

Gospel Stability

Colossians 1:21-23

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I'm glad everyone found us here tonight. If you need a Bible, we have Bibles available over here, so feel free in the beginning here to slip up and grab some so you can follow along. We're continuing our series on Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. "Colossians — The Preeminence of Christ." That's what we're calling this Fall, midweek series. And Paul, throughout this letter, is setting up the argument for the Colossians that in Christ they have everything that they need because He is preeminent. You see, there are teachers that have slipped into this church and they have told the Colossians that there's something missing from their faith, there's something missing from their practice. We think, based on Paul coming back to the word "fullness" throughout the letter over and over again that these teachers are telling the church there that, "You're missing out on the fullness. You have a good start but there's a certain fullness that's missing." And Paul wants to make the case that since the Colossians are united to Christ, from the moment they place their faith in Him, they have all the fullness that God has to offer to them in the Gospel.

Tonight I want to focus our attention on verses 21 through 23 of chapter 1. But for context, let's begin back with the Christ hymn in verses 15 through 20. So in the Bible there, the church Bible, it's on page 983. I'll begin reading in verse 15 and then we'll want to concentrate on 21 and 23 tonight, but before then let me pray.

Our heavenly Father, there are many things vying for our attention tonight, many voices that will be whispering in our ear. We want to hear Your voice through Your Word. So Lord, help me to serve, Lord, Your people tonight in opening Your Word. Enable us, by Your Spirit, to see the truth, to embrace it with faith. We ask this all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Beginning in verse 15, let's hear God's holy Word:

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.

Amen, and that ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth on all of our hearts.

The Greatness and Supremacy of Christ

I want us to think about verses 15 through 20 just briefly as we're going to dive into 21 through 23. If you were here last week, I wasn't but I found the sermon on our website, and Wiley asked us to think about what in God's creation elicits your awe and wonder and to realize that what Paul is telling us in verses 15 through 20, whatever that is, Christ is better. Think about that. What elicits your awe and wonder? Christ is better. Did you ever think about the sun? Of course we think about the sun; we live in Mississippi! We complain about the sun! But have you ever just allowed yourself to be in awe of the sun? Do you know how big the sun is? The sun is over 7 million miles in circumference. How big is that? That means 109 earths can go across the face of the sun. That's pretty big. It's the biggest star in our solar system. But in the Milky Way Galaxy, the sun is a medium-sized star among an estimated billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, which by the way is on the low estimation 1 of 100 billion galaxies. So the Milky Way Galaxy — let me correct myself — 100 billion stars it's estimated, and it's estimated on the low end 1 of 100 billion galaxies. That hurts my head to think about numbers that big!

How about a smaller number? 4,500 — 4,500 species of cockroaches in the world! But don't worry, scientists say that only 30 of those species are actually pests! I would consider them all a pest! I can see the fear that's being drawn from some of your reaction to bring up cockroaches. Why do I bring that up? Well in the Christ hymn it tells us that the innumerable stars and the almost way too many cockroaches, they were all created by Christ and for Christ. So don't ask the preacher why God made cockroaches; one day ask Jesus why He made cockroaches because they were made for Him. And Paul's point is that everything, everything that was created He is greater than, He is preeminent over. He is the one who is supreme over all things. In the Christ hymn there, right

before our passage, he's painting this big picture of grand praise. But it really is beyond our comprehension. It kind of leads towards an abstract thought about how great Christ is.

God and Sinners Reconciled

And in verse 21, Paul makes the transition from big praise that goes beyond our mind to then directly addressing the Colossians. In verse 20 it says that Christ reconciled all of creation through His cross. The creation that was corrupted by sin and in bondage to sin has been reconciled by the cross. And now in verse 21 and 22, he's going to tell the Colossians, "And you've been reconciled. And you have been reconciled." It's almost like he's saying, "Okay, the preeminence of Christ, it blows our mind; it's beyond comprehension. But here's something — we can begin to see the greatness of Christ. Here's a mark, here's a proof, here's an evidence of the greatness of Christ. Who else could reconcile sinners to a holy God? Do you want to know how preeminent Christ is? He can reconcile rebels to their Creator?" In our passage tonight we're given a great word to describe our salvation — the word "reconciliation." That's one of the words that we find in the New Testament that gives us insight to what Christ did for us at the cross — reconciliation. There's other words like redemption, propitiation, justification. And all of these words, they're not mutually exclusive. They all point towards what happens when the work of the cross is applied to the sinner when they receive the gift of the Son by faith.

