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Colossians 1:21-23

7th Message

John Hanneman

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

Many of us are familiar with the term “philosopher’s stone” from the Harry Potter series or, if you are really hip, Van Morrison song lyrics. “The philosopher’s stone is a legendary alchemical substance said to be capable of turning base metals (lead, for example) into gold or silver. It was also sometimes believed to be an elixir of life useful for rejuvenation and possibly for achieving immortality...Efforts to discover the philosopher’s stone were known as the Magnum Opus.”¹

The philosopher’s stone speaks to the human desire to be transformed: to be changed from something ordinary to something extraordinary and precious. Much of our life is a search for some thing, some place, or some one who can effect this transformation. We search for the Holy Grail, the fountain of youth, or the magnum opus that will redefine our existence. We search for the secret to life that will make everything right. Underlying this search is the desire to become what human beings were always intended to be. The Bible tells us that the Philosopher’s Stone does indeed exist and is in fact the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, a rock of offense or stumbling to some but the philosopher’s stone to others.

In the first century a small group of people living in the town of Colossae in Asia Minor had become followers of Jesus through the work of Epaphras, one of Paul’s disciples. These new converts were making great strides in the faith, but exposure to erroneous teaching and false spiritual practices threatened to derail them. Paul writes a letter so they will have a clear understanding of the inward transformation that had taken place once they put their faith in Jesus, so that they can resist this false teaching and stay on the right course.

And just as it was for the Colossians, understanding the change that God the Father has effected for us through Jesus the Son is essential to our spiritual life and how we live in the here and now. Here is our text from Colossians 1:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (vs. 21-23, ESV)

Let me remind you of the flow of verses 12-23. The last two studies in Colossians have focused on the hymn to Christ in verses 15-20. This hymn is bracketed by personal application. Just prior to the hymn Paul talks about the work of both God the Father and God the Son in the lives of these believers. The Father has qualified or made them fit for a heavenly inheritance, he has delivered them from the domain of darkness and transferred them into the kingdom of his beloved son. In the Son the Colossians have been redeemed and forgiven, the twin blessings of the new covenant. With the mention of the Son, Paul flows into the beautiful and skillfully crafted description of the Son, which some think was an early Christian hymn.

Now in verses 21-23 Paul returns to the personal pronoun “you” and applies the hymn to the Colossian believers, continuing to lay out the change that has taken place in their lives. These three verses close out the first main section of the letter and so provide a fitting place to stop our studies in Colossians for a while.

The Drastic Change – Reconciliation

In verse 21 Paul reinforces that fact that a drastic change has taken place in the lives of these believers, highlighted by the two little words, “once” and “now.” Paul often uses this little convention to contrast the former life with the current life. Once or formerly they were this, but now they are something else completely. What happened? Through the work of Christ these believers were reconciled to God.

Paul said in verses 19 and 20, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things,” (Colossians 1:19–20). Now Paul applies this truth to the Colossians and to anyone else who comes to believe in Jesus as Lord and King. What does reconciliation mean? Reconciliation means to change, exchange, or alter. A relationship that is at odds changes to one that is peaceful and harmonious.

The Need for Reconciliation

The need for reconciliation with God is based on three things: humankind is alienated from God, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil works. Alienated means to be estranged. Humankind is estranged from God. Just like the Colossians we begin life “continuously and persistently out of harmony with God.”² This certainly implies that the Colossians were former Gentiles since Gentile believers were formerly estranged not only from God, but as Paul says in Ephesians, to the people of God: “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). “Hostile in mind” denotes “a conscious antagonism to the only true God.”³ Humankind is depraved in its thinking. We do not think the thoughts of God. When we say, “I can’t believe in a God who would allow tragedy to happen,” or “God is not a good God,” we are manifesting animosity in our relationship with God. The thinking that disadvantages others in order to advantage self is hostile to God’s way of thinking. The word hostile can mean “enemy.” The way men and women naturally think makes them enemies of God. We shake our fist at God and take control of our own life.

Paul then goes further, describing the Colossian’s former conduct as “doing evil deeds” or evil works. Hostile thinking makes itself manifest in evil actions. Evil behavior is characteristic of those who live in the kingdom of darkness and not in the kingdom of light. They are the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:10) not the Spirit, and they lead to death rather than life. Evil deeds are rooted in the idea that one is a slave of idolatry and sin. In contrast to their former state

Paul can now pray in verse 10 that the Colossians would bear fruit in every good work. The natural way of thinking and the natural way we behave make it impossible to have a harmonious relationship with a holy God.

Without the Spirit to illuminate our thinking we have a hard time grasping our estrangement from God. When I was growing up as a boy going to church I would read the prayers about being a sinner and I didn't know what I had done wrong. I would not have thought myself alienated from God. However, as I grew up and lived in darkness I knew that I was getting further and further away from God and what I was intended to be. I can look back now with great clarity as to my hostile thinking and my evil actions. At the time I didn't realize that it had to do with a relationship with God but in truth that was the reality. Maybe some of you had the same experience.

