

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

Colossians 2:13-15

The power of the cross of Christ (Part 1)

13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. 15 When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Not to long ago I came home on a Sunday afternoon with the rare opportunity of having nothing scheduled; no place to be and therefore I entertained the thought that I might close my eyes for a few moments before our planned evening activities. Such a thought was misguided as I was informed that the kitchen sink was backed up. After making sure it was only the kitchen sink and not the whole house, I thought, "I surely can get this taken care of quickly." Again, I was misguided. After using the garbage disposal and also the plunger to no avail, I then got in the car to go purchase some ultra heavy duty, guaranteed to work the first time liquid drain cleaner; but just in case that did not work, I also bought a 15 ft snake to clean the drain. I followed the directions on the bottle of liquid drain cleaner, let it stand twice as long as it suggested and yet again, to no end. So I started taking apart the pipes underneath as I was determined to get this drain working. After draining the water out, I very proudly pulled out my newly purchased drain snake and ran it down the line; one foot; two feet, three feet, then four, then eight, then twelve, then to the end and I had not hit whatever it was.

Realizing that my rare jewel of a nap was quickly fading, I became more determined about this issue. I went back to the store and bought myself a 40 ft drain cleaner. I got this new, heavy duty tool home; got it out and as I started to use it, I found it was too big and not flexible enough to work around the very first turn of just to get into the pipe at the wall. At this point I remained ever so calm and collected [not]. I was frustrated that I, knowing what the problem was, was yet powerless and unable to correct the issue. I only had one more course of action; to call my father-in-law and see if he had any ideas or tools I could use. He graciously allowed me to use a drain snake of his and met us half way between his house and ours to get it to me. For sure, this would do the trick. I got it home and start to work it down the pipe and got to a spot that was a turn or the blockage but no matter how hard I tried, I could go no further. I was frustrated because I knew what the problem was, but was powerless to get the job done.

So, contrary to every fiber of my being to call and pay someone else to do what I felt I should have been able to do, I got a plumber out the next day, who got his handy-dandy electric snake, and within less than 2 minutes of effort (and \$109 later) cleared the drain. When I asked him about it, he told me that unless I had had an electric snake, there was nothing that I would have been able to do. Indeed, all my efforts were in vain and I was, in myself powerless to succeed. Yet the plumber saved the day because he had the power to succeed.

As we come to Colossians 2:13-15, we are presented with both the powerlessness of man as well as the power of the cross of Christ. And like my recent plumbing experience, man, no matter what he might attempt, simply does not have the power to save himself or even contribute to his salvation. As we will see in our text, while we remain powerless, God, through the work of

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

Christ on the cross, is powerful enough and alone is powerful to save and save completely. The truth that is being present in this text is the same as that found in Galatians 6:14 where we read:

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Beloved, we must boast in the power of the cross. Our profession, by word and by action, needs to be exalting the power of the cross of Christ. [recent string of powerful earthquakes – yet these do not compare to the power of the cross]. This is the good news! This is the gospel - that whereas we are powerless to save ourselves, Jesus is not only powerful to save, but also graciously willing to save all who call upon His name. [Romans 5:6]. But just how is this powerlessness of man and the power of the cross of Christ evidenced in the words of Colossians 2:13-15? Let us turn our attention to the text and see the power of the cross of Christ. But to understand the power of the cross of Jesus we must first come to grips with the powerlessness of ourselves!

I. The Powerlessness of Our Condition (2:13a)

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh...

Colossians 2:13 begins with a dramatic reminder of our spiritual condition apart from Christ. If we are ever to see Jesus as truly all-sufficient; if we are to enjoy the full peace and benefits of salvation in Jesus; then we must first know what was our state or condition from which we were or are being saved. And the words of our text scream with this truth – we were powerless; helpless; hopeless; God-hating; self-focused; self-centered creatures. Do you doubt this? These words testify of the hopeless and powerless condition sinners find themselves in apart from God’s intervention through the cross of Jesus Christ. So then, according to our text, what condition were we in before being drawn to Christ? We were spiritually powerless; that is, without means to know, love, serve, worship or even appreciate the greatness of the work of God. Why were we powerless? Our text reveals three things.

A. We are definitely dead to God

When you were dead...