So tonight we're going to be thinking about that word, "reconciliation." And I want to draw out three things from the passage. First, we see that reconciliation is required. The second thing that I want you to see from the passage is reconciliation's goal. And the third thing I want you to see from chapter 1 verses 21 through 23 is reconciliation's promise.

Reconciliation is Required

So let's begin looking at verses 21 through the beginning of verse 22 and see that reconciliation is required. There in verse 21 it begins with, "And you who once," and we can just pause there for a second. The apostle Paul is doing something that he does often in his letters. In order to drive a point home he's going to do a compare and contrast for the believers, for the church who is receiving his letter. So he's going to want them to see, "This is who you once were," and then he's going to tell them, "Now this is who you are in Christ." So that's how 21 begins. But in telling the Colossians who they once were, we see a description of all people apart from Christ. We see a description of all sinners. So what does he say about sinners? "And you who once were alienated." Alienated means a consistent and persistent pushing separation away from God. It's being at odds with God not just some of the time but all of the time. You see, sinners

and the holy God, it's not just like they don't see eye to eye occasionally and maybe disagree about certain things — "Well I don't think that was really that bad but obviously you thought it was really bad so we're going to maybe agree to disagree." That's not the situation of alienation. The situation of alienation is consistent, persistent and being at odds with their Creator. This is who the Colossians were; this is who all sinners were. They are alienated from God.

Hostility with God

And he builds on it. He says, "and hostile in mind." Their mindset, their disposition, is at a full enmity against God. The word there that's translated "mind," it doesn't simply just mean the organ inside your skull; it could also include the concept of your heart, your inner being. From the core of who you are you're at hostility towards God. Paul, in another letter, in Romans, he just says plainly that sinners are enemies of God; alienated, hostile in mind. And then finally he says, "doing evil deeds." Doing evil deeds. An evil mind leads to evil actions. And the point is that, he's saying that, "Before God, let's get the picture clear. In your entire being — word, thought, actions — you are an enemy of God if you are a sinner." This is the situation; this is the dilemma.

Who can reconcile such enemies to a holy God? Verse 22 — "He, that he," — I'm taking that as a reference to Christ, picking up right where we were in the hymn in the prior verses — "He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death," and we'll stop there for now. We see what was required in order that this sort of enemy could be reconciled to a holy God. What did it require? Well it required two things. It required intervention and a payment. In verse 22 it says, "He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death." There had to be an intervention. If sinners were to be reconciled to God, God had to take the initiative. Sinners were not interested, they were not thinking about it, considering it. God had to take the initiative; God had to intervene.

Peace with God

And it was the work of the Triune God. That's clear. I want to point out something at the beginning of verse 22. It says, "He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death," and then later on in the verse it says, "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." You see, when we talk about sinners being reconciled to God it's not just that there was a wrathful, angry God the Father and Jesus was the sympathetic Son who came to reconcile sinners. If you notice, it's telling us that it's not only God the Father we need to be reconciled, but because of our alienation, because of our hostility of mind, because of our evil deeds we were enemies of Jesus. We were enemies of Jesus and Jesus is reconciling sinners to Himself. And then also we see the price that had to be paid for that reconciliation. What was the price? It was death. "The wages of sin is death." And the Son of God took on flesh and paid the penalty of death. He made the payment. It was what was required. What was required? It

was that God would have to intervene on behalf of sinners and that someone would have to pay. And it's the one who hung the stars, it's the one who created every insect and who knows why mosquitoes exist, who knows what every bug is doing right now at this moment. That one, the preeminent one, humbled Himself and took on flesh and died for sinners to pay the price for sin in order that sinners could be reconciled. Reconciliation is the bringing together of two opposing parties, to bring together.

