

“A Lovely Little Paragraph”
Colossians 1:21-23

February 2, 2014

SI: We’re studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians this winter. Paul wrote most of his letters to the churches because there were problems that needed to be addressed. The problems were things like division and conflict, or false teaching, or ungodly behavior.

In most of his letters, Paul starts with a warm and thoughtful greeting, then he gets into doctrine. Not just any doctrine. He focuses on teaching that will then be the basis for addressing the particular problems in that church.

We started the doctrinal portion last Sunday with Paul’s magnificent statement on the deity of Jesus Christ and his creation and restoration of all things. In these verses, Paul turns to the Colossians themselves, and their spiritual history, the effect the gospel has had on their lives.

One commentator called it a lovely little paragraph, and I’m sure you’ll agree.

INTRO: Vince Lombardi is famous for his success as a football coach, and for his many memorable sayings such as:
“Winners never quit, quitters never win.”
“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”

And supposedly, every year, on the first day of spring training, he would face the team, hold up a football and say (you know it):
“Gentlemen, this is a football.”

His point was that success required commitment to the fundamentals.

I imagine he was also reminding those professional players, who had been at it for so long, to remember their first love of the game.

The letter to the Colossians is a kind of like Paul giving a spring training talk on the fundamentals. It’s Paul saying: Gentlemen, this is a football.

Because the problem in the Colossian church was a teaching or an idea going around that said we don’t need the fundamentals at our stage.

The Gospel and faith in Jesus Christ are true and important, but they are just baby steps. They are just the ABCs of the faith.

If you really want to move up to the higher plane of Christian living, if you really want to experience fullness—that was the buzz word—fullness, then there are some other things you need to focus on.

Derek Thomas, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC described it this way in one of his sermons.

You go to Colossae and there on the main street is a bookstore. It’s the Christian bookstore. Actually, it’s called “The Full Christian Life Bookstore.” And as you go in, the first thing that you see is an exercise machine, and the exercise machine is called “The Slim Christian for the Full Christian Life.” You make some inquiries and you discover that in Colossae there is a belief about exercise, about diets, and sure enough, there before you in the Christian bookstore is “The Christian Diet for the Full Christian Life” with a starter pack. And there in the center is something called “The Liturgical Christian” promising that if you keep these Sabbath days and feast days you’ll experience “The Full Christian Life.” And everywhere, all around the bookstore, hanging from the ceiling are angels and seraphs and cherubs, little angels with bangles that you put around your wrist and angels with bobbing heads that you can put on the dash of your car, because these Colossians are into angels. They believe that angels are speaking to them, giving them words of knowledge that raise them to fullness of Christian experience . . . You ask for a book about Jesus and the bookstore manager scratches his head and he says, “Well, yeah I think I’ve got that book and it’s somewhere in the back and maybe I can find it, but you know, it just doesn’t sell.”

You can imagine a Christian bookstore like that, can't you?

Filled with books and paraphernalia about Christian diets, and schedules for personal devotions, and angel figurines—but harder to find books about Jesus.

Not that Jesus isn't important. We have to have faith in him to be saved.

But doesn't your Christian life feel kind of flat?

Don't you want a fuller, deeper, richer, more intense, authentic, honest, dynamic, exciting spiritual experience?

Of course you do. And here's the key.

Then good old Paul walks in, lifts up the cross and says:

Christians, you were alienated from God, you've been reconciled by Christ, and you must continue to live by faith in him.

Those are the fundamentals of the Gospel.

And it is by focusing on those, you experience fullness.

The way you got into the Christian life is the way to maturity.

Later on, in chapter two, Paul will hammer pretty hard on these popular spiritual practices and ideas that the Colossians were getting into—their diets, angels, and devotional schedules—

these extra things they thought were necessary to supplement the Gospel.

Paul doesn't pull any punches.

But not yet. He's still in his spring training speech.

And in this lovely little paragraph, he spells out three fundamentals.

We can't ever get away from these. We can't let anything distract us from them.

They are:

1. Your alienation
2. Your reconciliation
3. Your continuation

Let's look at each.

Credit where credit is due: Two sermons, Dr. Robert Rayburn, Charles Garland.

MP#1 Your alienation

Vs. 21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

Paul says the first fundamental

is an unvarnished view of your natural condition apart from Christ.

You must never lose sight of this. It must always be the way you view yourself.

I was not born good and innocent. I was not even born a blank slate.

I was born alienated from God, an enemy of God, and prone to evil.

That is the natural human condition since the fall of Adam.

This verse is just the Cliff Notes version.

Paul develops this much more thoroughly in other letters, especially Romans.

In Romans 3, for example Paul says:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

And in that passage, he quotes verse after verse in the Old Testament which describe the natural state of unregenerate people.

In Ephesians 2 Paul says:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Spiritually dead, followers of the Devil, enslaved to sinful cravings, incapable of turning to God—Paul could not paint bleaker picture of natural human nature.

