

## The world-wide power of the gospel.

Text: Colossians 1: 3-8 for 2/10/2019

Mr. Ham was a Hmong village leader in Northern Vietnam. He was the village shaman, someone his neighbors believed could tell the future of people who were both alive and dead. So, Mr. Ham was someone people trusted to help with the funerals of their loved ones. But Mr. Ham knew it was a lie. Even as he put on the show of a shaman his words were empty. He received money and meat from the poor people from his village as payment for his services. Those payments became a heavy weight on his conscience. He wanted to help, but he knew that would mean something had to change. That's what led him to explore a new teaching he heard on a Christian radio broadcast. So, Mr. Ham traveled to a nearby village to find out more about Jesus. And when he did, he believed.

Mr. Ham went back to his village excited to tell others what he had heard and learned. Soon a church began to gather, and Mr. Ham became Pastor Ham. But this frightened the officials in power at the time and they threw this new convert in prison. Over the next several years Ham would be interrogated, beaten, and isolated, all in an attempt to get him to give up his new faith. It must have all been confusing for this new Christian. He had hoped to help his people. He was not about to give up his new confidence, but he was in prison. His people who were gathering as a church were in danger. How could he help if he was stuck, beaten and alone in jail?

Pastor Ham did not realize it at the time, but even though he was behind bars, true help had arrived. God was there in his village. Grace had arrived. The powerful Gospel was at work.

This would have all sounded familiar to the Apostle Paul. He spent years in prison because he would not give up his faith in Christ. The words from God we are focusing on today come from a letter Paul wrote while he was in prison. Enemies in Jerusalem had convinced the local authorities to lock Paul up for trying to undermine the Jewish faith. Those local officials kept Paul locked up for years. Paul finally appealed as a Roman citizen to the emperor in Rome. It was during his house arrest in Rome that Paul became aware of a problem among a Christian church he had never visited. The church in the city of Colossae was in danger. False teachers were spreading dangerous ideas about needing to add works to faith if a person wanted to truly be saved. These false teachers were telling the Colossians to rely on their human wisdom to comprehend God's word. These false teachings threatened heaven itself for these people. But how could Paul help if he was stuck, alone and beaten in jail?

Paul knew exactly how to help. He sent a letter to the Colossians that would turn their focus back to Christ alone. Listen to this word of God that reveals Paul's confidence for the Colossians. Paul writes:

*"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— <sup>5</sup> the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. **In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's***

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*grace.* <sup>7</sup> You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup> and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” (Colossians 1:3-8)

Paul, the prisoner, knew that help did not come from his presence. True, spiritual help only comes from the power of the Gospel of Christ. Paul reminds the Colossians to stick to what they already knew. On the day the Gospel came to them, with all the power of God behind it, they had truly understood that they were saved as a free gift from God – no strings attached. They truly understood God’s grace. Even though Paul had yet to meet this gathering of believers he knew the power of God’s promises. He knew the Gospel that had come to them. As Paul repeated that Gospel in this letter, he knew it would bear fruit just as it was doing throughout the whole world.

During Pastor Ham’s time in prison he did not yet have that same confidence. For years he dedicated his life to helping his people who were also under fierce persecution. At times they had to retreat into the cover of the jungle for worship. The help Pastor Ham could provide never seemed like enough. He did not yet truly understand God’s grace that comes from the clear, simple, earth-shattering power of the Gospel.

That has now changed. Through contact with WELS mission workers, Pastor Ham and many other leaders from the Hmong Fellowship Church of Vietnam are being led to truly understand God’s grace for the first time. This is how Pastor Ham describes what has happened: *“Personally, since I have been receiving training from the WELS, I see a change in myself as well. Before this, I taught and used my own authority in the church. At that time, I thought, “I’m the smart one – I’m the one with training, and I am the one with the authority. I can force my members to do the right thing.” But since I have been studying with the Lutheran Church, I have changed. I have reevaluated myself and how I taught in the past – and know that I have taught false teachings. The training made me value my members more – and know that they need the gospel. I used to use the law to motivate my members. That was how I showed my authority. But since receiving this training, I now understand that the law won’t help the members. I started to share the gospel and taught them to understand that the gospel will motivate you to love and show care for each other.”*

Pastor Ham has come to the experts and is asking for help to train his church that now numbers over 100,000 members. He has appealed to you.