Without hesitation, the first truth we are presented with is that every person apart from Christ is spiritually dead. “***When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh...***” What does dead mean? To be dead in this context does not speak physical death, but rather speaks of a lack of inward life or right inclinations toward God. We are all born in or with sin and therefore dead toward God. Before the working of God in us there is and will be no true passion or heart for the living God. We will not delight in His character or in His Word. We will not be moved to please Him. According to the whole teaching of Scripture, we are born in alienation to God and seek to live to or for ourselves. Being spiritual dead is seeking to please anyone other than the living God. Before spiritual life, our desires are motivated by the world and all its enticements. Being spiritually dead is to be deaf to loving, life-giving message of hope as presented in the gospel. In short, to be dead to God is to live in opposition to God. The only thing that keeps us from being as totally bad and as rotten as we could be is the common grace of human accountability. We avoid certain sinful actions not

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

because we are uninterested in them, but rather because we and to be accepted in one form or another by people and therefore conform to certain standards.

We find this a common teaching of Paul who said the same thing to the Ephesians in 2:1-2 saying, **“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”**

We see this even among the most religious of people as evidenced in the gospel accounts when the Jewish leaders who heard the teachings of Christ, who saw the miracles of Christ, who observed the quality of the life of Christ would not and could not see that God with man was no residing. Why? Because they were spiritually dead. So even as they say Jesus heal people or even raise someone from the dead right before eyes, they responded how, with scoffing and with scheming to kill Him. In Matthew 13, after teaching the parable of the soils, Jesus is asked by His disciples why He spoke in parables. What was the answer that Jesus gave? In Matthew 13:11, 13 we read:

To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . .Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

How can we explain unbeliever’s insensitivity and stupor unless we acknowledge that have not been granted the life need to see and to hear; that they are therefore inwardly dead?

This is the danger that lies before the unbelieving: they are dead (shut off; closed off) to the things of God and therefore dead (closed off) to respond to the gospel, and therefore unaware and uncaring about their need for Christ, and like a frog being slowly heated up in a kettle of water, they are oblivious to their destiny with judgment. So then, what is the point? The point is this: the dead cannot give themselves life. To suggest that they could goes against everything the word “dead” means. And so we read in our text, **“when you were dead...”**; this is the condition of everyone apart from Christ and we are left with the truth that we were powerless to do anything to give ourselves life, nor did we even desire to do so.

B. We are deliberately disobedient

When you were dead in your transgressions...

But our text goes on to describe the nature of this deadness. This being dead results in both ungodly actions as well as attitudes. It is both outward as well as inward in its expression. When Paul uses the phrase **“dead in your transgressions”** he is saying that our spiritual deadness was both caused by and characterized by “transgressions” – that is by our sinful actions. The word “transgressions” speaks not merely of sinful actions, but rather deliberate, willful acts that violate God’s Word. In other words, “transgressions” are not accidental sins, they are aggressive sins. We do not inadvertently stumble into sin like stepping on some chewed gum in a parking lot. The word here speaks of planned, intentional, thought out ways by which we seek to cross the boundary of God’s law into the realm of lawbreaking; whereby we ignore the righteousness of God in order to pursue unrighteousness. We want to do what we want rather than what God wants. This is depicted so graphically by the often used picture of the toddler, who when heading off in one direction toward potential mischief or danger and is called to by his parents to turn around; to repent and come back, looks again at what lies before him and then

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

back to the parent; and then, with often a look of defiant determination, heads off to please his own misguided desires; desires that will result in potential hardship and punishment as he lives for the moment. Beloved, his is what it means to be dead in our transgressions

Spiritual deadness results in transgressing, deliberately crossing over God's Word. The opposition of this then becomes one of the salvation confirming assurances of the Christ and that is a desire to obey the Word of God. Before Christ, to obey God seemed like lifelessness; but to the believer, not to obey God now is known to be lifelessness.

C. We are demonstratively destitute

When you were dead in... the uncircumcision of your flesh...

