

I figure that it is time to get back to the Colossians series that we were working on before the pandemic. I will preach another sermon or two on Psalm 23 and there may be other sermons applying the word of God to our situation as things develop and change, but we are at a point I think where not every sermon has to address the pandemic directly. There is a sense in which the gospel message addresses every situation in that it deals with things that are of greatest importance whether we are in relatively easy times or whether we are in more difficult times. So this evening we will deal with verses 21-23 of Colossians 1.

Now in the last two sermons on Colossians 1 we dealt with verses 15-20 which are all about Jesus Christ and his role in creation and in the new creation. This passage describes the supremacy of Christ in a most striking way. Jesus Christ is the one through whom God created all things and by whom all things hold together. And it is through Jesus that God is pleased to reconcile all things to himself – all things whether on earth or in heaven. The thrust of those verses is that Jesus is preeminent in all things.

There are no words to adequately describe how great and exalted Jesus is. The scope of the renewal that God is working through him is similarly breathtaking. This is the big-picture context for our lives. Jesus is preeminent and what he working toward is the renewal of the entire creation. This is a glorious hope as we consider how broken the creation is because of sin and how human sinfulness continues to work its destruction in society and non-human parts of the creation. What a comfort it is to know that Jesus Christ, who created all things, is working towards the renewal of all things! The history of the world is not moving towards the disintegration that is the inevitable harvest of sin, but rather, God in Christ has broken the power of sin and death and he is working towards their eventual eradication. In the end, God, man, and the rest of the creation will dwell together in harmony and the wonder of that is beyond what we can now imagine.

Verse 15-20 describe the Jesus-dominating and cosmic context of our lives. It is a very big and glorious picture. And the verses that we are going to look at this evening describe how believers fit into the big picture that verses 15-20 describe. That is the significance of the first two words of verse 21. You have the exalted description of the cosmic reconciliation that God in Christ is achieving and then Paul continues and says, “And you....” Now he is going to describe how the Colossians fit into the glorious picture of cosmic renewal that he has just painted. And it has to do with reconciling them to God. In verse 20, he speaks of God in Christ reconciling all things to himself and in verse 21 he narrows his focus and speaks about how God in Christ has reconciled the Colossians to himself.

Shortly after the beginning, Adam and Eve rebelled against God and that had consequences for the whole of the creation. Through what Jesus accomplished on the cross, sinners are reconciled to God and that also has consequences for the whole of the creation.

The whole of the creation is a very big thing. When David in Psalm 8 considered the vastness of the heavens, he felt very small. Psalm 8:4 “[W]hat is man that you are mindful of him” And yet God has given the human

race a very significant role in his creation so that man's sin resulted in the fall of the whole creation and man's salvation is connected to the renewal of the whole creation.

It is important that we understand that God is infinitely greater than we are, and we do not exist for ourselves but for him. But, on the other hand, we must also understand that God has given humanity an incredibly significant role in his creation. We see that in how our fall into sin had disastrous consequences for the whole of creation and how our salvation from sin is related to the renewal of all things. The most important thing in all the creation is the relationship of humanity with God. The human race, serving, and worshipping God, is at the center of what the whole creation is all about.

That is the significance of the relationship between the glorious big picture described in verses 15-20 and the description of the salvation of sinners in verses 21-23. The way to the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven is through the reconciliation of sinners to God. The salvation of sinners, through what Jesus accomplished by his life, death and resurrection, is at the heart of the renewal of the entire creation.

Paul begins with where the Colossians were before they were reconciled to God through the gospel message. "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled...." This how Paul described the Colossians before they were changed by the gospel. This is how the Bible describes all people who are not reconciled to God through salvation in Jesus Christ. Apart from salvation we are all "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds."

Now in many cases this is obvious. There are many people in the world who detest the God of Scripture and detest the people of God. But there are also many who might be described as apathetic. They don't feel hostile towards God, they just don't think much about him at all. They just don't care. But the Bible considers that hostility to God. Romans 8:7 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law...." This text tells us that not submitting to God's law is hostility to God.

And that makes sense when you think of it. God is God. He is our creator. He has the right to tell us how to live. He has done that by giving us his law. Not obeying that law is an act of rebellion and therefore an act of hostility. And in many cases that hostility may come more to the surface if God's claims upon their lives are pressed upon them. A failure to submit to God by keeping his law is an expression of hostility.

But what about us? We are in a different situation than the Colossians were before their conversion. They were converted out of paganism. Most of us have been raised as covenant children.

Now many of us can remember a time when we are unconverted. We took part in church life because we had to, but our hearts were not in it and we were not interested in keeping God's law. If that was your experience you can easily identify with Paul's description of the Colossians before they were converted – "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." There may be some among us who are still in that condition. Outwardly we may comply with expectations, but in reality we are still hostile to God. That is not a good place to be.

But within the covenant people of God, there are those who cannot remember a time when they were hostile to God. We often pray that our little ones may grow up and never know a time when they did not believe in Jesus and want to please him. That is what we hope and pray for - for all our covenant children. If that happens they will not be aware of a time when they were alienated from God and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.

