ocean and crashed when it ran out of fuel. But there is a person who claims the plane tracked Singapore Airlines flight 68 headed for Spain and flew in its radar shadow, then split off after it passed India and Pakistan, and that it landed somewhere in China, Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan. One theory is that it was accidentally shot down by American or Thai fighter jets. There is the theory that several Chinese engineers with secret information were on board the plane and that American forces, wanting that information, took over the plane and flew it to the American base on the island of Diego Garcia. A friend with high level contacts in Washington says that U.S. Intelligence people know the plane flew north and was likely shot down there. One theory is that the Malaysian 777 that was later shot down in Ukraine was in fact the same plane! And of course 5% of Americans believe aliens took it.

What would you conclude about the wide variance in beliefs about that tragic flight? Would you conclude that in fact there is no truth? Or would you conclude that all of these explanations are equally valid? Either of those conclusions would be dumb. We know there is truth about that plane. Something happened to it. One of those theories will eventually prove to be true and all the others false. In other words, what some people believe about the plane is wrong.

Wrong? How can you be so narrow? That's so judgmental and so intolerant to say that those people have theories that are wrong. No, it isn't judgmental or intolerant. It is simply stating a fact. That doesn't make them horrible people and it certainly does not mean that they should be treated badly. They should be treated with dignity, respect and kindness. However it does mean they are wrong. And so it is in the spiritual realm. There are many theories. What that tells us is not that all are equally valid, which is a ridiculous notion. It tells us that someone is right and a lot of other someones are wrong.

It is most sane to conclude not that all claims are equally valid in the moral and spiritual realm, nor that none are valid, but that one is right and the rest are wrong. It behooves us then to find out which one is right. The person who says there is no God and no spiritual realm, and thus that there really is no morality, could be right and we could be wrong.

Same with the Buddhist and the Muslim and the rest. But they could be wrong and I could be right about the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think I am because of the evidence in its favor.

Everyone has a “truth” that they base their lives on. While they may not verbalize it this way, everyone believes they know the truth. Their “truth” will impact the way they see the world, the kind of person they are and the way they live. If you transform their truth, you transform the person.

What about Buddhists, who are open to everyone’s truth? In his book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, D. A. Carson has an interesting quote from the Dalai Lama. He said, “Liberation in which ‘a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality’ is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of...nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice.” Do you hear what he is saying? Only through Buddhism. He believes he has *the* truth that can transform and no one else does.

There is a very popular narrative in our culture. It is a narrative that forms the “truth” that many claim as the basis for their lives. It says that billions of years ago nothing existed. But at some point for some unknown reason, “nothing” exploded. I have trouble wrapping my mind around that statement, but it gets better. The nothing that exploded suddenly became matter that was violently flung spinning out into space. Eons later as clumps of that blazing hot spinning matter cooled it congealed and formed stars and planets. On one of those planets at least there was a fortuitous combination of chemicals that came together and formed a cell that somehow developed something we call life. Over billions of years that cell reproduced and many other cells were created, if you’ll excuse that word, but in some the process of reproduction got fouled up and the cells mutated to become something more complex and better. That process continued with an infinitely long string of miraculously helpful mutations that created increasingly complex creatures culminating in you.

You then are the result of nothing more than physical and chemical forces and random but shockingly fortunate events. What this means is that in fact your life is purely accidental and physical. At some point you will come to the end of your days and the atoms of your body will be recycled back into the system. End of story for you. There is no hope of anything else. This also means that you have no more meaning or value than a box of rocks, given that those rocks are the result of the same accidental and pointless process that produced you. Furthermore there is no God out there, so concepts like justice, morality, and right and wrong simply don’t apply. They are artificial human creations, nothing more than illusion.

This “truth” is going to impact your life. It is going to mean the only thing that makes sense is to live by the laws of nature, which pretty much boil down to the strong survive and the strong prey on the weak. Your soul will scream in agony because inside you have a voice that cannot be quieted that says you were made to mean something, and you will mean exactly zero. And you will be a monster, for you will live by the law of the jungle.

