

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: "Free Indeed"

Text: Colossians 1:21-23

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Verse 21

Colossians 1:21-23 provided practical application to all Paul said in Colossians 1:15-20. All together, Paul's point in 1:15-23 was to remind his readers of both the person and work of Jesus. Both concepts — Christ's person and Christ's work — are integral to the Christian experience. One cannot really know God or walk with God without a firm understanding of such things.

Paul began his section on practical application by saying, "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (Colossians 1:21). The phrase rendered "and you" was significant. It tied Paul's discussion concerning reconciliation in verse 20 to a discussion concerning his readers in verses 21-23. Christ had indeed provided a way for "all things" (Colossians 1:20) to be reconciled to God, and some in Colossae had personally experienced such reconciliation (Colossians 1:21-23). In describing the way the Colossians had been reconciled, Paul spoke of their pre-Christian way of living with three concepts — "alienated," "hostile," and "doing evil deeds."

The word "alienated" provided an accurate picture of the way sin impacts the human condition. Plato liked to use the word to speak of estrangement between two parties.¹ Because of Adam and Eve's first transgression, humanity is plagued by relational strain, both relational strain with God and with other humans. When the Lord placed the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, He told them, "...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The death of which the Lord spoke was a spiritual death. After violating the Lord's command, Adam and Eve immediately experienced estrangement from God and one another. They spiritually devolved into a depraved state. They were overcome by shame because of their sin (Genesis 3:7) and they began blaming God and one another for the resultant state of sin (Genesis 3:8-13).

Adam and Eve's experience is now the default experience for all of humanity. The language of Colossians 1:21 involved a perfect passive participle, depicting humankind as being continually and completely alienated from God because of original sin. Because of their transgression, all are naturally alienated from God and others. Paul spoke of such things in Ephesians, describing unredeemed humanity as "...darkened in their understanding, *alienated* from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Ephesians 4:18).

On top of being "alienated" from God and others, the Christians at Colossae were also previously "hostile in mind." This hostility was a result of their alienation from God. The word "mind" referred to the immaterial part of humans. It was synonymous with "spirit," "heart," or "soul." As used by Paul in Colossians 1:21, the term depicted the location or sphere of humanity's hostility toward God.

The Greek word (*echthrós*) rendered "hostile" in Colossians 1:21 is one that spoke of enmity in the first-century world. Paul used it in Romans 5:10 to speak of our life before Christ — "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." The effects of sin are not just external. Original sin has wrought a disastrous outcome on the souls of men and women. Each is born with an inborn hostility toward God. Because of sin and its accompanying shame, unbelievers naturally have an inward angst and antagonism toward the Lord.

¹ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 481.

Paul used a third concept to speak of the Colossians pre-Christian experience. He spoke of the way they were previously committed to “doing evil deeds.” While the terms “alienated” and “hostile” spoke of the static state of unredeemed humanity, the phrase “doing evil deeds” referred to the dynamic lifestyle of those who don’t know Christ. It spoke of the commission of sin. Unbelievers are plagued by a positional standing of alienation and hostility towards God, but they are also marked by a practical lifestyle of continual sin. One Bible scholar has rightly expressed the meaning of Paul’s words, saying, “Hostile purpose finds natural expression in evil deeds.”² The inward state of sin always exhibits itself in an outward display. Jesus once remarked on such things in when debating His religious opponents. He said, “The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matthew 12:35).

Paul wanted the believers at Colossae to remember what they had been before they heard of Christ. They had been in complete bondage of sin. They lived a depraved and hopeless existence. However, Christ’s work had brought reconciliation and restoration where there had been estrangement. Paul reminded his readers of such things in order to discourage them from looking to Gnostic philosophies for hope and help.

Verse 22

After describing his readers’ pre-Christian condition in verse 21, Paul described the work of Christ in verse 22. He said, “...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” (Colossians 1:22). The opening words of the verse provided a sharp contrast to what Paul had previously stated in verse 21.³ Paul used the word translated “now” in an emphatic position to emphasize the dramatic change of Christian conversion.⁴

The word “reconciled” referred to the believer’s “legal standing” before God. Though the real believers in Colossae had previously been “judiciously estranged” from their Creator, Christ had brought them back into a right relationship.⁵ It wasn’t through interactions with angelic intermediaries that one gained access to God (Colossians 2:18). Reconciliation was only available in Jesus.