So, we are dead because of our deliberate, willful, sinful and outward actions, but notice next that we are also dead because of some inward attitude. We are demonstratively destitute. By destitute I mean that we are deprived of, devoid of and otherwise lacking in any means by which to change ourselves, heal ourselves, or fix ourselves. We must acknowledge that there is something dreadfully wrong on the inside as we read that we were dead in, or by reason of **“the uncircumcision of your flesh.”** As we noted last week, this use of the word “uncircumcision” this being without a cutting away of the flesh or sinful nature, refers to the state of condition of being unregenerate; of possessing a heart that has never been changed by the Lord. This is the person who has that old sick and deceitful heart of Jeremiah 17:9. The picture here is graphic. For the Jews considered the Gentiles to be unclean because of their lack of physical circumcision. Paul draws on this to say that such is simply a picture of the reality that the whole disposition of a person is unclean and anti-God apart from a divine work in the heart.

John Murray calls this “the totality of pollution.” He writes, “Man is totally corrupt; sin has taken possession of his whole being. The inmost springs of desire, disposition and motive are corrupted or depraved: the source of intellectual, emotional and volitional activity is enmity against God. Man is under the dominion of sin” [*Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, 168]. This is the uncircumcision of the flesh, a heart that has not been born again. This is why we need the working of God as revealed in the power of the cross of Christ. This pollution, this uncircumcision has polluted everything in us, our thinking, our speaking, our desires and our emotions. This uncircumcision of the flesh is a poison that has but one remedy. We can make any and every attempt to find our own antidote, our own cure; but until we see Christ alone as the cure; to see Christ as the only sufficient and complete healer; we will never appreciate the power of His cross and of His work. We will fail to appreciate the grace of God because we will want to contribute or take some credit for the changes within. Salvation is from the Lord; salvation is by the grace of God and by the grace of God alone; through the channel of faith and faith alone, a channel that God opens; it is, as Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, **“not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works (not payment for services rendered to God), so that no one may boast.”**

Before Christ, we demonstratively reveal ourselves as destitute, but all this reminds us then of the great mercy and grace of God and of our need for the active intervention of God without which we are hopelessly powerless. What was God's remedy for this powerless spiritual condition in which all people find themselves? The power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

II. The Powerfulness of the Cross (Colossians 2:13b-15)

...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. 15 When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Beginning here in the second half of verse 13 and running through to verse 15 we see the great work of God; not only in giving us life in Jesus Christ, but explaining how it is we enjoy this being made alive with Him. The reason why you and I can have eternal life is because of the things mentioned here in these verses, all of which have a reference back to the cross of Jesus. Through these remaining verses we find four blessings provided by the cross of Christ. Through the power of the cross, we are provided with regeneration to life; remission of our sins; removal of our debt and finally the rejection of godless influences.

A. Provides regeneration to life (2:13b)

He made you alive together with Him...

This morning, I wish to simply key in on this first thought however; that even while we were sinners, dead in our willful, sinful acts as well as dead in our unregenerate, impure sinful nature; God intervened; God acted; God showed us undeserved, unmerited favor and did something to us; something miraculous; something extraordinary. For the God of life; who took the dust of the earth and brought life to that first man, Adam; the God who raised the widow's son by the hand of Elijah; the God who raised Lazarus from the grave four days after he died; and the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead; made us alive with Jesus. Notice the progression of these verses. We begin with the main action; God who makes sinners alive. What does it mean to be made alive with Christ? It means that God has forgiven their sin; canceled out their indebtedness as lawbreakers, and defeated the powers of hell through Christ death on the cross. This is the work of God by the power of the cross of Christ. It is not our power, it is God's power at work in us.

We must believe this and yet there so many, even in our evangelical churches, that believe they must have a spark of life in themselves that simply needs to be motivated a bit by God. These then work hard to “do” church and Christian things believing that this spark of life will ignite into true spirituality make them acceptable before God. This is not what our text teaches. Here we must come to grips that we are in the most deplorable and desperate of conditions if we are apart from Christ. And we must come to believe that until God acts on us and for us, we will not turn to Jesus and therefore we will not be forgiven and we will not live to God.

But here is the good news! God has acted! God has done the work in Christ and our text says it simply that **“He [God] made you alive together with Him [Jesus].”** God brought life from death, light from darkness. This beloved is the work of regeneration; making the dead alive. As we have heard often from this pulpit; Jesus did not come to make bad people good and good people better but rather to make dead people alive; alive to Him. We call this divine act of regeneration by many names. Jesus calls it being “born again” or being “born from above” in John 3:3-8. Peter describes it as being “born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). James 1:18 we read this, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth (meaning to bring forth or bear young – implying sonship) by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.” Paul

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

calls the regenerating act of God as that which makes us “new creations” and of being the sole workmanship of God in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ephesians 2:10.

