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Colossians 1:21-23

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In the previous verse (Col. 1:20) Paul notes that God was reconciling “all things to Himself.” A similar thought can be found in 2 Corinthians 5:19 which states “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” Paul now specifically applies this reconciliation to the Christians in Colossae, as indicated by the “you were ... yet now” construction. In fact, Paul deals with their past (“were,” v. 21), present (“now,” v. 22), and future (“if,” v. 23).¹

1:21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds

Colossians and Ephesians are called the “twin epistles.” Much that is written in one finds a parallel in the other. The passage in question is no exception. Verse 21 is reminiscent of Ephesians 2:12, “you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”² They were “excluded from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18).

The apostle here is reminding the Colossian believers of their condition before conversion (cf. Col. 3:7; Rom. 11:30; 1 Cor. 6:11). Since most of his audience was Gentile, the chances were great that

¹ David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), NIVAC Pradis Edition.

² The context is the disunity of Jews and Gentiles, as opposed to the context of Colossians 1 which deals with the separation between people and God.

they would return to their old lifestyle. Therefore, “... Paul resumes the same kind of pastoral concern so evident in his thanksgiving and prayer”³ presented earlier in the chapter.

He uses three terms in his description. The first term is “alienated” (“estranged,” NRSV). The verb used here is a perfect passive (*apallotrioo*), and it literally means “what belongs to another.” They have not alienated themselves consciously but they have been in this state since birth. Sin is a barrier between God and men. “Estranged” is perhaps not the best word to use here since sinners never had a relationship with Him to begin with. They “are estranged also from one another, and lead lonely lives in a universe which is felt to be unfriendly” because the Fall infected the entire Creation (Rom. 8:22). Christ’s death has not only reconciled men to God but has also reconciled men and men.⁴

The second term is “hostile in mind.” In contrast to *apallotrioo*, this phrase means being an active enemy of God. They “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). “Hostile” (*echthros*) comes from the root word *echtho* (“hate,” “hateful”). In the New Testament, this odious concept is found in passages such as Romans 5:10 (“while we were enemies (*echthrois*), we were reconciled to God”) and 8:7 (“the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God”). The noun “mind” means “mind-set” or “way of thinking.” “It reflects the determined and self-sustained attitude illuminated in Romans 1:21, where human creation, having disowned its creatureliness, finds a self-satisfying mode of existence in ignorance of God ...”⁵

A hostile mind leads to “evil deeds” (our third term). These evil deeds include idolatry and immorality.⁶ Some of the more popular idols were Cybele, Apollo, and Aphrodite.⁷ Colossians 3:5-9 list some

³ Arthur Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 36.

⁴ Much of this paragraph comes from F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 77, 78.

⁵ James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 106.

⁶ Peter O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishers, 1982), 67.

⁷ Clinton Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), 3:381.

specific sins of the Colossians (impurity, greed, anger, wrath, malice, *etc.*).⁸

Jesus said “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart,” and “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matt. 15:18, 19; cf. Matt. 12:34; Mark 7:21; Luke 6:45; James 4:4). Wicked thoughts lead to wicked actions.

One way to appreciate God is to remember what you were like before you trusted Christ as your Savior.⁹

1:22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach

Paul now tells the rest of the story by explaining how the Colossians were converted. It came about by the crucifixion of Christ. The Greek is more explicit than is the English for the original has “the body,” “the flesh,” and “the death.” We cannot save ourselves; divine intervention was and is necessary.¹⁰

The apostle specifically mentions Jesus’ “fleshly body” (NASB; “physical body,” NIV). What at first seems to be a redundant phrase was written that way on purpose. Apparently some in Colossae were denying that Christ had come in the flesh (cf. 1 John 4:2). These heretics were under the notion that all flesh is evil yet all spiritual things are good.

Because our sins manifest themselves through our body, they concluded that there was no such thing as sinless flesh. That would obviously rule out the possibility that Jesus was actually all God and all man. In other words, they were denying His humanity. This doctrine is called Docetism (from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “appear”). Jesus only seemed to have a human body.

Docetism is one of the tenets of what scholars call the “Colossian heresy.” With a population of mostly Gentiles, the area was ripe for false teachings. It is also the beginnings of a more organized heresy

⁸ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1964), 83.

⁹ Patzia, 36.