Yes, you. Maybe this startles you, but you are just what this world needs. The truth about God’s Grace is one that you know well. In fact, in comparison to the vast majority of the world you are *experts* in this truth. And that is not because you are better than anyone else. You know who you are. You know what you deserve from God without his help. You know what you would be able to accomplish apart from God. Even our best days are spoiled by the evil thoughts that go through these heads, and the unkind words that sometimes slip from these lips. We know the self-centered outlook that is our default view of the world. When we are honest, we realize our hearts are an open book to God, we know what we deserve. God would have been more than right to throw us aside for all eternity in hell. You know that.

But you also know the amazing and unexpected things God has done. The amazing promises he has made. You know how he sent his Son for you. He condemned his Son

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instead of condemning you. He made his Son suffer so you can live. God gave up that which he loves the most to show how much he loves you. These are not truths anyone could expect. But thank God that at some time in your life someone told you, "God forgives you because of what Jesus has done. God will not treat you as your sins deserve. Instead, You will be with Jesus forever in heaven." That grace which comes through the gospel is how God has made you an expert.

You are an expert in world that will be lost without this truth. The story of Pastor Ham is just one of billions that could be told. There are over 7,000,000,000 people alive on this planet. The experts who have studied this tell us that more than 6,000,000,000 of them do not believe in Jesus. There is no way to sugar-coat this. Those 6,000,000,000 unbelievers spread around this globe, are all headed to hell. They need what you know. It might be easy to think, "I know they need what I have, but Vietnam is a long way from here." Don't sell God short. He has chosen you and made you a part of his Kingdom. He has designed you and every member of his Church to spread this good news to every nation. Have you seen the thousands of people from other parts of the world who are moving into our towns and neighborhoods? As the Holy Spirit empowers us with the truth of his forgiveness and grace, he gives us opportunities to witness every day. The grandmother that teaches her grandchildren the stories about Jesus and his love gets them ready to be the Savior's witnesses. The friend who consoles a grieving heart with the truth of God's unending love leaves a heart that is ready to spread that love to another. Your unexpected act of kindness leaves the recipient curious to find out what makes your heart so willing to love, and that allows you to explain God's grace. There are countless other ways that God will use your expertise. Once the Gospel is truly understood, it springs up to bear fruit and grow. As our efforts combine with the efforts of Christians around the world, God knits together his perfect plan to make sure more and more hear the message that brings such unexpected help. The Gospel of Christ's full and free forgiveness, which is the Gospel you truly understand, is just the thing these people in Vietnam need.

So, you shouldn't be surprised that God is using you to do this. There are those in these pews today who have personal experience with Vietnam. Some of you watched the news of war in that country unfold on T.V. Some of you were on the ground as that war was underway. You, more than most, know how unexpected it is for an American church body to have an opportunity to spread the Gospel in Vietnam. But with God we have grown to expect the unexpected. Your Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is making plans to build a training center in Hanoi, Vietnam. Pastor Ham is helping to organize training that will reach hundreds of village churches. That means over 100,000 people will be reached with the pure gospel of God. We don't know exactly how God will use all these efforts, but God does. We who truly understand God's grace know that his grace is enough. That is why we ask him to use us to share his Gospel. We ask him to bless his Gospel as he has promised among us, around the world and in Vietnam. We ask him to help people to truly understand his grace.

Like the Apostle Paul who had never met the Colossians, we may never meet pastor Ham or the other believers in Vietnam. At least not yet. Because of God's promise we know

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we will be in heaven. Because of the power of God's Gospel we know many who hear this message in Vietnam will be there with us. You have the amazing honor of sharing the precious Gospel with others. And you know what will happen. God told you. The world-wide power of his Gospel will grow and bear fruit. Fruit that will last for all eternity. Amen.