

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 1:21-23**

To understand redemption a little more clearly.

Changed

In 1862, a book written by Victor Hugo, which Upton Sinclair called, “one of the half-dozen greatest novels in the world,” was published. It was titled *Les Misérables*. In English, it is still typically referred to by its French name, which roughly translates as, “The Wretched,” or, “The Miserable Ones.” The story begins in 1815 in Digne, following a peasant named Jean Valjean who had just been released from a 19-year imprisonment. Because he is marked as a former prisoner, no one wants to give him work and he is forced to the streets, that is until Digne’s Bishop Myriel gives him shelter. That night, Valjean steals some silverware but is caught by the police. Upon being returned to Myriel’s home, Myriel tells the police that Valjean had not stolen the silverware but that it was a gift, and that he had forgotten to take two candlesticks that were given as a gift as well. Shocked by this incredible act of grace, Valjean is broken. Myriel tells him he had been spared by God, and to take the candlesticks and sell them and make a new life for himself. In the midst of a crime, Valjean is confronted with the force of grace, and is changed in an instant.

Stories like these are compelling perhaps because grace is so compelling. We all, if we are honest, identify with Valjean, and the Gospel is the announcement of grace that we so desperately desire. In Colossians 1:21-23, Paul lays out this reality. We are hostile towards God, enemies of the kingdom, and yet He redeems us. Everyone wants grace, and with grace comes profound change.

Our Worst and His Best

Verses 21 and 22 capture a marked difference between our state of mind and the actions of the Lord Jesus. Below is a brief outline of some of the more important points.

OUR CONDITION

Paul points out three aspects of our condition prior to salvation in Christ, and all three aspects are important to understanding the magnitude of God's grace.

"You were formerly alienated"

The first thing that Paul says is that we were formerly alienated. Two things stand out about this. For one, "formerly" suggests that this alienation was a reality in the past, but is no longer the case for those in Christ. Secondly, it suggests isolation which implies vulnerability to attacks. The word for "alienated" here in the Greek is ἀπαλλοτριώω (apallotrioō) and it means something like, "to be estranged." This same perfect passive participle is found in Ephesians 2:12: "Remember that 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." The word implies that Paul is speaking, as he was in Ephesians, to primarily Gentiles. The blessings of God fall on the people of God, the Israelites. It was the Jews who received the covenants and the statutes. The Gentiles were strangers to God and alienated from His blessings, but in Christ, we have been, "grafted in" (Rom. 11:11-31). Part of what the reconciliation of Christ guarantees us is that we are no longer strangers to God or His blessings, but rather a part of the family of God through adoption (Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:14-17).

"Hostile in mind"

The next aspect Paul draws out is that we were, "hostile in mind." The word here for "hostile" in the Greek is ἐχθρός (echthros), and it means, "to be an enemy." The word is used also in other places in the New Testament. Paul uses it also in Romans 5:10: "For if while we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." James also used it in James 4:4: "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an **enemy** of God." It is not just that we were against the ways of God prior to faith in Christ, but that we had positioned ourselves as enemies to His kingdom. The term, "mind," is a word that elsewhere reflects the innermost part of our being. In other words, we were not just enemies towards God in our actions, but in our very core.

"Engaged in evil deeds"

Because we were enemies of God in our innermost parts of our being, our actions follow. We not only hated God in mind, but in action. Paul sums this up well in Ephesians 2:1-3: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." The New Testament is adamant about our deplorable state apart from Christ. We all are guilty of sin, and due to receive the necessary punishment (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Even in spite of our condition, Christ acts on our behalf. He does for us what we were incapable of doing for ourselves.

These three aspects are important to understand for several reasons. For one, it makes the picture of grace that much more glorious. It isn't that God came along and helped us do what we were already trying to do.

Apart from Christ, we are incapable of anything good. Yet, even while in direct opposition to God, Christ reconciles us. Secondly, but equally important and even more practical, any theology that teaches that you must do your part so that God might do His is ignorant of the doctrine of sin. You cannot do “your part.” There is no “your part.” You were spiritually dead, you hated God, you had decided to be His enemy in your heart, and you acted accordingly, and STILL, Christ redeemed us. *That* is why it is good news.