¹⁰ O’Brien, 67.

called Gnosticism.¹¹ The fact that He could die (“through death”) indicates that (1) Jesus was not a spirit, (2) nor was He an angel (“the worship of the angels,” Col. 2:18; cf. v. 15), and (3) His death is an historical fact. The Gnostics also denied the reality of His death.

It is always important in trying to understand Paul to remember that σῶμα does not mean “physical body” as such. Thus, most clearly, the distinction he makes in 1 Cor. 15:44, between the body of this age, σῶμα ψυχικόν (“natural body”), and the resurrection body, σῶμα πνευματικόν (“spiritual body”), shows that different embodiments are necessary for different environments. Since in Hebrew anthropology disembodied existence was scarcely conceivable, transformation of the “body” was simply the means by which transition from this world to the next takes place (cf. Phil. 3:21). In contrast, “flesh” remains rootedly of this world, inextricably part of it, so that “flesh and blood” cannot inherit the kingdom (1 Cor. 15:50).¹²

This is not to say that God died. God cannot die for the Word speaks of Him as an everlasting God (Isa. 40:28, 57:15; Luke 20:36; Eph. 3:21; Jude 25). Genesis 21:33 declares that the Lord is “the Everlasting God.” Psalm 102:25-27 is more to the point, “Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.”

In Colossians 1:22, Paul notes two results that came about from Jesus’ death on Calvary (cf. Heb. 9:22). One is the fact that sinners have been reconciled to God. Those who know Jesus as their personal Savior have had their sin removed (from God’s point of view) and thus can have a close relationship with Him. Sin is no longer the barrier between God and man. “Resuming and applying the language of [Col.] 1:20, Paul expressed the truth that moral and spiritual changes come because of the death of Christ.”¹³

¹¹ Gnosticism was a heresy that took full bloom in the second century. The term comes from the Greek word for “knowledge” (*gnosis*). The Gnostics emphasized knowledge and enlightenment along with the inherent evil in flesh and the inherent goodness of the spirit.

¹² Dunn, 107.

¹³ Richard Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1991), 231.

MacArthur states it well when he writes, “As a result of a faith union with Jesus Christ, God sees Christians as holy as His Son.”¹⁴

Barnes adds that this sacrifice “was the means of bringing the sinner himself to a willingness to be reconciled - furnishing the strongest possible appeal to him; leading him to reflect on the love of his Creator, and showing him his own guilt and danger. No means ever used to produce reconciliation between two alienated parties has had so much tenderness and power as those which God has adopted in the plan of salvation.”¹⁵

A second result is loaded with imagery of the sacrificial system¹⁶ (“in order to present”). The verb “present” means “stand by,” “show,” or “dedicate.” It is the word commonly used as to how an offering or sacrifice is brought before the Lord – it is presented. The offering for sacrifice and service is for the Colossians here and now.¹⁷

It will be completed in the end times (Jude 24). As 1:28 declares, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.” The expressions “if indeed you continue,” in verse 23 and “what is lacking” in verse 24¹⁸ hint of the future also. This is a time to which the Lord Himself is anticipating. Ephesians 5:27 states that “He might present to Himself the church in all her glory,...”¹⁹ (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).

Another familiar word is “holy.” “The use of this word gives support to the view that in this statement Paul was not thinking about our personal conduct but about our position in Christ.”²⁰ It has the meaning of “sanctify” or “set apart for a special purpose.” Christians are set apart to serve God. It is related to the word “purity” but it not exactly the same thing. What makes something holy is its purity.

¹⁴ John MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon* (QuickVerse 8 Edition).

¹⁵ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament* (Comments on Col. 1:22; E-Sword Software Edition).

¹⁶ Some see a judicial flavor here rather than a cultic one (“acquitted of all charges”). Patzia, 37 and O’Brien, 68.

¹⁷ A concept which is mentioned by O’Brien but not supported by him (68).

¹⁸ Dunn, 110.

¹⁹ Hendriksen, 84.

²⁰ Curtis Vaughan, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon* (Zondervan, electronic edition).

God is holy (Isa. 6:3) because He is wholly other. That is, He is dramatically different from His creation in that He is absolutely pure. “The aim of reconciliation goes beyond the enjoyment of a relationship with the living God. He wants to purify His people.”²¹

A third term is “blameless” (NASB; “without blemish,” NIV). In the sacrificial system, the animal being offered had to be of the highest quality, without blemish or flaw (Num. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:19). Leviticus 22:21 reads, “And when a man offers a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD to fulfill a special vow, or for a freewill offering, of the herd or of the flock, it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it.”