Paul wanted his readers to remember the truth of reconciliation. Thus, he mentioned the concept twice in just a few verses (Colossians 1:20, 22). In our current verse, Paul wanted his readers to remember that the work of reconciliation required a sacrifice. Thus, he made mention of Christ’s “body of flesh.” Mention of Christ’s body was relevant to the doctrinal controversies in Colossae. Gnostic teaching claimed that Jesus didn’t have a real physical body.⁶ This teaching maintained that physical matter was innately evil. In addition, they believed that Jesus was one of many spirit beings through which humans could interact with the supreme being. Paul contradicted such spurious teachings and flatly presented Jesus’ body and flesh as the means of reconciliation with God.

Paul’s words reveal that a “body of flesh” is at the heart of reconciliation. Christian salvation is not based on a mere winking at sin on God’s part. In His program of redemption, the Lord has not chosen to merely overlook human transgression; there had to be a definite object, a scapegoat, a means of forgiveness. The conduit of reconciliation was Christ — his

² Robertson, 482.

³ Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 114.

⁴ Robertson, 482.

⁵ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 39.

⁶ Robertson, 482.

sinless body offered on behalf of our sinful bodies. Paul also presented Jesus' flesh as the means of human redemption when writing to the Romans: "For 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, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4). The author of Hebrews spoke of the way in which Christ offered his body on behalf of sin: "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

Contrary to the Gnostic heresy, a right standing with God wasn't achieved through interaction with angelic intermediaries, observances of ascetic practices (Colossians 2:18), or possession of supposed secure knowledge (Colossians 1:9). Reconciliation was only found through Christ. And Christ's work of reconciliation accomplished a specific purpose in God's program of redemption. Paul made mention of such by saying, "...in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (Colossians 1:22). The phrase "in order to" denoted purpose in the original language of the text. The overarching purpose of Christ's work was to "present" a people to God.

The Greek word rendered "present" is one that was used of someone being presented before a court of law in the first-century world.⁷ For Paul's Jewish readers, the term undoubtedly evoked thoughts of Old Testament priests presenting sacrifices before the Lord.⁸ As used by Paul in Colossians 1:22, the term had connotations of end-time judgment. When human history comes to an end, all will stand before the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). Those who are in Christ will then be presented as not guilty of sin. No judgment will be passed down to God's people and they will receive a portion in the New Heaven and the New Earth (Matthew 25:21; Philippians 1:9-10).

Paul used three descriptors — "holy," "blameless," and "above reproach" — to speak of the end-time presentation of God's people. The words "holy" or "saints" were commonly applied to believers in the New Testament (Matthew 27:52; Acts 9:32; Romans 1:7; Hebrews 3:1; Jude 3; Revelation 5:8). To be holy was to be "...positively consecrated, separated unto God."⁹ The term depicted one being sanctified by the work of Christ.

Like the holy articles of the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple, Christians are set apart from the world and set apart unto the Lord. Whereas they were previously marred by sin, they are clean because of the offering of Christ's body and blood on their behalf. Paul used the Greek word for "holy" on six different occasions in his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 1:2, 4, 12, 22, 26; 3:12). Obviously, the false teaching at Colossae had caused some misunderstandings concerning the holy standing of God's people. Paul wanted to remind the church of its holy position before the Lord (Colossians 1:2) and he wanted the church to practically pursue such holiness as well (Colossians 3:12).

The word rendered "blameless" was used of animal sacrifices in the Mosaic ceremonial system.¹⁰ It meant "without spot" or "without blemish." As used in the Septuagint (LXX) it designated "...the absence of anything amiss in a sacrifice, anything which would render it unworthy to be offered."¹¹ Applied to believers, it depicts them as being ceremonially pure before the Lord because of the work of Christ. Paul used the word in Ephesians to speak of the results of salvation (Ephesians 1:4; 5:27). Jude employed it in a way that was similar to

⁷ Johnston, 39.

⁸ Beale, 115.

⁹ Robertson, 482.

¹⁰ Robertson, 482.

¹¹ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 461.

Paul's meaning in Colossians 1:22, when he spoke of the way Christians will stand blameless before the Lord at the end of time because of what Christ has done: "...to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude 24).

The term translated "above reproach" was a legal term in the first century world. It meant "without accusation" or "free from any charge at all."¹² In a court of law, it indicated that there was "...no legal or judicial accusation..." that could "...be brought against a person."¹³ As used in our current verse, the term referred to the end goal of Christ's work. At the end of time, Jesus will present the Church to the Heavenly Father as a pure and radiant bride. The goal of God's covenant redemption will then be finally and fully realized. The Lord will have a redeemed and holy people for Himself for all of eternity. Paul used the words rendered "above reproach" to speak of such things when writing to the Corinthians: "...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:8-9).