HIS RECONDITIONING

Paul discusses the Lord’s actions in more depth in verse 22. A few phrases stand out.

“He has now reconciled you”

The word “reconcile” in the Greek is a word found only in the New Testament: ἀποκατάλλασσω (apokatalassō). It means, “to trade hostility for friendship,” continuing the idea developed in verse 21 with regard to our inward hostility. Essentially, Christ’s reconciling work takes our inward hostility and exchanges it for friendship. Now, as a result of the cross, we are not enemies of God but friends with Him. The relationship has been mended, and fellowship is restored.

“To His fleshly body through death”

Again, this is a continuation of thought from verse 20 with regard to, “making peace by the blood of His cross.” Reconciliation with God requires a physical sacrifice, and thus a physical body and a physical death (Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:22). Christ’s incarnation was necessary for the plan of salvation to occur. Death was always the plan, from the moment of His birth.

“Holy, blameless, and beyond reproach”

The purpose of reconciliation is two-fold, and both of these purpose work together. In Ephesians, Paul addresses the *vertical purpose*. He says that the purpose of reconciliation was to bring praise to God’s glory (Eph. 1:6,12,14). Here, Paul focuses on the horizontal purpose: “to present you before Him (the Father) holy and blameless and above reproach.” The image presented here is that Christ came to the earth to live among us, God’s enemies, and laid His life down as a sacrifice for us, and after completing the sacrifice, brings us before the Father no longer hostile towards Him but desiring fellowship. Both the vertical and horizontal purposes are mutually beneficial. To quote John Piper: “*God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.*”

Continuing in Faith

The proof of such work in your life is perseverance. It’s one thing to have an experience one time in a church or at a camp; it’s an entirely different thing to live out your faith for the duration of your life through both blessing and hardship. Perseverance is accomplished by clinging to, “the hope of the gospel that you have heard” (Col. 1:23). Genuine faith perseveres. Those who proclaim faith but walk away from Jesus cannot say they walked away; they were never in faith to begin with (1 Jn. 2:19). This gospel, Paul says, “was proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Col. 1:23). The idea here is that the Gospel is unchanging. It is the same Gospel being preached now that it was then. The same Gospel the Colossians had believed was the same Gospel that laid out the Apostle on the road to Damascus some years prior (Acts 9:1-30).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Colossians 1:21. What does it mean to be, “formerly alienated?” (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Colossians 1:21. What does it mean to be, “hostile in mind?” (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Colossians 1:21. What does it mean to be, “engaged in evil deeds?” (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Ephesians 2:1-3. Write down everything that this passage says about us prior to faith in Christ. What is the point of this passage, in your own words?

Day Three

1. Read Colossians 1:22. What does it mean to be, “reconciled?”

2. Read Colossians 1:22. Now, read Romans 6:23 and Hebrews 9:22. Why did this reconciliation require physical death?

Day Four

1. Read Colossians 1:23. What does Paul mean by, “if indeed you continue in the faith?” In other words, how important is perseverance to the Christian walk?

2. Read 1 John 2:19. What is the point of this passage, in your own words? When someone walks away from the faith, what does it reveal about the quality of their faith to begin with?

Week 4 Discussion: Rethinking His Image

In Colossians 1:21-23, Paul spells out our former condition, and the work of Christ on our behalf to reconcile us back to the Father. Talk as a group about your former condition, and why remembering where you came

from matters, and how it helps you share your faith with other people. Use this opportunity to be transparent, and be a safe place for others to be transparent as well.

1. Icebreaker: Are there things you've done prior to faith in Christ that you've never talked about or told anyone? Would you be willing to share some of that with the group?
2. Do you think that non-Christians, in general, are hostile towards God? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever done something for someone that was undeserving of it? Talk about it with the group, how difficult it was, and how they received it.
4. Are you embarrassed or ashamed of who you were prior to faith in Christ? Why or why not?
5. Does understanding this passage make you more grateful of God's grace? Why or why not?

Takeaways:

1. Prior to Christ's redemptive work, we were hostile enemies of God and deserving of death.
2. Jesus reconciled us by the blood of His cross when we were still hostile towards Him, and His act of reconciliation is what makes fellowship with the Father possible.
3. Perseverance is an important aspect of the Christian walk because it validates our faith.

PRAYER REQUESTS: