

## Keeping the Gospel in Focus

Colossians 1:21-23

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Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who minister by night in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the sanctuary and bless the Lord! May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who fills heaven and earth! Let's sing to His praise and glory from number 646, "Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts."

*Our Lord and our God, we hunger for You, we thirst for You in a dry and weary land. There is no place in the world that we would rather be than with You in the midst of Your people, under Your means, the means of grace that You have provided for the filling of our souls, for the stirring of them, that we might give to You the glory due Your name, that we might know fellowship with You, that we might receive wisdom and grace spoken into our hearts by Your Word.*

*We ask, O Lord tonight, that You would meet with us and that we would know that we have met with You, that we would say, "Surely the Lord is in this place." We ask that You would bless the one who will bring Your Word. We ask that You would enable us in our songs, in our prayers, to give ourselves to You, that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart would be acceptable in Your sight.*

*We pray Heavenly Father that in all these things we would glorify You and that You would inhabit the praises of Your people and that You would speak to us in such a way that we are strengthened and comforted and equipped to serve You for the living of these days. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now turn with me if you would to Colossians, Colossians chapter 1. And we'll be reading together a slightly longer passage than the one announced in the bulletin. We'll be beginning to read at verse 15. Colossians 1 and verse 15. I immediately thought of verse 23 of Colossians chapter 1 where he says, "not shifting from the hope of the Gospel." And tonight I want us to think about living out the Gospel on a daily basis, having the Gospel before us and day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, "not shifting from the hope of the Gospel." Now before we read this passage together let's look to God in prayer. Let us pray.

*Father, we thank You once again for the Scriptures and pray now for Your*

*blessing. Help us as we read this passage together to know the blessing of Your Spirit, the blessing of illumination, that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*

Verse 15 of Colossians chapter 1. Speaking now about Christ, who in the previous verses he has spoken of the Colossians as having been delivered from the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, and now in verse 15:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Well so far God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now Jerry Bridges, who is a revered preacher, teacher, in the land today on, I think, almost every occasion that I have heard him, and that's been several occasions that I have heard him, he has reminded us that we need, you and I, to preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. We need to preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. John Stott says, "The cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us."

Well that's been what we've been trying to do this summer — getting near to the cross, getting near to Jesus, getting near to the Gospel.

And here in Colossians Paul has spoken of these Colossians as having been delivered from darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's Son in whom, he tells us in verse 14, "we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins." It's all about Jesus. Now if you were to go to the church in Colossae, one of the buzz words that would come out — you'd only have to be there for a day or two and there would be a buzz word — and the buzz word would be "fullness." Paul alludes to it several times in this letter — "fullness." They were all about the full

Christian life. Living the Christian life on another plane, on another exalted level — how to have the full life, the full Christian life. And the way, well let me illustrate what that might mean.

You go to Colossae and there in the main street there is a bookstore. It's the Christian bookstore. Actually, it's called "The Full Christian Life Bookstore." And as you go in, the first thing that you see is an exercise machine, and the exercise machine is called "The Slim Christian for the Full Christian Life." You make some inquiries and you discover that in Colossae there was a belief about exercise, about diets, and sure enough, there before you in the Christian bookstore is "The Christian Diet for the Full Christian Life" with a starter pack. And there in the center is something called "The Liturgical Christian" promising that if you obey these Sabbath days and if you obey these feast days you'll experience "The Full Christian Life." And everywhere, all around the bookstore, hanging from the ceiling are angels and seraphs and cherubs, little angels from bangles that you put around your wrist and angels with bobbing heads that you can put on the shelf in your car, because these Colossians are into angels. They believe that angels are speaking to them, giving them words of knowledge that has raised them to fullness of Christian experience. And Paul, Paul is writing a letter to the Colossians and what do you think? Look, it's all about Jesus. It's all about Jesus. You know that Christian bookstore? Well, it's kind of imaginary. I sort of made it up, but you've been in those bookstores. They actually exist today, and it's about all sorts of things. And yes, over there in the corner you ask for a book about Jesus and the bookstore manager scratches his head and he says, "Well, yeah I think I've got that book and it's somewhere in the back and maybe I can find it, but you know it just doesn't sell." Paul is writing to them about fullness. You want to experience the full life, the full Christian life, the whole deal? It's all about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

And he spells out for them — he'll chastise them in the second chapter; he'll tell them off about their worship that's given to them by angels and about their feast days and Sabbath days and their asceticism — but first of all in this chapter he sets before them Jesus, in four dimensions. He sets before them in verse 15 Christ in relationship to His Father. In verses 15b, the second half of verse 15, through to verse 17, Christ in relationship to the universe. And then in verses 18 through 20, Christ in relationship to the Church. And then in verses 21 through 23, Christ in relationship to the Colossians themselves. He begins, and all I can do tonight is just outline this.