The fact is that this is how God often works in covenant children. Psalm 78:1-8 describes a situation in which fathers teach their children God's word from their earliest days, "so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God but keep his commandments." Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." We know that that is not a promise. But it is an observation that, generally speaking, when a child is trained in the way he should go, he will not depart from it when he is old. And we know that to be so from thankfully observing it happening many, many times.

How are we to think of covenant children who are not aware of a time when they "were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds"? There are two things that must be said about this. One is that we are all born in sin. We are all conceived with sinful natures. We are all conceived sinners. Romans 5:18 teaches that "one trespass [Adam's sin] led to condemnation for all men." David in Psalm 51:5 writes, "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." And Ephesians 2:3 says that all of mankind are "by nature children of wrath." So even if we can't remember a time when we were hostile to God, we share the sinful nature that all people inherit from Adam and so we all need to be saved. That salvation may happen when we are very young and often it does, but we are all sinners by nature and need to be saved by believing in Jesus.

Secondly, even if we do not remember a time when we were not trusting in Jesus and seeking to please him, all true believers are given to see something of the evil of their sinful natures and the sins they commit. In Romans 7 after Paul describes his struggle with sin in his life he says "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He is speaking as a believer and he is very aware of the evil of his sinful nature. And that is the experience of all believers. When we see our own sin for what it is, we see that there is an aspect of hostility to God in all sin and so we have some sense of what we are saved from. It is not biblically accurate to say that believers are "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds," but because of the knowledge of the sinfulness of sin that comes with salvation, we understand that this is what we are saved from and because we still sin we are not yet completely free of hostility to God. All sin is against God. All sin is a refusal to submit to God. And so we see in Paul's description of the Colossians before their conversion, a description of what we are all like by nature and what we are being saved from.

Next Paul speaks of salvation using the image of reconciliation. "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in the body of flesh by his death." If we are saved people, we have been "reconciled in his body of flesh by his death...." Now the reconciliation that is in the foreground

here is the reconciliation of the Colossians to God. Before they “were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” but that is no longer the case. Their attitude towards God has been changed. They are no longer hostile to God. They now submit to him. They now trust in Jesus. They now are seeking to please God. And so from their side they are reconciled to God.

Paul is speaking about a profound inner and outer change that has happened in the lives of the Colossians. Reconciliation involves the deep seated change in attitude towards God. That change happens by the power of God. Verse 22 speaks of the reconciliation as something that God has done. God in Christ has reconciled believers to himself. And the result is that the Colossians are no longer “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds....”

But this reconciliation that Paul is talking about here also includes God being reconciled towards sinners. Before people are saved, God is not reconciled towards them. Unsaved sinners are guilty before God and they are under his wrath. Romans 1:18 says that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men....” 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says of believers that Jesus, “delivers us from the wrath to come.”

So there are two sides to reconciliation. We are reconciled to God and God is reconciled to us. There is peace between God and his people. The relationship is restored. The hostility is removed. Instead of alienation there is harmony and love. The barrier between God and his people is taken away. That barrier is both the guilt of our sin and our inner rejection of God as our God. The guilt is taken away in forgiveness and our inner hostility to God is removed by the change that God works in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. God adopts us as his children, and we love and trust him as our Father.

This is a beautiful thing. This is at the very heart of goodness. In the biblical worldview a loving relationship between God and humans is at the center of life and blessing. It belongs to the very purpose of the creation. It is pleasing to God and it is fullness of life for human beings. We were created for this relationship and it is this relationship that salvation restores. God and sinners reconciled is joy to the world.

And it happens by means of the death of Christ. Paul says in our text that Jesus has reconciled the Colossians to himself “in his body of flesh by his death.” Paul probably uses the phrase “body of his flesh” to emphasize the fact that Jesus became a true “flesh and blood” human being because there has always been false teachers on the fringes of the church that have taught that Jesus only looked like a human, but was not really and truly flesh and blood. But Jesus was a true human being as well as God. And being a true human being made it possible for him to die. It was the death of Christ, Paul is saying here, that reconciled God and his people. Paul expresses this same point in Romans 5:10 where he says, “[W]hile we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son....”

Being reconciled to God is at the heart of all that is good for human beings and the death of Christ is how that reconciliation was accomplished. The death of Christ is a great expression of the love of God. Verse 21 of our text reminds us of how personal sin is. Apart from salvation we are alienated from God. We are hostile towards God. We flout his authority by doing evil deeds. If we think of the fact that God made us ... that his intentions for us were always good and that rebelling against God is such an insult to God ... it is a great wonder that God does not just give us all what we deserve. And yet “God so loved the world that gave his only Son....” (John 3:16) Jesus according to Revelation 1:5 is the one “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Jesus “gave himself for our sins” according to Galatians 1:4. “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” according to Ephesians 5:2.