Verse 23

After describing the glorious work of reconciliation in Christ, Paul provided a qualification to such things. He knew there were false religious professors in Colossae. Some boasted of being in Christ when they weren't really born again. They spoke of God, but they weren't really reconciled to God. It is for this reason that Paul provided a caveat to all he said in Colossians 1:21-22 by saying, "...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" (Colossians 1:23). In short, Paul's words in Colossians 1:23 were "an exhortation to perseverance" for his original readers.¹⁴ The apostle's intent was similar to the intent he had when telling the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6).

Paul's concern in verse 23 was that his readers "continue in the faith." The word rendered "faith" was used in two different senses in the New Testament. First, it was often employed in a subjective sense, referring to the abiding trust in Christ that believers are to exhibit in life (Romans 1:17; Ephesians 2:8). Second, it was also employed in an objective sense, referencing the absolute truth of the Christian gospel (Jude 1:3). In Colossians 1:23, it seems Paul used the term in the first sense. This seems to be the meaning, since Paul used the term for "faith" in this way repeatedly in his letter (Colossians 1:4; 2:5; 2:12).¹⁵ The apostle wanted his readers to keep exhibiting a trust in Christ. He knew they were being tempted to believe a "different gospel" (Galatians 1:6).

Paul's reference to "the gospel" in verse 23 was similar to the one he made back in verses 6 and 7. In those verses, the apostle made mention of the way the church at Colossae had initially heard the gospel. Epaphras was the one who first proclaimed the good news of Jesus in that city. He had likely heard it from Paul's preaching (Acts 19:10). Paul now wanted his readers to continue in that gospel they had initially heard.

Some would interpret Paul's words in verse 23 as meaning that one can lose his or her salvation. It is important to note that the English words "if indeed" are based on Greek words that assumed a condition was true. One Greek scholar has noted that Paul's intent was to

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

¹⁴ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 160.

¹⁵ Beale, 116.

express “confidence rather than doubt.”¹⁶ Paul didn’t mean to place a condition on whether or not his readers would remain saved. He meant to portray confidence that they would persevere in the faith because of Christ’s work.

To interpret Paul’s words as meaning that one could lose his or her salvation would go against other plain teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Our Lord regarded salvation as a permanent, irreversible thing. He said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). Paul regarded salvation in the same light. He told the Ephesians, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14). To the Philippians, Paul said, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

The testimony of Jesus and His apostles indicates that salvation is irreversible. When the Lord grants the new birth, He preserves those He births until redemption is finally and fully accomplished. This is what Paul meant when he told the Romans, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30).

If one was to interpret Paul’s words in Colossians 1:23 as meaning one could lose his or her salvation, he or she would adopt a view point that goes against the rest of Scripture. In addition, one would adopt a perspective that regards works as a requirement for salvation. If full and final salvation is based on what we do, salvation is of works. The Bible is clear that salvation is not earned through human merit. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Titus 3:4-5 says, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

While salvation is not earned “as a result of works” (Ephesians 2:9), it does result in good works. Jesus indicated as much in His Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Good works do not earn salvation, but they do give evidence of salvation. They are not the cost of salvation, but they are the consequence of salvation. Paul indicated as much in Ephesians 2:10. After saying salvation is by grace, through faith and not of works, he said, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Regeneration always results in the display of good works. If the Spirit of God dwells within the human soul, there will be some sort of spiritual fruit in one’s life (Galatians 5:22-23). This is why the Lord will be perfectly just in judging people on the basis of their works at the end of time (Revelation 20:12). If one does not exhibit good works, one reveals that one has never been truly converted.

This was Paul’s point in Colossians 1:23. Some at Colossae boasted of salvation, but they were not hinged to gospel truth. They had a religion that was detached from Christ. Through their creed, confession, and conduct they denied the person and work of Jesus. Such individuals gave evidence that they weren’t genuine believers. Despite their boasts, they didn’t really know Christ. The genuine converts at Colossae would be able to tell who was truly saved by examining whether or not people continued “...in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.”