### **I. Jesus is the image of the invisible God.**

He begins with Christ in relationship to the Father. He is the image of the invisible God. This is where the Gospel begins. It begins with Jesus. And who is Jesus? He is the image of the invisible God. This week was the first week of semester, which for me means Systematic Theology I. It begins with the doctrine of God

and two great questions. The first can't be answered — What is God? About the only thing we can say is God is Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. A better question is — What is God like? And do you know, do you know boys and girls, the answer to that question? What is God like? The answer to that question is He is like Jesus. He is like Jesus. You know when John is writing his gospel he says, “No one has ever seen God. The only begotten of the Father, He has revealed Him.” He has, well he uses the word “exegete.” He's explained, He's given us a glimpse of what God is like. He's like Jesus.

Do you remember what Jesus said one time? “He who has seen Me, has seen the Father.” That's astonishing. That's one of those statements that takes your breath away. You've seen Jesus, you've seen the Father. You've seen what the Father is like. This Jesus who gets down on His knees and talks to little children! I was so flustered about talking to the children I came out early tonight. (laughter) Jesus spoke to little children. He blessed little children. That's what God is like. There is nothing in Jesus that you can't find in God the Father. Do you know sometimes we're okay with Jesus, it's the Father we're not sure about. You know Jesus brings us warm, comfortable feelings, but the Father, well, we're not sure about Him. And sometimes views of the Gospel and of the cross are concocted so as to make the Father reluctant to love and He only loves because of the sacrifice of Jesus. And John 3:16 tells us “God the Father so loved that He gave.” He is the image of the invisible God.

There was a little baby in my Sunday School class this morning. He was just a few months old. You know to be honest, he looked like any other baby, but that's not what I said because I'm better than that! I said to the proud father who was displaying him to me, “He looks just like you.” And he beamed! It was the right thing to say! (laughter) “He looks just like you.” Jesus is the replica of His Father.

You know, maybe that's where some of you need to start because maybe you've imprinted a bad relationship with your earthly father on God the Father. You relate to Jesus but somehow there's something temperamental about God the Father. That's not the Gospel. The Gospel begins with God the Father loves and loves and loves and loves again. There is no un-Christlikeness in God. There is no un-Christlikeness in God. He is the image of the invisible God. That's the first thing.

## **II. Christ is the firstborn of all creation.**

The second thing — he tells us first, Christ in relationship to His Father — the second thing he tells us is Christ in relationship to the universe. “He is the firstborn of all creation.” Now firstborn here, in the Old Testament sense, firstborn in the one who inherits. Ligon was talking about inheritance issues this mornings. And in the Old Testament, and it was true of western society until fairly recently,

but the firstborn was the inheritor. He was the one with status. He's the firstborn. He's the one with all the status. He's the one who's given all the glory. He's the firstborn. He's the firstborn of all creation. By Him all things were created. By Him all things are sustained. Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, He made everything.

I have got the coolest iPhone app ever. I absolutely love it. It's one of these things that you always wished you had. And you just lift the phone up to the sky and it will tell you what that star is or what that constellation is. It's the coolest thing ever. I have learned more in the last week than I've done in a lifetime! The sheer size of this universe in which we live, that the stars, the little white lights that are twinkling in the sky that we see, the light has taken hundreds, no thousands, no tens of thousands, no hundreds of thousands of light years just to get here. I can't take it in. When you look up at the sky you're seeing history. You're actually seeing the past. It takes my breath away. And Jesus made it all! "He made the stars," Moses says in Genesis 1, as though it was a trifling thing, like a throwaway line. "He made the stars," just threw them into the sky.