Hebrews 9:14 expresses a similar thought, “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”²²

That is one reason Jesus had to be perfect in order to be our proper sacrifice, and that is how we are to be presented to the Lord. “The pronouncement of justification made in the believer’s favor here and now anticipates the pronouncement of the judgment day: the holiness of life which is progressively wrought by the Spirit here and now is to issue in perfection of glory at Christ’s *parousia*.”²³

The final phrase of verse 22 is “beyond reproach” (NASB; “unreproveable in his sight,” KJV) The NIV captures the essence well: “free from accusation.” In the Greek it is one word, *anegkletos*, which is derived from *egkaleo*, a legal technical term meaning “accused, bring charges against.” Thus, placing a negating *a-* as a prefix, the meaning comes out as “not accused.”²⁴ In this role, God is more of an examiner than judge.²⁵

We are to be people of integrity such that no charge can be brought against us. We cannot be disgraced in any way. Indeed, the main quality of an elder is that he be “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2, 10; cf. Phil. 2:15; 1 Tim. 6:14; Titus 1:6, 7, 2:8).

²¹ Arnold, 3:381.

²² Ibid., 3:402.

²³ Bruce, 79.

²⁴ Dunn, 109.

²⁵ O’Brien, 68.

Certainly the Colossian Christians knew these things about the atonement but probably were in need of a reminder so they would not “lapse into careless Christian living.”²⁶

1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

The first part of this verse is a first class conditional statement²⁷ (“provided that you continue,” NRSV). “Continue” has the idea of persevering (cf. 1 Tim. 4:16, where the same Greek word is translated “persevere”).²⁸ Paul is not doubting that the Colossian Christians will “continue in the faith” but he assumes it to be true. The Greek construction *ei ge* (“if indeed”) is used elsewhere to convey certainty and not doubt (Eph. 3:2).²⁹

Once believers are saved (“in the faith”) they are always saved (“continue in the faith”). In fact, later on Paul writes he is glad to see “the stability of [their] faith in Christ” (Col. 2:5; “how firm your faith in Christ is,” NIV).³⁰ He doesn’t want them to waver from their commitment to Christ. They are not to move away from “the hope of the gospel” (See more below).

Numerous passages can be put forth concerning the security of the believer (John 10:28, 29; Rom. 8:35-39). Continuing in the faith is an indication that the person is saved.

Some scholars assert there is a measure of human responsibility here. Believers must exert some effort to maintain their salvation. However, because of divine intervention and assistance, believers cannot fail in this endeavor, they say.³¹

²⁶ Melick, 232.

²⁷ As to why the apostle utilized a first class conditional is investigated by Ibid., 234, 235.

²⁸ O’Brien, 69.

²⁹ Melick, 233.

³⁰ O’Brien, 69.

³¹ Dunn (110, 111) supports this view and lists other passages from Paul to bolster this claim (Rom. 8:13, 17; 11:22, etc.). Yet he also admits that *if indeed* “may denote confidence more than doubt” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:3; Eph. 3:2, 4:21).

The apostle describes our faith as “firmly established and steadfast.” Not just established, but *firmly* established. The verb used is *tethemeliomenoi* (“to lay a foundation”), a perfect passive participle functioning as an adjective. The root is *themelios* (“foundation”). The fact that the participle is passive may refute any notion that human responsibility is involved. Paul sometimes wrote of himself as if he were a master builder (Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10-12a).³²

Colossae was earthquake prone because it was in an active volcanic area and so to hear that their faith was firmly established (“stable,” ESV) was very welcome news.

Christianity is not based on men’s ideas (a shaky foundation). Peter writes that he and the other apostles “did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

Christianity *is* based on the infallible Word of God. Second Timothy 3:16, 17 affirms, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (cf. 2 Peter 1:21).

“Steadfast” means unchangeable. God will not say one day, “That verse is wrong. What I really meant to say was ...” We can be sure that the Word will hold firm (cf. Heb. 6:19). “... the Scripture cannot be broken ...” (John 10:35; cf. Rom. 11:29), and “... the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8).