This is not a minor point for Paul.

He sounds this note over and over in his Apostolic teaching to the churches.

It's a foundational doctrine of the faith.

But more to the point in this letter, seeing yourself this way, having this self-image, is essential for enjoying fullness in the Christian life.

Why? Why can we never forget this fundamental doctrine?

Why do we always have to come back to it, and allow it to shape us?

Let me tell you two quick stories about two men that will show you why.

A number of years ago, a man I had never met dropped by the church office and asked to speak to the pastor.

He was in a crisis and chose our church at random.

And over the next 30 minutes or so, he talked non-stop and told me all the bad things he had done, drugs and alcohol and lies and unfaithfulness, destroyed marriages, abandoned children, and something really bad that shocked even him.

Then after telling the tale, he said, But pastor, I hope you understand, I'm not a bad person. Deep down I'm a good person.

I tried to get him to see that Jesus came to save bad people.

That the things he had done came from his heart. Jesus could give a new heart. But that wasn't what he wanted to hear—and I never saw him again.

The other man many years ago, in Florida, another stranger, random church call.

Actually, his wife called the church office and asked if a pastor would come and talk about funeral arrangements, because her husband had a terminal brain tumor.

They lived in a beautiful home on the water. He was a retired engineer.

A proud, hard-working, wealthy man—spiritually, he was as dead as a door nail.

But over the course of several visits, the Holy Spirit began to wake him up.

And I'll never forget this as long as I live. I read Ephesians 2:1-9 to him.

That passage I just read a moment ago that starts:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, and then it ends:

For it is by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not by works, so that no man can boast.

I began to explain how he was an enemy of God and a slave to sin.

His wife and their grown son were sitting there and his son got mad and said:

Don't say that, my father is a good man.

And his father looked up with tears in his eyes and said:

Son, I believe this is true about me. I want to hear it.

And a week before he died, he professed faith in Jesus Christ.

The one man, for all the bad things he had done, couldn't accept the Bible's verdict that he was an enemy of God—so he saw no need for grace and he missed Jesus.

The other man, for all the good things he had done as a father, husband, engineer, believed it, humbled himself, and received mercy and forgiveness.

Paul is saying: That self-awareness of who you are apart from Christ is not something you put aside after you become a Christian.

You preach it to self for the rest of your life. It's part of your self-image.

You must never forget what you were apart from God's grace.

You might say: OK, so what do I do with this, how do I apply it?

Hold on to that question, we'll get to it in the last point. Let's move on to . . .

MP#2 Your reconciliation

Vs. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Reconciliation is one of the ways the Bible speaks of our salvation.

Reconciliation is the repairing of a relationship.

When did your reconciliation with God happen?

A few weeks ago, someone in our church told me how one day during this past Christmas holiday, a member of the family who had been estranged for years, dropped in unexpectedly and there was a sweet reconciliation.

That reconciliation happened on one particular day.

But in the divine plan of God, we can talk about our reconciliation with him as occurring at two different times.

A believer can say: I was reconciled with God when I came to faith in Christ. I was reconciled to God when I was nine years old in Tuscumbia, Alabama and I prayed in my bed one night.

Whatever the story and timing of your conversion.

And a believer can also say: I was reconciled with God when Jesus died on the cross for me. That's when it happened. When were you saved?

I was saved 2,000 years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Both are true statements.

What happened in the death of Christ, and what happens in the believer's life experience is the same reconciliation.

One comes before the other. There cannot be one without the other.

In the purpose and power of God, one will never be found without the other.

So our salvation can be described as either the result of one or the other—

Christ's death on the cross, or our coming to faith in him in our own experience, whichever one the biblical author chooses to highlight for his purpose.

Which does Paul highlight here?

Paul points to the crucifixion as the time of their reconciliation.

He says you were reconciled by Christ's physical body through death.

None of these Colossians had even heard about Christ when he died.

Some of them had not even been born.

When Jesus was crucified, they were living pagan lives, alienated from God.

But Paul places the timing of their reconciliation with the death of Christ's body.

And in doing that he emphasizes the finality and completeness of Christ's work.

That means the initiative is all in God's hands.

He gives mercy as he wishes to give mercy.

It's not that Jesus put an offer of salvation on the table and all the spiritually intuitive and bright people took the offer and congrats to us.

And all you dimmer bulbs missed out.

No, it's all God's mercy. If you put your faith in Christ, it's because of a miracle of the Holy Spirit in your life. God caused that to happen, you didn't.

This is the good news that Paul says is preached to the whole creation—

it's a declaration of Christ's victory. He has accomplished all he set out to do.

He has saved every soul he came to save.

There's no advice here about how to have the victory—

it's news about Christ's accomplished victory that he secured on the cross.

What was happening in the Colossian church was that some people were taking this good news and turning it into good advice. There's a big difference.

The good advice approach is that Jesus is my coach. I look to him for a game plan for success in my life. A way to be a better person. A way to fullness.