And He holds everything together. That's what we can engage in exploration. That's why we can engage in science. That's why we can go where no man has gone before, because every part of this universe is held together by Jesus, this Jesus of the Gospel, this Jesus who dies on the cross of Calvary, this Jesus. When you enter into a relationship with Jesus, not only are your sins forgiven, you enter a new universe. Something, what does the hymn writer say? "Something lives in every pew, Christless eyes have never seen." You know, when you enter into a relationship with Jesus, the whole universe opens up before you. It's His. It is Jesus' universe. He made it. He holds it together.

### **III. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead.**

And then he says a third thing. Not only in relationship to the Father, not only in relationship to the universe, but in relationship to the Church. "He is the firstborn from the dead," verse 18. He is the firstborn from the dead. It's talking about the resurrection. He has preeminence over creation. He has preeminence over death and hell and the grave. What did the resurrection achieve? I remember, I was just a little boy, but I remember Neil Armstrong on the moon. I can remember looking out because the moon shone at least in Wales it did. I can remember that very evening looking out at the moon and thinking, "Neil Armstrong is on that moon and he's just said, 'A small step for man; a giant leap for mankind.'" I imagine Jesus in the tomb, folding His grave clothes as John describes it, and saying, as He walks out of the tomb, "It's a small step for Me; it's a giant leap for My people. It's a giant leap for My people." There's coming a day, do you see, when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess — willingly or unwillingly — every knee, every tongue, that Jesus Christ is Lord, is Lord. He is God. The only God there is - this sovereign, majestic, glorious God who is the image of the

invisible God who upholds the universe that He has made, who is head over all things to the Church through His resurrection.

#### **IV. He is the Savior of His people.**

And then fourthly he says, and he's speaking now to the Colossians in particular, "and you, and you," having just spoken about the peace that He has made by the blood of His cross, the Gospel, "and you who once were alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel." In relationship to His Father, He is the image of God. In relationship to creation, He is the Creator and Sustainer. In relationship to the Church, He is the head. And in relationship to the Colossians, He is the Savior. You see those first three amount to nothing unless there's this fourth one, that He is your Savior. He is your Savior.

And Paul, Paul understands something here, that it's possible to shift from the hope of the Gospel. He's talking to Colossians. He's talking to believers. He's talking to professing Christians. And he's saying it's possible to shift from the hope of the Gospel, to look somewhere else.

Ligon addressed us this morning like a sword through the heart about covetousness. And as he finished, I whispered to myself, "Thank God for the Gospel, because I'm guilty. I am just guilty. Thank God for the Gospel." And so every day, every single day, we have to preach to ourselves this Gospel, this Savior of sinners, who through His death and resurrection has reconciled us unto God.

C. J. Mahaney, in his wonderful, wonderful book on the Gospel-centered life, or the cross-centered life, *The Cross-Centered Life* — go buy it. Buy two copies. Read one yourself and give one to your mother or your neighbor. It will be one of the best things you'll ever do. *The Cross-Centered Life* — and he says in a concluding chapter, "Here's what you need to do. You need to sing the Gospel at least once a day — in the shower, in the car, somewhere. You need to sing the Gospel at least once a day." "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling." What's your favorite Gospel hymn? Put it up on the fridge. Put it up somewhere in the house. Have a CD. Put it in your car. Put it in your iPod, but sing that Gospel at least once a day.

You know, there are texts in the Bible — there was a great book published in the 19th century called *The Hundred Gospel Texts* — the one hundred Gospel texts. Repeat a Gospel text at least once a day. "God made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him." You repeat that once a day and I'm going to say, I guarantee it's life transforming. It's

life transforming, because we build our lives day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, on the solid foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's all about Jesus. These Colossians were looking to angels, they were looking to rituals, they were looking to some kind of asceticism and diets and whatever fad happens to be popular. But it's all about Jesus.

Paul says one breathtaking statement about Jesus in this passage. "In Him dwells all the fullness of God bodily." All the fullness of God. The full Christian life is in Him. It's in relationship to Him. It's in fellowship with Him. It's all about Jesus.

*Father, we thank You for the Gospel. You take sinners like us and You make us clean. You reckon us as white as snow. You cover our sins with the blood of Jesus and we are Yours, now and forever. Father, we pray that we might never shift from the hope of the Gospel. Keep it before our eyes. Keep it in our hearts. Help us every day to preach the Gospel to ourselves. We ask all of this for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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