That’s a life in need of transformation. Desperately in need. The people to whom this letter was written also felt that need for transformation. They lived knowing that they were considered worthless. They had no meaning. They lived in superstition and fear, their lives were hard and they had no hope. It is helpful if we grasp the fact that *everyone* wants transformation, just like they did. Everyone is looking for something that will change their lives, that will change them, just as the Colossians did. In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller wrote that there is a point in *Romeo and Juliet* where Romeo says, “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized; henceforth I never will be Romeo.” Romeo wants to be changed, to be new, different, whole. Miller says, “Everybody wants to be fancy and new. Nobody wants to be themselves...they want to be different, with different clothes or shorter hair or less fat” (p. 29).

The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ changed the Colossians. It gave them hope. It told them that there is a God, a creator, and that he is just and good. It told them that this God cared about them, and that because he is real and just their lives have meaning. The truth told them that God cared so much about them he entered this world to have a relationship with them and to give them the hope of eternal life.

In *Blue Like Jazz* Miller also told an amazing story he heard at a concert. The singer had a friend who is a Navy Seal. This Seal told the singer that he had been on a mission to rescue some hostages who had been imprisoned for months in a dark part of the world. They assaulted the building where the hostages were held and found them huddled together on the floor. When they entered that room they told them that they were Americans there to free them, but the hostages just sat there on the floor, afraid to move. At first the Seals didn’t know what to do. Then one put down his weapon, took off his helmet and sat down next to one of the hostages. He got up as close as possible to a couple of them and put his arms around them. He stayed there quietly for a while until some of the hostages actually began looking in his eyes. He quietly said, “We’re Americans, and we’re here to rescue you. Will you follow us?” He stood up slowly and one of the hostages, finally understanding, stood with him. One by one the hostages stood up. They followed the Seals out, boarded the helicopters and were taken to safety.

In Christ God has come to be with us. He has come to rescue us, but the only way he could free us from our dark dungeon and from our fear was by becoming one of us and wrapping his arms around us. That’s exactly what Jesus did.

The message of God's grace through Jesus Christ changes us by bringing the news of forgiveness, acceptance and love from God. It means that we can be at peace, because we do not have to strive to earn that which would otherwise be forever out of our reach. We have nothing more to prove. We now can rest in God's love and live with gratitude for a God who wants us to be his children. That changes everything.

TRUTH PRODUCES HOPE

What the Colossians heard about was the hope that was "stored up for you in heaven." This is the great news that there is life after death, that not only is it existence, but it is the existence humans were created for and long for. We may not even know we long for it, but the dream of this eternal life is there in all of us. It is reflected in the striving for utopia, for the perfect life that is so common to the human race. Titus 2:13 calls this the "blessed hope." In Romans 8:23 Paul said we struggle in this world because we want that beautiful life and don't have it, so we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly" for it. In verse 24 he said "For in this hope we were saved." This is what God has gone to such an extreme, the extreme of the cross, to bring us.

Revelation 21:4 says in this kingdom God will "wipe every tear from their eyes; there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain." Can you imagine a world without death or pain? That is what waits us. In Revelation 21:5 God says, "I am making everything new." Wow does that sound good. I am not new. I am old. Some of the students in Toby's med school class found out that he played football in both high school and college. They have a flag football team, so they recruited to play on their team. He became an instant star. On offense he was the quarterback and was throwing lots of touchdown passes. On defense he played safety and getting so many interceptions he said, "It's not really fair, Dad." All good until last week when he pulled his hamstring. He texted me, "getting old really stinks."

Getting old? Hash tag "give me a break." He has no idea. He's not even 30 yet. You want to talk about pulling muscles? I feel like I'm in danger of pulling something if I just sit down too quickly. I woke up in the morning and my left ankle was sore. I have no idea why. I had not injured at all. A couple of weeks later I woke up in the middle of the night and had to go to the bathroom. But when I got out of bed I could barely walk. My right ankle felt like I had blown my Achilles tendon. How do you get injured sleeping? The next morning it felt fine. What was that about? It was about getting old. Stuff isn't getting better. The trajectory is depressing. But God says he is going to make everything new. I am going to be restored, new, and everything will work. And it won't look as bad as it does now.

Romans 8:17 says that we will share in the glory of Jesus Christ. I have always wanted glory. I have mentioned this before, but I always wanted to be a star athlete that played

on the biggest stage. That doesn't make me unique. It makes me human, and disappointed. I am disappointed because it never was even a possibility, and it never will be. But God actually put in all of us that desire for glory because he made us in his image. He created us to be glorious, worthy of glory. That has gotten distorted. But that desire is powerful and present in us all. Here's the great news: while in this life I will never experience the glory I long for, God promises I will in his kingdom. At last that itch will be scratched to my utter satisfaction.