The question is, "Have you been reconciled?" I want to draw us back to the beginning of verse 21. It says that the Colossians, before you met Christ, before you were reconciled you were hostile in mind. We need to make the distinction between thinking thoughts about God and desiring and delighting in Him. We need to make the distinction between just knowing truth about the Gospel and it being the thing that is our pure and utmost delight and our desire to bring God all glory. Have you been reconciled to God? Well a question to ask yourself is, "Are you still hostile in mind? Are you still hostile in mind to your God? Is He utmost in your mind?" Reconciliation is a beautiful picture. It's a very helpful way for us to understand our salvation. You know the different words for salvation in the New Testament help us to get a grasp of redemption, being bought back as a slave, or propitiation, the sacrifice of appeasing the wrath of God; justification, being declared innocent.

A Seat at the Family Table

Reconciliation, being made at peace with God, there's a legal aspect to it but do you see that there's a familial, there's a family aspect to it? It's kind of like being asked to come and sit at the table. Can you imagine that? I'm always thinking about food, but we're a couple of months away from Thanksgiving and could you imagine on that special occasion, it's one thing to bring in a stranger or a neighbor that you don't know very well or a new co-worker who's just moved to the area, but thinking about bringing in *that* person, that enemy, that person that wrongs you more than anyone else has ever wronged you, the person that you have imaginary arguments in your head with over and over again, that person that you will be waiting in line somewhere forever and you see him show up and you've been waiting in line thirty minutes, you're about to get to the front, but because they're in the room you just leave — that person being invited to your table at Thanksgiving to sit with your family. That's what reconciliation is. It's the enemies being brought together. So reconciliation required.

Reconciliation's Goal

The next thing — reconciliation's goal. I want us to think about the end of verse 22. Half way through the verse there we see an "in order to." So he's saying that Christ has done this to reconcile sinners to Himself, reconcile sinners to God, "in order" — for a purpose. Verse 22 ends with a purpose clause. "In order to

present you” — he’s telling the Colossians — “holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Reconciliation has a goal. They go back and forth, the scholars, when they look at this passage. And they’re saying, “Okay, is reconciliation really getting at our justification? Is it really getting at our sanctification?” And here, it’s all of that and it’s really getting at, what I think is our glorification. The goal of our reconciliation to God is that one day God promises that through the power of the cross, through the final and finished work of the cross, those who have been reconciled to God will be perfected, they’ll be glorified, holy, blameless, above reproach. Above reproach. You see, this reconciliation, it makes you a new person, but the Colossians, and if you’re a believer here tonight, you too, notice that I’m reconciled to God but I still struggle and I’m still tempted with sin. I’m still tempted. The battle is not over yet. And here Paul tells us that the goal of reconciliation is that one day when the battle is over to be there on that day.

Learning the Family Traits

Reconciliation begins with justification, includes our sanctification, and ends in glorification. So right now, in the time in between when we first met Christ and when we see His face and we are like Him, as the Scripture tells us, we’re learning new family traits. We used to know the old playbook. We used to know we were on the wrong team with the wrong playbook and now we’re learning a new playbook. Or, going back to the table, we’re learning how to sit at a table. Maybe you grew up in a family where dinnertime meant thirty seconds in the microwave and Nick-At-Night or whatever was on television and then all of a sudden you go to a friend’s house and they sit at the table and they talk to each other while they’re eating. It’s the strangest thing sometimes for some people. Or if you’ve ever been at a dinner and there’s more silverware than you know what to do with, there’s forks and little forks and then even tinier forks and then spoons and different things — what do you start doing when you’re at that table? You start looking around and saying, “What do I do at this table?” You find someone who knows what they’re doing. You see, in reconciliation you’ve been given a status, you belong there, and now you’re learning the family traits; you’re learning what to do at the table because the goal is your growth in holiness with the promise that because you’ve been reconciled you will be glorified. Reconciliation’s goal.