This is indeed amazing grace and it is reason for joy and celebration and praise and thanksgiving as well as lives of thanksgiving. The next part of this sentence gives us a sense of how wonderful this is. Jesus has “now reconciled [us] in this body or flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him....”

Words like these in the Bible are there to give us an incredible sense of peace and joy and satisfaction and security. If the most important thing in life is our relationship with God – if the worst possible thing in life is the wrath of God upon us because of our sin – what Paul describes in these words is the most exhilarating blessing imaginable. Jesus, on the basis of what he accomplished by his death, presents us to God as holy and blameless and above reproach. That is hard to imagine and challenging to believe when we realize how awful our sin is and how dishonoring to God. But this is the good news that is true of all who trust in Jesus. If you are trusting in Jesus, Jesus presents you to God as holy and blameless and above reproach.

And living in that awareness belongs to healthy Christian experience. Paul is writing this to the Colossian church and through them to the whole church. This is not written to some kind of super-Christians who were so sanctified that they hardly needed saving. There is no such person. This is written to people who were once alienated and hostile to God doing evil deeds. And the reason that they are now presented to God as holy and blameless and above reproach is not because of anything that they have achieved. It is all because Jesus was and is holy and blameless and above reproach and he has paid the penalty for their sin and placed his perfect record of obedience on their account.

This is reason for us to live with deep peace and joy and with a deep sense of being valued. When God thinks of us he is pleased. He is very satisfied with us because we are holy and blameless and above reproach in Christ. That in spite of the fact that there is still a lot of sin in our lives. This is the glory of the gospel. Because of Jesus and what he has done for us by dying on the cross, Jesus presents us to God as holy, blameless, and above reproach. And knowing that helps a lot for our psychological wellbeing. Our greatest need is acceptance with God. Our greatest psychological need is to know that God loves us and that he is pleased with us. And

that is what Paul is saying here. If we are trusting in Jesus, Jesus presents us to God as holy and blameless and above reproach. And that means that it is well with our souls.

But there is a “but.” This state of being holy and blameless and above reproach is conditional on continuing in the faith. Verse 23 begins with the word “if” and the word “if” introduces a condition. “[I]f indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard....” In order to be holy and blameless and above reproach we must continue in the faith, we must be stable and steadfast, we must not shift from the hope of the gospel that we have heard.

Now this does not mean that truly saved people can fall away from the Lord. If someone is elect and born again and has been given saving faith and genuine repentance, they can never fall away from the Lord. Jesus keeps his sheep. No one will be able to pluck them out of his hands. Paul in Philippians 1:6 says to the Philippians 1:6 “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Praise God that those who are truly saved will be kept by Jesus right to the end!

But we know that some people who think they are saved do fall away. And the Bible not infrequently warns of the possibility of falling away from the Lord. And we must take both of these scriptural truths seriously. As long as we are continuing in the faith we can take great comfort in the fact that God will keep his own to the end – he will never let them fall away. But that truth may not foster complacency. If we are not continuing in the faith – if we are shifting from the hope of the gospel that we heard, we had better take these warnings seriously. The reality is - the result of God keeping his own is that they continue in the faith.

This is a wonderful thing about Scripture. There are many pairs of truths in Scripture that seem to be in tension with one another and yet we need them both and they are both of great practical importance. So in this case, God says that true believers will never fall away. And God tells us in this passage that we will only be holy and blameless and above reproach before him if we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Both of those truths are utterly essential for our spiritual wellbeing. If we are continuing in the faith it is a great comfort to know that God will keep us to the end. If we are drifting away and shifting from the hope of the gospel we had better face up to the fact that we are in grave danger of falling away. And the consequences of that are eternally catastrophic.

One of the best evidences of salvation is continuing in the faith over the long haul. We know that that it is much easier to begin something than to keep at it especially when that something is hard and takes continual effort. The Christian life takes perseverance. It takes stick-to-it-tive-ness. Being stable and steadfast means not being swayed in the temptations and headwinds of the Christian life. We know that if it happens it is because of God’s grace, but God’s grace results in our continuing and not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12-13 express this perfectly, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

So all that Paul has said about the wonder of being holy, and blameless and above reproach in Christ is gloriously true. This is the good news of the gospel that the Colossians had heard and responded to. They should rejoice in that and be encouraged and motivated to live lives that are pleasing to God. Indeed they should be encouraged by those wonderful truths to persevere in them. One of the things in the background here is false teachers who were active in the Colossian congregation as they were in so many others. Paul is urging the Colossians to continue in the faith and not shift from the hope of the gospel that had been preached to them.

That same gospel has been preached to us. We have it in our Bible's and it is a glorious message indeed. Paul in this letter to the Colossians has described aspects of that gospel in some of the most wonderful words in the Bible and God's goal for us in preserving this letter as part of his word for us is the same as Paul's goal for the Colossians: that we might continue in the faith stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we have heard. That gospel has been proclaimed throughout the world. It has come through time to us and it is the best possible news for our lives in this age and in the age to come.