In both Luke 13:29 and in Matthew 22 Jesus depicted the kingdom of God as being like a feast. Do you know why? That's because in those days a feast was the most fun they had. They didn't have television, movies, Super Bowls, World Series, concerts, plays, surfing, vacations on tropical islands. Their lives mostly were hard and often drab. What everyone looked forward to with eager anticipation was a feast, especially a wedding feast. That was the best party in their lives and the most fun they ever had. Do you get this? God pictured his kingdom as a feast because he wanted us to know it is going to be a blast. You have never had as much fun as you are going to have in that kingdom.

There is a show on television called *Forever*. The central character is a medical examiner in New York City. The unique twist of the show is that through an unusual curse, the central character cannot die. He has lived for more than 200 years. Actually he can die, but when he does he immediately wakes up in some body of water. Yeah, I know, it's a bit weird, but we like the actor who plays the character. We were watching the show and it hit me, the guy isn't afraid to die. Oh, he doesn't want to die because the process can be painful at times and more than a little inconvenient. But he's not afraid because he knows he'll come right back. So he takes some crazy risks, because for him it's not really a risk at all. And that's when it occurred to me we should be like him. We have the hope that we will live again. *Should we die our experience will be just like his, for we will instantly wake up alive again. This is the hope that the truth of the gospel brings us.*

HOPE RESULTS IN LOVE

The Colossians deeply loved each other. The early Christians were known for this, for the way they cared about each other, and others as well, was noticeably and remarkably different than people normally are. Paul commented on this and gave thanks to God because they were so known for loving each other.

It seems strange that Paul would say hope produced love. I would expect him to say that it produced joy or peace, for it surely will. But why would it produce love? That's not an obvious connection. How does hope produce love?

There are people who criticize the Christian faith because it focuses so much on heaven. All the talk is about the hope we have after we die, they say, and this makes the faith of

no effect for this life. Author and former pastor John Piper said, “The problem with the church today is not that there are too many people who are passionately in love with heaven. Name three.” He’s right. How many people do you know who talk, think and act as though the hope we have in heaven is the best thing that could ever happen to them, and who behave as though it is real? How often does this great hope come up in conversation, and how often do you think it impacts the decisions we make day to day? I suspect you don’t know very many people for whom this hope is ever present, if any.

I submit to you that being “heavenly minded” is not the thing that keeps us from loving people. Being more focused on this world actually is the thing that most keeps us from loving people. There were a few occasions when my kids were in high school that I tried to help them with perspective. High school tends to be a time when kids are obsessed with the events of their lives and what is happening in their school. There is a lot of drama and it all happens in a mostly narrowly confined world. The kids are utterly consumed with having friends, with things like having a date for prom or who is going to homecoming with whom. Often this leads to sadness when a high schooler feels left out or even ostracized. So more than once I had the conversation with one of our kids about how soon high school would be over and what would happen when it was finished. I told them the people who seemed all important at that point would totally disappear in their rear view mirror in a surprisingly short period of time. I told them very quickly they would look back on high school and see it as a pretty juvenile thing. As they moved on through life they would see high school as a brief somewhat unpleasant and not all that significant experience in their lives, one they would be more than happy to leave behind. I told them the world ahead of them held many interesting and more enjoyable people, much deeper friendships, and many fascinating challenges and adventures. So see all the drama in high school for what it is and don’t get too emotional over it.

It didn’t help. I know that because they immediately said, “That doesn’t help, Dad.” They still had to deal with the trials of life in high school and they sometimes felt lonely. Looking back on it both of our kids would probably say there were some good times and some highlights to their high school years, but for the most part...yuck. And I know that both of them would say what has come after high school has been immeasurably better and infinitely more important.

So what does that have to do with Colossians 1:3-8? In a sense, in this life we are in high school. We are utterly consumed with what happens in this world. All of the drama in our lives absorbs us and focuses on right here, right now. The hope of the gospel is that we will soon graduate to something infinitely better and more glorious. All the things that so occupy our minds and hearts right now will be seen as insignificant and even worthless. We will experience a life immeasurably better and more joyful. We will look back on this life and say there were some good times and highlights, but for the most part, yuck.

