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<sup>4</sup> For we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven... <sup>11</sup> May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from His glorious power... <sup>13</sup> He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

From Colossians 1:1-14

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Have you heard of a ‘trust fall’? A ‘trust fall’ is something where someone stands on something high (like a chair, or a stage), and then has their eyes closed (or are blindfolded), and then are asked to fall back into the arms of a group of people who will catch them. The first time I saw a ‘trust fall’ was at a Youth Bible study where the leader was speaking about what it means to ‘trust in God’. And if you have ever done a ‘trust fall’, it can be both an exciting and anxious experience. The whole idea (and it can work in a secular environment when people are seeking to build a sense of ‘teamwork’) is for people to develop within themselves a sense of ‘trust’ in others around them. And in all the times I have seen ‘trust fall’, I have not seen a ‘trust fall fail’. But what would it be like if people didn’t catch you – if either they chose not to catch you, or messed it up, with the end result that you were hurt? How would you then feel (besides physically hurt)?

As Christian people we often speak of ‘faith’ or ‘trust’ in God in similar terms. We may take Bible verses like Proverbs 3:5-6 (*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths”*), and we subtly turn this into a ‘human work’ – that is, something you ‘do’. It’s seen as ‘making a decision’ to ‘trust in Jesus’. ‘Faith’ or ‘Trust in God’ is then described along these lines: “We must give in to God, laying all our fears and worries and problems at His feet.” And we are told, “Try not to think of this as a difficult task.” It is said that “The only path to truly experiencing the abundant life available to us in Jesus is placing our faith and trust in Him alone”, and in order to do this you must “Choose to place your faith and trust in God.”

But have you ever felt like you ‘Have no faith’? Have you ever felt exhausted by being part of “the family of faith”? Have you ever had doubts about the existence of God Himself, or in ‘belonging to a church’ (or even a local congregation)? Have you ever felt like the more you have ‘tried to believe’, the ‘more difficult faith becomes’?

Let’s be honest – there are times in our lives when we find it hard to ‘believe’. There are times in our lives when our trust is broken. There are times in our lives, also, where we are proud of our ‘human achievements’ and what we perceive is our ‘faith in God’ – but then our actions and thoughts do not resonate with Christ’s call to ‘love one another’ including our ‘enemies’. We either feel like we are ‘falling forward’ in the ‘trust fall’, when we should be ‘falling back into the arms

of Jesus. Or we believe we are falling the right way, only to find that we have separated ourselves from others in the family of God, especially those who require us to 'stand firm'. When it comes to 'keeping faith', we all fail in one way or another – as Luther says, either through 'pride' or through 'despair'. We become proud of our human efforts (and perhaps judgemental towards others) rather than a humble faith and trust in God. Or we feel like we can never really 'truly believe' and be 'good enough for God'.

In his letter to the church at Colossae, the Apostle Paul says this (Colossians 1:3-4): *"In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints."* This might seem like the Apostle Paul is 'patting them on the back' for 'being good Christians'. But he is not. Paul is not telling these Christians that they are 'good', or 'grand', or somehow 'worthy of praise' – for Paul goes on to say this (Colossians 1:5-6): *"because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God."*

True Christian faith is not anchored in what you believe or do; true Christian faith is anchored in what God has promised and done for you.

Some of you have heard of Keith Green (famous Christian singer in the 1970s) who tragically died in a plane crash at age 28 in 1982. Keith Green had tremendous passion and heart for both the church and the lost. He was incredibly genuine. He often gave away his albums for free wherever he ministered. And after Green's death, his wife Melody write a book called 'No Compromise' which summed up Green's life. Yet as you read his book you find out that he had times where Keith Green doubted whether or not he was even saved. Often he had no peace. There was inner turmoil and conflict. But a Pastor came and taught Keith about grace. In Acts 18 it speaks about Apollos, whom it says 'spoke boldly and fervently for the Lord'. Yet 'When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.' (Acts 18:26) That is what this Pastor did: he focused on God's grace, not the human effort of faith. And with this understanding of grace, Keith Green wrote a song 'Grace by which I stand' which starts off with:

"Lord, the feelings are not the same, I guess I'm older, I guess I've changed. And how I wish it had been explained, that as you're growing you must remember, that nothing lasts, except the grace of God, by which I stand, in Jesus.