More literally, “steadfast” denotes “a place where one sits.” Dunn remarks that Paul’s original readers “are to remain as firmly seated on the gospel as a god in his temple or a skillful rider on a spirited horse” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58).³³ Steadfastness is illustrated in Matthew 7:25 where Jesus speaks of a house founded on rock.

Paul is also (correctly) assuming the Colossian Christians will “not [be] moved away from the hope of the gospel.” They may have been in the process of doing so because “to move away” is a present participle. Hence, “not shifting from the hope of the gospel” (ESV).

³² Ibid. See also Isaiah 28:16; Romans 9:33; Ephesians 2:20; and 1 Peter 2:6.

³³ Ibid.

The verb *metakineo* is used in the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT) to denote “take flight” (e.g. Deut. 32:30).³⁴

Hope in the Bible is not wishful thinking (“I hope it doesn’t rain on Saturday”). Hope in the Bible is a thing that is certain to happen yet hasn’t happened yet. In this case it is the certainty of meeting Jesus face-to-face someday. Paul thus wants them (and us) not only to “continue in the faith” but also to not abandon the certainty of what they have heard – the gospel. They are not to be swayed by “the arts of philosophy, and the allurements of sin.”³⁵

This gospel has been “proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” The gospel that was proclaimed in Colossae is the same one that is being preached from town to town. “Paul hardly meant that every person had heard the gospel. That would defeat the point of his mission and his intense desire to preach where Christ had not been proclaimed.”³⁶

Much of the Orient, for example, had not heard of Jesus Christ at that time. He is also saying that the gospel has spread to every corner of the Roman Empire. The NIV’s “to every creature under heaven” is taking things too far. Furthermore, this verse demonstrates the universal appeal of the gospel (cf. 1:6) “in stark contrast to the heretical teaching with its appeal to a select group of initiates.”³⁷

“The aorist tense [of ‘proclaimed’] may reflect the perspective of Paul at the end of his missionary career, conscious of the flickering pinpoints of candle flame that he (and others) had kindled in so many cities of the Mediterranean world. ...But a degree of hyperbole can hardly be denied.”³⁸

Paul concludes this verse by making it clear that he has indeed been given apostolic authority (“I, Paul”). The Lord has entrusted him and commissioned him to explain and spread the gospel message. Perhaps, since he wasn’t part of the original twelve, and now in jail too, some were questioning his authority. Those “some” were likely the Colossian heretics.

³⁴ O’Brien, 70.

³⁵ Barnes, Comments on 1:23.

³⁶ Melick, 235.

³⁷ O’Brien, 71.

³⁸ Dunn, 112.

The last word in this passage is *diakonos* (“minister”) which can also be translated “deacon” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12) or “servant” (so NIV, NRSV; Matt. 20:26; John 12:26). Paul believed that as a servant of Christ he had the responsibility to disperse the gospel to as many as possible, and he was willing to deal with the hardships which are inherent. His was a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-21). In addition, “he shows his commitment to the message that the Colossians have heard as well as his identity with his co-workers Epaphras and Tychicus (1:7; 4:7).”³⁹

In these three verses, Paul reminded the Colossian believers that they were once separated from the Lord because of sin but have now been reconciled to Him, and indeed are even “holy and blameless and beyond reproach.” Verse 23 seems to teach that their salvation is conditional, that they must not have a moment of disbelief or they will lose their salvation.

Two considerations, however, refute that interpretation. One is the fact that that understanding would conflict with other verses on salvation, and with what is called eternal security. As noted in the body of the article, several passages teach that losing one’s salvation is not possible. John 10:28 is maybe the best known, “I give eternal life to them [Jesus’ sheep], and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.”

Secondly, the first part of verse 23 is a first class conditional statement. As such, it is assumed to be true in most, if not all, circumstances. It is presupposed that all Christians will persevere in their walk with God.

In conclusion, it is helpful to realize that there is a difference between having faith to the end and remaining faithful to the end. The latter has to do with keeping oneself from sin, especially those sins which are obvious and outward. The former is assumed true (and indeed is true). Believers will forever retain their faith in Jesus.⁴⁰ Geisler makes a very good point when he writes, “Hence, while

³⁹ Patzia, 37.

⁴⁰ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 3:319.

continuance in the faith is a *demonstration* of salvation, it is not a *condition* for being saved.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid. Italics in original.