The verb that Paul uses here in our text is found only here and in Ephesians 2:5, a compound word meaning “to make alive along with” We find life along with Him who is life, Jesus Christ. The verb here reminds us that to be made alive means that we were absolutely dead, inanimate, without hope; helpless and powerless until God, or as Ephesians 2:3-5 declares, that we were by nature children of wrath, deserving of eternal punishment, **“but God”** because of His rich mercy alone and His great love alone, “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” Until we experience the work of God’s quickening, enlivening power to bring us life; we will always be dead to God. In no uncertain terms we are to learn that it is God himself going to work upon our spiritually dead condition. And we are so dead in our transgression that we must be made those new creatures described in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

At the cross of Christ, we will learn that Jesus took upon Himself the death we possessed and the death we earned so that by His death and then resurrection from the grave, we might also have our death to sin and resurrection to life. At the end of verse 12 we read that the very power of God which raised Jesus from the dead is the power by which God **“made you alive together with Him.”** In the deep recesses of your heart, God, because of the work of Christ on the cross, grants the believer the power of the resurrection which brings our dead minds to life, and gives us affection toward God and causes us to long for obeying the things please God. All of this work of God comes before our own repenting and expressions of faith because before this we are what, “dead” – having not desire to repent or to believer until the change is wrought in our hearts. This is why we pray for the salvation of others; for each of us knows that unless God intervenes into the life of a person, that person will by no means come to faith. If this were not so, then we would not ever need to pray for someone’s salvation as it would be our work of persuasion and the unbelievers work of being spiritual astute enough to receive Christ. But that can’t be if a person is dead to God. We love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19) and we live and believer because God first gave us life and open our eyes to behold the Savior.

God made you alive together with Christ. Have you experienced this? Does this describe you; one who by faith sees yourself to be a sinner deserving of death and unable in yourself to make yourself right before God and then in light of that by faith believing that when Jesus died for your sins, you died to your sins; that when Jesus was buried in the grave, you had the power of sin stripped off, removed from you so that even as Christ was raised from the dead unto newness of life unto God; even so you know that you have been raised to life to live for God. This beloved is regeneration. This beloved is the result of the power of the work of Christ on the cross. And it is God’s work. As we close and prepare to partake of the Lord’s table together, let me share an explanation of what it means to be made alive with Christ – this work of regeneration. I pray this causes believers to be reminded of the greatness of their salvation and excites them to greater acts of gratitude and forsaking of sin. And I pray that this is used by the Lord to cause unbelievers to have their eyes opened and plead for this work to be made evident in their lives. John Murray this about being made alive in Christ:

There is a change that God effects in man, radical and reconstructive in its nature, called new birth, new creation, regeneration, renewal—a change that cannot be accounted for by anything that is in lower terms than the interposition of the almighty power of God. No combination, permutation or accumulation of earth-born forces can explain it or effect it. In the words of Stephen Charnock,

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

'It is not an excitation or awakening of some gracious principle which lay hid before in nature under the oppressions of ill habits, as corn lay hid under the chaff but was corn still; not a beating up something that lay skulking in nature, not an awakening as of a man from sleep; but a resurrection as of a man from death; a new creation, as of a man from nothing. It is not a stirring up old principles and new kindling of them.

Let me ask you; have you been made alive with Christ? Are you born again? Are you certain that you are born from above? How do you know? Do you love the Lord, the things of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, the service of the Lord, the people of the Lord? Do you rejoice always, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks? Do these things characterize your life more than anything else? These are the marks of the regenerate; of the born-again, of those who have, by the power of the cross, been made alive together with Christ. Our hearts sing with sentiment of Charles Wesley in that great hymn, “And Can It Be?”

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*

Is this true of you? Believer, is it true that the power of the cross is at work in you whereby you are dying daily to sin and to self and living unto God? Repent and confess your sins and then excel still more in this working of God in you. Unbeliever, today is the day of salvation. Call upon the Lord and beg of Him, plead with Him to diffuse that quickening ray, to fell your chains and free your heart so that you know Jesus as the Lord whom you follow from this day forward. This is the power of the cross – being made alive with Christ. Let us so live.

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2010 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, and 2300 South 13th Street, Rogers, AR 72758.