

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

## **Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-23) The Gospel - Colossians 1:21-23**

**21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 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 — 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.**

This morning I once again have the privilege of speaking to you about the Gospel. I know that some of you are thinking, “You always speak about the Gospel, Pastor” or some might even be thinking “But I have already heard the gospel.” Whatever you might be thinking when you hear the word Gospel, know this with all certainty: we need constantly to hear and be transformed, our lives demonstrably changed by the hearing of the Gospel. What question does the gospel answer for us? Why do we need to hear this gospel over and over? Because the gospel answers for us the question of how it is that sinful people enter into a right and peaceful relationship with their Creator God. This is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the question that a person begins to ask when he comes to grips with his separation from the Creator because of his sin.

The trouble is that before we know Christ, we think ourselves capable by some measure of personal strength to put ourselves into a right relationship with God and by our own efforts to make peace between ourselves and God. Yet every attempt to do so only ends with frustration and ultimately, damnation. It is only by what God in Christ has done for sinful men that we can be saved, reconciled to God, and experience peace with God both now and for all eternity.

The passage before us present us with the gospel encapsulated. Here in Colossians 1:24-27 we find the essential elements of the gospel being spelled out for both these first readers, many of whom were indeed believers, as well for us who would read these words all these years later. Beloved, if the proclamation of the essential elements of the gospel was important enough for Paul to give to these first believers, how much more are we in need to hear and be transformed by these very truths? So then, what are the essential elements of the gospel that you and I need to hear; that you and I need to transform our lives; and that you and I need to be proclaiming ourselves to those yet separated from God because of their sin. Our passage presents three such elements. These are not exhaustive, but I would suggest that from these three elements we find the wonder of the gospel. In Colossians 1:24-27 we find:

- I. Man’s Problem
- II. God’s Provision
- III. Divine Preservation

If we would keep even these three thoughts in our minds as we contemplate the wonder of our own salvation or as we seek to present the wonder of salvation to others, we would be well on our way to properly communicating the gospel.

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## I. Man’s Problem (Colossians 1:21)

*And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds...*

In Colossians 1:21 we are first presented with man’s problem. This verse helps us understand why the gospel is called “good news”. If there is to be any good news, there must be first, by comparison, something bad. And our text helps us answer the question; from what do people need to be saved? Of course we might quickly say sin, which is true, but where is that sin found? It is found within us. We are sinners and thus we ultimately need to be saved from ourselves; from our sinful bents that seek to live as much as possible apart from God and according to our own rules rather than by God’s will.

Notice how universal and how broad a statement Paul begins; **“and although you...”** With reference to the church at Colosse, each and every one of them, from the faithful Epaphras who first preached the gospel to them, to the runaway slave Onesimus whom Paul disciplined in Rome and everyone in between, the first realization of the gospel comes as we recognize that there is not one person, not one man, woman, boy or girl who does not need and cannot benefit by the good news of the gospel because each and every one finds themselves with this problem before coming to Christ; each one of us is born and lives in a condition of being alienated from God; hostile in mind toward God, and engaged in evil deeds against God. Beloved, this is each of us before Christ and because of this we deserve nothing but God’s wrath. But the good news here is that Paul clearly identifies this as a past condition for those who are in Christ saying, **“although you were formerly...”** in this condition. Oh blessed thought if I can know that I was formerly in this condition but am no longer. But what is this condition? Paul gives three descriptions of this condition.

First, man’s problem is one of being alienated from God. The word “alienated” carries the strongest of connotations. Its most basic meaning is to be to estrange, to separate, to withdraw, particularly the affections. It can mean to be indifferent, averse to an other where there was once a relationship. To be alienated means not to participate with an other. When we use the word “alien” we think of those who are strangers or outsiders, who do not know our ways or participate in things like us. And the truth before us is this, that apart from the grace of God, each one of us is alienated, separated from God.

Before we move on, let me answer a question. Why is Paul drawing his reader’s attention to their former condition apart from Christ? Remember that in Colossians 1:15-20, the Hymn of Christ where we were presented with the supremacy of Christ as He is the beginning and focal point not only of all creation but also of the church, His body. Now Paul calls attention to the present condition of the Colossian believers. He wants them and the Holy Spirit want us to work through the matter of assurance of salvation, of our right relationship to God through Jesus Christ alone and is therefore directing them away from the false teaching of those who were seeking to turn them away from Christ. Paul wants his readers turned on to Christ as never before, but to do this, he first reminds them of their alienation from God.