Here's why this is important. What you will notice about high school kids is that they will have their moments when they care about other people, but for the most part their lives tend to be about themselves. It is a wonderful thing when they get past those years, hopefully grow up, and actually learn how to love other people. My point is, it is the hope of heaven that can actually free us from obsession with ourselves so that we can begin to learn to love.

It is gratitude over the incredible gift that God has given us that causes us to want to love other people. Again I will quote John Piper. He said, "Only one thing satisfies the heart whose treasure is in heaven – doing the works of heaven. And heaven is a world of love."

All of us like to think we love people. Who wants to see himself or herself as an unloving person? So of course we say we love others. Do we really? My experience isn't "gospel", but after 35 years as a pastor I can tell you I have dealt with a lot of relationships that were damaged or downright failing, both marriage and friendships. I can tell you that without fail it has always involved a failure to love. We all have a frightening ability to label our selfishness love. When we are saying, "What about me? That person did this to me. I should expect this from that person and he or she has never given it. That person did this to me and it made me feel bad or angry or hurt." What is the common denominator in all of that? It is me!

It is helpful to look at that familiar description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. What is love like? It is always patient with the other person. It is always kind to the other person. It doesn't envy what another person has or boast and talk about itself. It is not self-seeking. Let me say that again. It is not self-seeking. Let me say that again. It is not self-seeking. Let me say that again. It is not self-seeking. It is not touchy and testy. It doesn't keep track of wrongs because it forgives without even being asked. It always believes in the other person. Love never fails.

I submit to you that in every situation where I have had to deal with a relationship in trouble *if even one person in the relationship would just love like that, the relationship would be healed*. If both did it would be a slam dunk, but if even one loved like that it would be amazing.

The problem is we are focused on this world. This is my only chance. I have to be happy right here and right now. My happiness depends on me having what I feel I need. I need recognition, I need affection, I need affirmation, I need attention, I need sex, I need money, I need conversation, I need patience from you, I need... Well you get the idea. If I don't get those things from someone then there is going to be trouble in the relationship.

Here's the great news of graduation. We have hope. Something far better awaits us. We have been given this incredible gift of hope that is real. It is the reality of this and gratitude for God's grace that has given it to us, that frees us up. I don't need to have all those things, because I will get all I need after high school. So in the meantime what I can do is focus on giving them to others because that is what God wants me to do.

I had an interesting experience a couple of months ago. Laurie and I were at the Honolulu airport on our way home. We had to transfer flights in the middle of the day and our transfer involved taking the Wiki Wiki shuttle bus to our terminal. When we got there we discovered there was no place in our entire terminal serving food and we were very hungry. I told Laurie I would go hunt down some food and bring it back. So I went out to get on the shuttle. When I got on the lady driving the bus asked me where I was headed. She asked because she had seen me on the bus to our terminal, so it seemed odd that I was now leaving it. I said I was looking for some place to get something to eat. I thought there were some in the terminal we had been in previously. Apparently there were but they had very little to offer. So she said, "When we get to the next terminal everyone is going to get off the bus, you just stay on it." Sure enough we got to the terminal and everyone got off the bus. I stayed on it and the driver talked to someone to explain what she was doing. Then she drove to yet another terminal. What is interesting about that was it wasn't her regular route. So I was the only person on the bus. She took me to the other terminal, told me exactly where to go to find food, then what to do when I was ready to go back to my terminal. This woman went way out of her way just to take care of a random tourist looking for food. I thanked her profusely and went on my way, frankly a bit amazed.

I have thought about that experience a lot. It has made me ask, "who are you going out of your way to help? Do you think about how you can encourage, love and help even your own wife that way? Who are you loving?" The problem is we are all preoccupied with ourselves. I cannot say it more clearly than Paul did in 1 Corinthians 13. If you are preoccupied with yourself you are not loving anybody. You might be manipulating them or using them, but you are not loving them. Love is not about self. It is not about me. It is about giving. It is other-centered. The key to that is *knowing at the core of our being that we have what we need so we don't have to be obsessed with taking care of ourselves*. And that knowledge comes from the blessed hope of our Lord.