But even if unbelievers do not understand the ideas of sin or a fallen world or hostility to God, most people know that something is horribly wrong in the world and how people live. And most people if they are really honest and in touch with their heart know that they themselves are out of sync, out of tune, out of touch, and out of order. They have a need for something or someone to set them right. Humankind is searching for what is missing. They search for the philosopher's stone, and the reason is because they are not reconciled to God.

In the book of Ephesians Paul describes how unbelievers (Gentiles) live. They walk "in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (Ephesians 4:17-19). Estranged from God, hostile in thinking, evil deeds. Paul says that for those who become followers of Jesus, this was your former life.

But now you have been reconciled to God. You once were this but that is not who you are any longer. A drastic change has taken place. Because of Christ everything has changed. The "now" has no connection to the "once." Oh for the grace to see this transformation, this philosopher's stone in all its clarity. If we could see this as clearly as Paul we would get up out of our pews and dance for joy. We would shout with a loud cry of Hallelujah! We would want to gather and worship every day ... and we would be on time even!

But for most of us it is much easier to identify with the "once" rather than the "now." It is much easier to live in the guilt, shame, and slavery of the "once" rather than the joy and freedom of the "now." We sing: "Redeemed, Restored, Forgiven" but it is not easy to live as if this was true. Much of our Christian life is spent gaining a full understanding of what has happened. This is why the Christ hymn in verses 15-20 is so important and why Paul brackets this hymn with application. The message is to keep looking at the work of Christ and to keep applying this truth to our lives over and over again. All the fullness of deity resides in Christ and he is all we need. If we don't get this right then we will be tempted to follow false teachers and false spirituality. But if we get it right then we will live as citizens of heaven in the new creation even though we currently live in the country of death and suffering.

The Means of Reconciliation

How did this change happen? How were we reconciled to God? Paul says literally it was "in his body of flesh by his death." Here we see a correlation with verse 20: "through him to reconcile to himself

all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). The word "reconcile" corresponds to "making peace" and the "death of the body of flesh" with "the blood of the cross."

Two things really stand out here. First, body of flesh is likely a Hebraism for physical body. Jesus had a physical body just like ours and he suffered and died as a man. Likely the reality of the incarnation was a corrective to what was being propagated by the false teachers.

Paul says in Romans 8: "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3). Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us in the flesh. In his body Jesus took the condemnation for our sin on the cross. The death of Jesus is what allows us to be reconciled to a holy God and live in a peaceful relationship.

Second, even though we were enemies and estranged from God, God took the initiative and provided the means of reconciliation. We did nothing, nor could we do anything, to bring about reconciliation. No one is good enough, all fall short of the glory of God, and all human efforts to make peace with God are inadequate. God does the work, not us. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). This is totally opposite of how the non-Christian world thinks.

Reconciliation through the death of Christ is fundamental to understanding the "now" of our relationship with God. But there is also an application for our relationships with other people. It strikes me that if a death was required to have peace with God, might not that be true of human relationships? The basic manifestation of sin is damaged relationships, both with God and others. This is what we see in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve ate the fruit; they hid themselves from God and from each other. Often we find ourselves at odds with people in our lives – spouses, children, parents, coworkers, brothers and sisters in the church. We become alienated and estranged by our choice or the choice of another person.

What will bring reconciliation? True reconciliation comes through a death, a dying to self, a laying aside of pride, a desire for revenge, the need to have our way, or a resentment we are holding onto. And if we are truly followers of Jesus, walking in the ways of Jesus, then God might call us to take the initiative even though we might be the innocent party. This doesn't mean that we become wallflowers and doormats. Nor does it mean that we put ourselves in an unsafe situation or forgo healthy boundaries. But dying to self is a voluntary, free act based on love and grace that can have dramatic effects in our relationships with other people.

There are a couple of passages that talk about reconciliation in the New Testament. One has to do with marriage in 1 Cor. 7 where Paul says:

"To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

For Paul there were two options when there was a separation in a marriage – stay unmarried or be reconciled. This is consistent with the Lord's teaching. This is a very complex issue, but basically God is a God of reconciliation and desires men and women to be reconciled in their marriages. Our marriages would be so much healthier and

vibrant if there was a willingness to die to self and maintain an ongoing environment of making peace. And if you husbands were to truly love your wives like Jesus as Paul describes in Ephesians 5, then you would make the first move, to die to self and initiate love even while being alienated or at odds. You would be amazed how impactful and transforming that can be on your wives.

The other passage is Matthew 5 where Jesus says:

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.” (Matthew 5:23–25)

We see here that estrangement between brothers and sisters in the church is very important to our Lord. But sadly churches are a breeding ground for conflict and division. Most church splits are centered on feuds between people and not because of doctrinal issues. How much healthier would the body of Christ be if we walked in the ways of God, willing to die to self and make peace? Again, the situations that occur in churches can be complex, but the key thing is just to search your hearts and be open.

Maybe a picture is worth a thousand words – here we see Pope John Paul shaking hands with the man who tried to kill him. That is exactly what has happened to us, except in our case we shake hands with the man we did kill. Reconciliation with God through the death of Christ can not only change the way we relate to God but can also change the way we relate to others. Experiencing estrangement in our relationships just might mean that we have not fully grasped and appropriated our reconciliation with God.