This is man’s problem, he is alienated from God. Is this a universal truth? Is each of us found to be in the same boat spiritually: sinners who are at enmity, who are at war with God? Indeed it is and time does not permit us to look at the many verses of God’s word that teach this. But let me offer a few. In Romans 8:7-8 we are reminded that before our lives are submitted to Christ, we ultimately seek to please ourselves, even if part of pleasing ourselves is an misguided attempt to please God by our own efforts. Paul writes,

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"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

**Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**

We find here that before Christ we have a set disposition against God and that disposition is do things for ourselves, by ourselves and for our own pleasure. In this condition, we are alienated from God and cannot please Him. Is this really everyone's condition? Let me remind you of Romans 3:10-12 where we read,

**There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.**

Notice the repetition of "one...not even one". This helps us to understand that it is not merely the non-religious or pagan-minded who are alienated from God; it is all people who live apart from the Lordship of Christ. Man is alienated from God. Man has a settled and determined separation from God. This is no temporary problem; it is a terminal disease with no cure, save one. But remember we cannot have good news if there is not first bad news. We must answer the question, what must we be saved from? We must be saved from our own desires to be permanently alienated from God.

How does this alienation manifest itself? Paul describes it as, "**alienated and hostile in mind...**" In addition to being estranged from God, we also have an inward bent against God. To be "hostile in mind" could be translated as "hating in the understanding". What does this mean? It means that it is the inward bent of each of us to hate the law of God, to hate the revelation of who God is and to hate the essential truths the gospel. Can we admit that? If we cannot admit that, we will not see the gospel as good news.

By way of quick example, just remember the religious leaders and their reactions to Jesus. As Jesus preached the gospel, how did the well-versed scribes and Pharisees respond? Did they embrace Jesus? No, rather they wanted to kill Him. How can people, with the knowledge of God's Word as had by the religious leaders of Jesus' day, want to kill the very one who came to offer them salvation? Because they were living for themselves, according to their own perceived abilities to live for God. Jesus disrupted their lives. He shook their status quo. He called them to a level of perfection that they knew they could not obtain. They understood that Jesus was calling them to see Himself as God in the flesh, God who alone would perfect those who trusted in Him alone. And so they seethed with hatred toward Him because He told them the truth. The truth being, if you live for yourself, apart from the life of Christ in you, even though you may be striving for personal moral perfection; even though you may see yourself as a better person than your neighbor, or even if you know yourself to be the chief of sinner, apart from Christ you will be damned to Hell.

This inward condition of hating the understanding was first found in Adam when he hated the truth of God and ate the forbidden fruit. That inclination toward manipulating, changing, justifying any deviations to God's word was born and passed on to each of Adam's children and is found in each and everyone of us. According to Ephesians 4:17-19, this inward bent causes the heart of man to shut off to the things of God. We read there,

**For this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding,**

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**excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.**

This is strong language as words like futility, darkened, excluded, ignorance, hardness, callused" help us to see that we are not just in some weak state but rather we are alienated, helplessly separated from God! May I ask you, does this describe your own heart?

But the bad news does not stop there. This alienation not only results in an inward bent, but also an outward manifestation. That is to say, what we think will reveal itself in how we act. Out text says that we all were also "**engaged in evil deeds**". Literally this reads simply that we all were "**in evil deeds.**" The word engaged is added to give the sense of the Greek. The idea is that because we are alienated from God, we will entertain a hatred of a true understanding of God and that hostility will reveal itself in various forms of "**evil deeds**".