¹⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

The apostle's language in Colossians 1:23 painted a vivid picture of the secure believer. He employed three terms to depict the one who perseveres in the faith. All of the terms were used in the world of first-century architecture.¹⁷ Paul used the metaphor of building construction elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the church (Ephesians 2:20; 3:17-18; 4:11-12). The metaphor emphasized the way the Lord graciously and sovereignly establishes the people of God, but it also emphasized the way the people of God are designed to grow into a vast superstructure built upon the foundation of Christ. Paul knew that the superstructure of God's people at Colossae was on shaky ground because of false teaching.

The word rendered "stable" was used of the laying of the foundation of a building (Matthew 7:25). Paul likely used it as a picture of the initial salvation of the true believers at Colossae. He employed it as a perfect tense verb, indicating that the initial act of salvation was a past event with abiding results. He also used the passive voice, demonstrating that salvation was performed by God upon his readers. The intent of his verbiage was to indicate that the Colossians' perseverance in the faith rested in the Lord's gracious work of regeneration.

In the first-century world, the Greek word translated "steadfast" was used to refer to buildings that had a firm structure.¹⁸ The words translated "not shifting" were used of a structure that didn't move from one place to another.¹⁹ Together, the two terms depicted the resultant condition of true salvation. Genuine believers are secure. They persevere. Because of the work of regeneration, they stay solid and immovable. Though they may struggle with sin and shortcomings, and though they may be given to spiritual despondency and despair at times, they have a solid foundation that keeps them firm and immovable. They don't sway and they ultimately don't stray from the faith. Grace keeps them in Christ.

In talking about the gospel's transformational work, Paul qualified the nature of the gospel with a lengthy description. He referred to it as the gospel the Colossians had "heard." The verb translated "heard" appeared as an aorist active tense verb; thus, it referred to a single, discreet action in the past. Paul intended to remind his readers of the moment they first heard the gospel through Epaphras' preaching. As he did in Colossians 1:5-7, he wanted to encourage the church to stick with the message they had initially heard. They needed to shun the new and novel doctrines of the Gnostic heretics.

Paul then described the gospel by saying it had "been proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Colossians 1:23). He gave a similar description of the gospel in Colossians 1:6. As in that verse, his language in Colossians 1:23 obviously contained a form of hyperbole.²⁰ Paul did not mean to literally say that every single person in the world had heard the gospel message at the time of his writing. Instead, he meant to convey the way gospel truth had spread like a wildfire throughout the Roman Empire.

After receiving the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8), the apostles had gone from Jerusalem and preached the gospel in non-Jewish regions. The prophecies of Hosea 1:10-11 and Zechariah 14:8 had been fulfilled.²¹ The Gentile world had heard the gospel. Paul's purpose in mentioning these realities was to encourage his readers to stick to orthodox Christian truth. The gospel message Epaphras had declared was the message that was transforming lives throughout the Roman-dominated world. The Gnostic doctrines were false and they had no power to change lives. Believers at Colossae would have been wise to shun such new teachings.

¹⁷ Beale, 117.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

²⁰ Robertson, 483.

²¹ Calvin, 162.

Finally, Paul qualified the nature of gospel truth by saying, “of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Colossians 1:23). In essence, Paul’s words were an appeal to his apostolic authority.²² He had given a similar appeal at the outset of his letter (Colossians 1:1). In the context of Colossians 1:23, the word translated “minister” was a generic one that referred to service rendered on behalf of Christ.²³ It should not be regarded as a technical term that refers to a particular office in the church.²⁴

Throughout the New Testament, the Greek term “minister” was used in a variety of ways. Paul used it in Romans 13:4 to speak of the ministry rendered by state governmental authorities. In Romans 16:1, he used it to speak of the service a woman named Phoebe rendered in the church at Rome. In 1 Corinthians 3:5, the word referred to those with official service capacities in the church. The word was applied to pastoral ministry in 1 Timothy 4:6, but it was also used of the deacon ministry in passages like Ephesians 6:21, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:7, and 1 Timothy 3:8. In addition to all these uses, Paul used it of the service he rendered as an apostle in Ephesians 3:7 and Colossians 1:25.

Though Paul did not use the word for “minister” in Colossians 1:23 as a technical term for the office of apostle, he used it to speak of the service he rendered as an apostle. He wanted his readers to remember that the gospel message they had heard through Epaphras was apostolic in nature. It was distinct from the Johnny-come-lately doctrine of the Gnostics. It was true. It was the apostolic doctrine from Jesus. The Colossians would have done well to reject new teachings and to cling to Paul’s teaching.

²² Calvin, 162.

²³ Robertson, 483.

²⁴ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 86.