The Goal of Reconciliation

Christ died so that we could be reconciled to God. But that is not the end of it. Paul goes on to say that we have been reconciled for a purpose – “in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”

The blameless, unblemished lamb was sacrificed so that we could be the blameless, unblemished people of God, with no spot or stain. The word “above reproach” is a judicial word that denotes a person against whom there can be no accusation.

The purpose of reconciliation is to create a holy people in Christ for God. This was God’s design for Israel and even though Israel didn’t get it right, God’s plan is not thwarted. What could not happen in Israel through Torah happens now in the worldwide church through Christ and the Spirit.

Becoming a holy people for God is a process and has a past, present, and future aspect. In the past all of our sin has been dealt with and we have been reconciled to God. But when we come to Christ we are not instantly perfect and so in the present we are being formed in Christ, we are being shaped and remolded through the work of the Spirit. And then in the future when we stand before the holy God we will be like Christ. The word “present” is often used in legal language and means “to bring another before the court.” One day we will be presented to God, complete and perfect.

Peter wrote about this in his first epistle:

“...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excel-

lencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9–10)

About a year and a half ago my wife Liz bought a horse. This was a lifelong dream come true. Liz loves her horse and delights in him. But the horse is young and needs training. He needs to be prepared and made fit for riding on trails and in open spaces. He needs to become accustomed to things like cars and bicycles that could spook him. Liz’s way of training is the bonding method. She thinks if she and the horse bond then the horse will do what Liz wants simply out of love. But that doesn’t work. Finally Liz realized that her horse needed someone to work with him. And so Liz and her horse went to cowgirl camp. The love and delight have not changed but Liz’s horse is now being prepared and made fit for use.

This is what is happening in our relationship with God. We have been reconciled to God. His love and delight over each one of us will never change. But he is training us, preparing us, and making us fit for something incredible: to spend eternity with him and share his glory. Reconciliation is just the beginning of a life-long process.

Perseverance in the Faith

With the promise of a future glory comes a condition stated both positively and negatively. “If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard (vs. 23).” The condition is intended to give encouragement and confidence rather than create doubt and fear. The meaning is more like “if you indeed you continue in the faith – and I am sure you will.” Peter O’Brien writes, “Continuance is the test of reality. If it is true that the saints will persevere to the end, than it is equally true that the saints must persevere to the end.”⁴ As Paul reminds the Philippians, God will complete what he has begun. While a counterfeit faith will wither and die, genuine faith is assured of continuing to the end. If we are truly in Christ we will persevere.

The positive statement is to continue or remain in the faith, stable and steadfast. The faith is not so much the act of believing as the content of what is believed. Stable and steadfast speak of the strength and security of a house (Matt. 7:24-27) that is anchored deeply into solid ground, the truth of the gospel. There will be temptations and dangers on the spiritual journey and thus the need for a firm foundation in the faith.

The negative statement encourages us to not shift or move away from the hope of the gospel. The word “shift” is used several times in the Old Testament where it means, “to put to flight.” The hope of the gospel is the future anticipation of being presented before God without stain or blemish, complete in Christ and sharing his glory.

When Paul makes the point that the gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven the note of universalism is reiterated. This is very appropriate. In verse 15 Paul says that all things in the heavens and earth were created in Christ. In verse 20 Paul says that God reconciled all things through Christ, whether things in heaven and earth. In verse 6 Paul says that the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing in the whole world. And so it is only fitting the gospel be proclaimed in the entire realm of which Jesus is Lord and King.

Now this does not mean that it has already happened at the time Paul wrote this letter. There were still people who had not heard the gospel. But it had been announced in the heavenly palace and now God’s messengers, like Paul and Epaphras, began taking this

announcement to the four corners of the world – to large cities and small villages, to people of every color and language. F. F. Bruce writes, “The catholicity of the gospel is a token of its divine origin and power.”⁶ The gospel is the authentic message “in stark contrast to the heretical teaching with its appeal to a select group of initiates.”⁶ The mention of “hope” takes us back to verse 5 where Paul talks of the Colossian’s faith and love that are based on the hope stored up for them in heaven. The mention of “hearing the gospel” also provides an echo of verse 5 and thus the mention of “hope” and “gospel” tie a neat bow around this first major section of Colossians, a double inclusio so to speak.

Conclusion

The cross has changed everything. In Christ we are totally and completely transformed and reconciled to God. We are no longer “once” but we are “now.” The Philosopher’s stone has changed us from lead to gold. And even though we are not complete and perfect quite yet we are moving toward that final goal with complete certainty. We live with an amazing contradiction, for while we live in the country of death at the same time we live into the resurrection of Jesus. Our gaze is focused on the horizon and we live into the hope of the gospel, the hope of glory, which is our deepest longing. We are called to simply persevere by keeping our lives centered on Christ.

1 “Philosopher’s Stone.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 22 July 2004. Web. Retrieved 29 September 2011.

2 Peter O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 66.

3 O’Brien, 66.

4 O’Brien, 69.

5 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 79-80.

6 O’Brien, 71.