What are these evil deeds? Let us not assume that an evil deed has to be something seemingly the most vile, the most hideous, at least from human standards. To be sure, the systematic attempt to exterminate the whole race of the Jewish people in WWII is a most deplorable evil deed. But any deed that is not done according to God Word, or any deed done in defiance to God's Word is equally evil. For the Colossians, Paul may have had in view their temptation to indulge in sensual sins or in being covetous of others. For us evil deeds might be seen in arrogance or pride, in anger or revenge, in lust or impurity, in boasting or self-centeredness, in selfishness or abusiveness. The sad thing is that there is no limit on the ability of the human heart to display its own sinfulness. This beloved, is what we mean when we speak of the total depravity of the heart. Depravity does not mean that each person is as bad as he can possibly be, for there are more and more steps that man can take into vile behavior; nor does depravity mean that everyone is equally as evil in his behavior as the next. What we mean is this, that man, by his nature, is without any holy principles and desires; that there is nothing in himself that is pleasing to God because he is alienated from God and so every act and action, be it seen as good or as evil in the sight of man, is an affront to the holy God because it is being done apart from the One who created Him. This is man apart from God, this was each of us before Christ. And Paul's point is not to linger here, but to focus on the grace that has been shown to the Colossian believers and indeed every believer who has come to trust in the work of Jesus Christ for them and in them. Man's problem is his alienation from God. But let us look now at God's provision

## II. God's Provision (Colossians 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 —*

One of the greatest transitions in the Bible are found between Ephesians 2:1 where everyone is described before trusting in Christ as being "dead in your trespasses and sins" this condition of alienation from God; and Ephesians 2:4 where we read "But God being rich in mercy...made us alive...". Look at an equally forceful transition here in Colossians 1:22 saying, "yet He has now..." (or But now..." In contrast to your former alienation from God, yet he has now reconciled you..." You who were formerly a part of the "domain of darkness" – ruled by the evil within your own heart have now been transferred by the power of God to the kingdom of His beloved Son. This statement in verse 22 points us to the God-centeredness of the gospel. There is not a hint of what man is doing to save himself here in our text. The focus is on God. It is God who has reconciled; it is God who has worked; it is God who has moved; it is God who has

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initiated; it is God who has acted; it is God who has done everything necessary to "reconcile" to make peace between His holy Self and our sinful selves. This is God's doing. This is God's provision to everyone who believes.

When we read verse 22, we are seeing the answer to the question, what are we saved to? In verse 21 we are saved from ourselves and our self-inflicted alienation from God. In verse 22 we are saved to a right relationship, a peaceful, non-hostile, warless condition before God. And all this is God's doing.

If we are to rightly know and proclaim the gospel, we must know that salvation is all of God. It is God's provision, it is God's gift to those who believe so that no one may boast. Let us never forget that there is not one person who ever came up with the idea that he needed to be saved on his own. God graciously intervened in our lives. He worked on our hearts and opened our eyes to the truth of our sinful selves and to our need of the Savior He sent. The good news of the gospel is that God did something for us when we could do nothing for ourselves. Consider this truth from I Corinthians 1:26-31 were we read,

***For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."***

Our reconciliation, our being made right and at peace with God was the result of God's working and God's provision. We see this in Acts 16 and Paul's preaching the gospel in Europe. The first convert of Europe was a woman named Lydia outside the city of Philippi. And the focus of the text is not on what Paul did, but upon what the Lord did. In Acts 16:14 we read that Lydia, "***was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.***" It was the Lord's work. Even going back to Acts 13 and Paul's preaching the gospel in what is today the country of Turkey, we read

***When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed [here is God's working] to eternal life believed.***

It is God who acts for we who are alienated, helpless, hopeless and even enemies with God. But what does it mean when we read in Colossians 1:22 that we have been reconciled in His fleshly body through death? We have peace with God. This is reconciliation, peace with God, the removing of God's righteous hostility or anger against sinners so as to call them His sons as well as the removing of the hostility of wicked men so that they truly love God. But all this came at a cost, that cost being the death of God's Son on the cross.

Let us never see the death of Christ as some effort on God's part to invoke in us some kind of sympathy, pulling on our heartstrings so as to get us to repent. The death of Christ was a deliberate act of God whereby God poured out upon His Son all the hostility and all the punishment you and I deserved so that He could now bring us to Himself and adopt us into His family. Some of the false teaching at Colosse communicated that Jesus didn't really have a physical body and therefore did not really suffer. Yet Paul says, it was His fleshly body upon

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which God acted. No ghost or emanation could face death. Jesus had to take on flesh so as face the judgment due to men – due to you. The gospel is about what Jesus did for man, taking upon man’s guilt and punishment so that man could be made right with God, adopted as a son of God and enjoy all the privileges of the Son of God in the presence of the Father. Beloved, what have you been saved to? You have been saved to a right and peaceful relationship to God where you need not fear Him as judge, but call upon Him as “Daddy” as “Abba, Father.”

Time does not allow us to consider all of this as I would like, but notice that the rest of verse 22 removes the idea that salvation is just a future event that has no transforming effects upon us in the present. This reconciliation, our salvation is to have daily consequences in our lives. Why have you been reconciled? Why have you been saved? What have you been saved to? Not only has God provided your salvation, but He has expressed the purpose of that salvation, **“He has now reconciled you...in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”**

One of the dangers of the false teaching at Colosse was that it promoted careless Christian living. We can see such a tendency today. We must be called to holiness, to going against the flow of really seeking to live before others in such a way that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). That is the purpose of our reconciliation, to be presented, offered up by God for all creation to see as increasingly holy – that is clearly distinct from the world, blameless, that is clearly unstained by the world; and beyond reproach, that is clearly free from accusation. The idea is that those who have by the work of Christ been made positionally holy, blameless and beyond reproach before God, would now live out that position before the world. This is God’s provision and this is good news.

### III. Divine Preservation (Colossians 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.*

There is no doubt we live in a day of many who profess to know Christ and yet few who seemingly seek to live out the words of Christ. We have asked the questions, what have we been saved from? Alienation from God; and what have we been saved to? Reconciliation with God that results in both a positional and experiential holiness of life. The final question we might ask is this, how can we know we have been reconciled from our alienation from God? The answer is this, as we continue in the faith, we know we are the recipients of reconciliation. We have the assurance of divine preservation as we continue in the faith.

What does it mean to continue in the faith? To continue in the faith first means to stay true to the teaching of the gospel as it came from Christ and His apostles. Our text tells us it is the gospel “that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” Any gospel or teaching that deviates from the Word of God is not the gospel. But how do we know if we are continuing in this true faith? Paul gives two considerations.

If we are truly reconciled to God, we will **“continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast.”** Paul is not casting any doubt on the salvation of the believers at Colosse, We could rightly read this, “assuming that you continue in the faith” which is Paul’s assumption that this is in fact true of them. What we are to see is that when we are reconciled to God the effect of reconciliation shows up in the way we go on living your life. This is divine perseverance on the part of the believer or “steadfastness” as it is termed here The word “continue” speaks of continuous action. It means that we are “persistent in” or persevering in” the faith.

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The faith we are to be persistent in is built upon the person and work of Jesus Christ though who we have our peace with God. The faith is that which looks actively exercise trusting in Jesus Christ and His merits. In other words, the reality of your faith being established, or settled in Jesus, and steadfast, persistent in Jesus, is seen when we constantly speak of and strive after Jesus in all we say and do. In fact, it is as we come to see Jesus as having first place in everything in our lives that we know we are continuing in the faith. The idea is that you have been so affected by trusting in Christ and the wonders of His gospel work that you continually rest in His sufficiency.

The second evidence of continuing in the faith is that we are **“not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you have heard.”** The gospel is hope and hope describes the full assurance we have in our relationship with and in the promises of Christ. We are not to waver in our confident expectation that what Jesus Christ secured for us in his death and resurrection will be totally fulfilled in the glory of His presence for eternity. Is there anything that is turning you away from such a hope? The Colossians were being swayed by the teaching of the mystics among them who were diminishing Christ and changing the gospel. Our text tells us to stick with the gospel. May we never be swayed by the teachings and the enticements of the world. The one gospel is our only hope and that hope is to believe that Christ alone has reconciled us to God. That is the gospel; that is the perseverance of the gospel in us.

So let me close by simply asking you each to consider this question. Have you come to experience the reality of being reconciled to God? Are you at peace with God? If you can say yes, then you should be able to see yourself continuing in a sure trust and increasing confidence in Christ. Your life is seeking to have Christ in first place in everything. If you are uncertain, then consider what you are looking to bring you peace with God. Nothing will satisfy but Christ. Trust not the world or yourself. Throw yourself fully upon the mercy of Christ. Ask Him to change you and allow you to experience peace with God. You have but to call, for all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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