Principles for better living straight out of the Bible.

Of course there are principles for better living in the Bible and lots of good advice.

But that's not the point. It's a proclamation of the finished work of Christ.

If you go to the Bible to find principles for successful living you distort it.

This is very common in the American church, unfortunately. Principles for living.

Preacher says, one of the keys to a successful and full life is generosity.

Today I'm preaching on five steps to becoming a generous person, that approach.

Is the Bible for generosity? Of course.

Does the gospel turn stingy people into generous people? Yes, in crazy ways.

You are probably giving away more money than you ever thought you would.

But is the Bible a book of tips about how to become generous? No.

It's a book about Jesus, and what he did to rescue sinners like me.

And when that sinks down deep, how Jesus was rich but became poor for my sake, that becomes the heartbeat of your life, you give for the kingdom.

It's not tips for a happy and full life, but the fruit of the Gospel in your life.

Otherwise the cross becomes nothing more than an inspirational gesture.

not the one and only means by which we were completely reconciled to God.

Good news, not good advice. Christ's finished, accomplished work for us on that hill outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

That's very important as we move on to the third fundamental.

MP#3 Your continuation

Paul says that the way to grow, the way to thrive as a Christian, is to continue in your faith.

Vs. 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

Paul doesn't say if you progress on to the higher matters, the deep spiritual insights that only the select few are learning in esoteric Bible studies, or through unique spiritual experiences that you might have along the way, or a pattern for living that will engage you with God more deeply.

Paul doesn't say it is those things that lead you to maturity

He says it's by continuing in the Gospel, being firmly established in Gospel itself.

The Gospel is not just the elementary beginning of the Christian life,

Paul says it's the whole of the Christian life.

And when he says this, the NIV mistranslates this.

If you continue in your faith, Paul actually says, if you continue in the faith.

Paul's not talking about subjective things.

He's not saying: If you keep your faith strong enough, your hope strong enough, keep yourself churned up and serious, then you'll make it in the Christian life.

He says the faith, objectively, the hope, what Jesus has accomplished for you.

It's not about how sincere you are, it's about Jesus, how trustworthy he is, how effective he is in saving people like you.

If you keep that faith, then you will move forward into maturity and fullness.

Remember the old frozen lake illustration. Two people come to a frozen lake.

One man boldly walks right out to the middle.

The other man timidly tests it with one foot, eases on.

Gets down on hands and knees and slowly crawls out onto the surface.

The question is, which man will the ice hold up? The bold man or nervous man?

It doesn't matter if bold or nervous, matters if the ice is thick.

The objective faith is that the ice is thick. Jesus Christ has lived and died for you.

So you move out trusting in him. It doesn't really matter if your faith strong or weak, it matters if it's well-placed.

If you have weak faith, in a strong Savior, you're ok.

But if you have strong faith, in faith, or in yourself, falling through the ice.
Paul says, continue in the Gospel, continue in the faith

But there are always going to be people who come along and say:

How do you feel like you are doing as a Christian?

I bet you thought you'd be farther along by now. I bet you thought you'd have victory over this or that sin or weakness by now. Where's your effectiveness? Where's your joy. The Bible says you should rejoice always, are you?

Here's what you need. You need my conference. You need my book.

This is the key to really becoming a full Christian.

You need to really focus on this aspect of theology.

You need to follow this pattern for family life, child rearing, or whatever.

When Christianity is turned into a methodology for a successful living, it produces gurus and stars, because that's what Christians want—someone who knows the secret and is going to share it with them.

But Paul doesn't call himself a guru or star, he calls himself a minister, servant.

He says: You don't need special insights from me, I have one message:

Continue in the faith you have heard.

You were alienated from God because of your sins,

Jesus Christ died and rose so you could be reconciled.

Take that Gospel and work it in deeply every day and you will grow.

It's like with our children. Christian parents feel an urgency for their children to accept Jesus into their heart. That's the terminology commonly used in the evangelical church. Good news, today my child accepted Jesus into his heart. OK, now what? Your child has repented of his sins and put his faith in Christ.

What are you going to teach him tomorrow? How will you lead him to maturity. You'll tell him the same thing: Son, repent of your sins, and put faith in Christ.

That's how you discipline your children.

Son, what you did to your sister was mean. It was cruel and unloving.

You need to repent of that sin, and ask God to forgive you, and he will. And you need to trust Jesus. Because that cruelty in your heart is too hard for you to fix, but Jesus can fix it, because he died and rose for you.

That's what you told your child the day he accepted Jesus, and that's what you tell him again and again, day after day.

And that's what you must preach to yourself every day.

Repentance from your sins, turning toward God with new obedience,
realizing the depth of your need for Jesus, and how his finished work alone
makes you holy and blameless before God.

Continue in the faith, established and firm,
not moved from the hope held out in the Gospel.

Gentlemen, this is a football.

You were alienated from God, Christ reconciled you through his death,
you must continue in the faith and hope of the Gospel.