I know that I would surely fall away, except for grace, by which I'm saved."

For Green, his peace returned. Peace follows an understanding of grace. Our hope is laid up for us in heaven. We are *"made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power..."* (Colossians 1:11) for *"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"* (Colossians 1:13-14).

What has Jesus done? He has rescued us from Satan's power. He's rescued us from sin. He's rescued us from death. He's rescued us from condemnation on judgment day. He has delivered us. He has redeemed us, by the price of His own blood, shed on the cross. He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness. Jesus has brought us (brought you) into His marvellous kingdom of light and love. Believers, listen, we are as eternally fit for heaven at the moment of our salvation as we ever will be. No amount of spirituality or self-discipline will make us any more fit for heaven. Fitness for heaven depends upon the finished work of Christ, not on our work for Christ. Because of the incomparable work of Christ on the cross, the believing sinner stands perfect in the sight of God:

Here in Colossians 1:12-14, the apostle has given us a brief glimpse of some of the wonderful accomplishments of what the Father has done for us in Christ. We are to be thankful, because God has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light, and He has delivered us from the power of darkness, He has conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, and He has provided redemption, even the forgiveness of sins.

Paul thanks God for the Colossians' faith. That is the first thing that comes to mind to be grateful for. Not their health. Not the size of the church. Not their budget. But their faith. That is the core and essence and channel through which all other of God's mercies are given to us. So Paul starts with thanking God for their faith. Then Paul thanks God for their love. But in particular Paul thanks God for their love for other Christians. How easy it is for us to love God in theory, but how much harder it is to love God in practice by loving God's people. But because God loves us, we can love our neighbour, and most especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. And then Paul thanks God for the impact of the gospel in and among them and also all around the world.

The word of the gospel is bearing fruit and growing. Paul gives thanks for this reality: that evangelism, discipleship, church health and true growth are all occurring as the gospel grows. Paul is less concerned for church growth than he is for gospel growth. He simply wishes people to know that they are known and loved by God in Jesus. And that is why he prays for the work of the Holy Spirit that *"you be made strong with all the strength that comes from His glorious power."*

Martin Luther had this to say about saving faith: *"Faith is an unceasing and constant looking which turns the eyes upon nothing but Christ, the victor over sin and death and the giver of righteousness, salvation, and life eternal."*

Faith is not what you know, it's not what you do, and it's not what you feel. In religion, like in rock climbing – the most important thing is not your rope, it's what that rope is anchored to. What is your faith anchored to? Our right standing before God is based on Jesus' work, not ours. He obeyed God perfectly, we haven't. He poured out his blood on the cross, we didn't. He paid the price for our sins – if we want to pay that price, we must spend eternity in hell. We are not saved because we believe; we are saved because Christ died to save us.

And you know what? That's very good news. Because I don't know my Bible as well as I should, do you? I don't always live the way the Bible tells me to, do you? I don't perfectly trust God's protection, His love, His plan and I don't always rejoice in suffering, do you? My faith doesn't always show itself in acts of love for my family, friends and perfect strangers – does yours? Sometimes, when I keep falling into the same sin over and over again or when guilt leaves me lying awake long into the night or when the smartest people in the world claim to prove that there is no god, I sometimes have some doubts; do you? But that's when I'm right where God wants me. Because God's grace and His promise are not to save those who have lived a perfect life or even have a perfect faith. Jesus Himself said that He didn't come for the good, but the bad; not the healthy, but the sick.

Faith doesn't save; God saves. And Saving Faith is not "believing in God"; it is believing God. This week then, lets change our perspective. It's God's power and strength that allows us to continue onwards, It's all God and nothing of us. He is willing to carry us when we can't go one more step. He is there to pick us up when we fall down. It is His journey with us more than it is our journey with Him. We have received mercy through what Christ has done for us. So *"may you be made strong with all the strength that comes from His glorious power."* Amen.

A prayer from Luther: *"O Lord, I now realise in very truth that not every person has faith. I believe, O Lord, but help my unbelief! Do not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax. O Jesus Christ, You who sit at the right hand of God, make intercession for me that my faith fails not. Be the author and finisher of my faith, that I may be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. Though I see not, let me yet believe and thus be saved. Amen."*