Reconciliation’s Promise

And then finally the last thing — reconciliation’s promise. Verse 23 — “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 of which I, Paul, became a minister.” He’s saying if you are to see that day and see your Savior and experience the fullness of glorification, all that belongs to you as a reconciled sinner, he says you have to continue in the faith. You have to

preserve in the faith. Reconciliation's promise. Now you say, "Promise? That kind of sounds like a warning here. It kind of sounds like the apostle Paul is warning them saying, 'Hey, don't walk away, or else!'" And you're right on to see that. It's a conditional sentence. We're given a contingency here. But I want you to recall what the apostle Paul has told the Colossians earlier in this chapter. He's told them that there is a hope in heaven waiting for them. He's told them that they've been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of His Son. He's told them that they've had their sins forgiven. And he's not all of a sudden changing on them and saying, "Well here's a strong warning." He saying, "Here's a promise if you continue in the faith." He's not trying to question their assurance; he's trying to build upon their assurance with a few towards persevering in the faith. Assurance upon assurance upon assurance. And here we see an indication of should you be rightly assured of your salvation, it's in the continuing of the faith. True assurance is accompanied by perseverance and that is what he's promising them. He's saying, "This is what Christ has done for you." There's other warning passages in the New Testament that are clearly saying, "Hey, if you don't remain in the faith, if your life doesn't evidence one that believes and trusts in Christ, who's repentant of their sins, you may apostatize." This isn't one of those passages. He's giving them the assurance. He's saying, "Now hold on."

The Promise: How the Gospel brings us All the Way Home

And in this verse 23 we see the purpose of the letter. He's going to, in the coming chapters, deal with the false teachers, deal with the philosophies, deal with the different practices that are going to undercut the truth of the Gospel, that are going to undercut their foundation. And so here he's saying, "Okay, I'm writing to you, I'm reminding you of who you are in Christ and how Christ has reconciled you to Himself and I want you to stick with that assurance." It's hard to tell here in our English translation, but some scholars point out that the words here, stable and steadfast, are very similar and connected to the same words that are used by Jesus in Matthew chapter 7 as He quotes the Sermon on the Mount and He says, "Build your house on the rock. Build your house on the rock and not on the sand." And so there's a connection between — Paul is almost saying, "You know what the foundation is, Colossians. Believer, you know what the foundation is. Continue building on it. Don't shift from it. And on that day you'll see your Savior in glory and you will be like Him." He closes out the verse 23 just assuring them, he says, "Okay, these false teachers will come in and they'll tell you that you missed it, that you're not hearing the whole message." He says, "No, the Gospel to put your hope in, the Gospel to build your life on, the Gospel that will reconcile you to a holy God is the one you heard from Epaphras." Epaphras was the one who brought the Gospel to the Colossians. He says, "It's the same Gospel that's going out through all creation" and he's saying that, "It's the Gospel that I, Paul, preach. Stick to that one. It doesn't need any supplements. It doesn't need any additions or subtractions. This is it. Reconciliation required, reconciliation's goal, reconciliation's promise. Don't get off the rock. Don't forfeit your place at the table," he's telling them.

A Call to Prayer

You know we opened with the hymn, “Rock of Ages, cleft for me.” Rock of Ages — that’s kind of like Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 through 20. What does that mean that Christ is the Rock of Ages? Eternal, unstable, unmovable. And he says, “but it’s a cleft for me.” It’s kind of like verses 21 through 23. Is the Rock of Ages your cleft? Is it a personal, is it your cleft? Don’t get off the Rock. Tonight I’m going to close with pointing out three prayer points for us. One, as we think about reconciliation, can we tonight pray that sinners would be converted? Can we pray that our church would grow through conversion? That the Gospel that we have heard that has reconciled us to God, can we pray for that? Can we pray that for each other and for our church that we would not shift from the Gospel but that we would build upon Gospel assurances — perseverance? Let’s pray that we would remain faithful. And then finally, let’s pray that the Gospel of reconciliation goes out into all the world. No one is meant to be excluded — no group, no nation, no people, from being reconciled to God. Let me close.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that in Your grand design You have overcome our enmity towards You. You have saved us, Your enemies. You have brought us into Your family, to Your table, and we have a status we don’t deserve, a fellowship we could never repair. Lord, these things are great and wonderful; may we marvel at them and never leave them. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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