

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: “Alive in Christ, Part 4”

Text: Colossians 2:13-14

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Verse 13

In verse 13, Paul said, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (Colossians 2:13). The words translated “and you” at the beginning of verse 13 were emphatic in the original language of the text. Paul wanted to place strong emphasis on his readers pre-conversion status. He wanted them to remember what they were before Christ. His rationale was simple — the previously depraved state of Paul’s readers could not have been remedied by legalistic observances and mystical experiences. Only the person and work of Christ had the potential of making them whole before the Lord.

“You, Who Were Dead”

Prior to conversion, Christians were spiritually “dead” before God (Ephesians 2:1). In the original language of the New Testament, Paul used a verb that spoke of a continuing trait.¹ The problem with humanity is not just that it does sinful things every once in a while. No, the problem is far worse. Apart from Christ, humankind is in a perpetual state of sin. Humans inherited such a state because of Adam and Eve’s original transgression (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:22-24; Isaiah 59:2; Romans 5:12; 6:23). Humanity lacks spiritual life because of a legal problem before God. Sin has rendered all spiritually dead (Romans 6:23) and all are subject to the second death because of sin (Revelation 20:14-15).

Paul’s Jewish audience would have heartily agreed with his assertion concerning spiritual death. The ardent Judaizers who made demands concerning circumcision would have affirmed what he said. Most all Jews believed humanity was spiritually dead in its natural state.² Paul, however, differed from the Jewish legalists in Colossae in that he proposed a different means of remedying humanity’s spiritual deadness. For him, Christ alone was the means of reconciliation and regeneration. Jewish ceremonial observances had served a purpose, but that purpose had passed away with the coming of the Promised One.

“In Your Trespasses and The Uncircumcision of Your Flesh”

Paul explained the source of spiritual death by referring to his readers’ “trespasses” and “uncircumcision.” The two ideas — trespasses and uncircumcision — should have been

¹ 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), 464.

² Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 109.

regarded as going together.³ The former was a result of the latter. Because their hearts were previously uncircumcised, Paul's readers had previously committed innumerable "trespasses."

The Greek word for "trespasses" could be rendered "offenses."⁴ It referred to violations of God's Moral Law. In God's eyes, such offenses are deserving of spiritual death (Genesis 2:16-17). The apostle spoke about the condemnation associated with such trespasses in Romans, saying, "For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

In speaking of uncircumcision, Paul didn't mean to speak of literal circumcision of literal flesh. He continued his thought from Colossians 2:11. He intended to provide a metaphor of his readers' unregenerate state before salvation. The circumcision prescribed to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 17:1-14) was a sign of the spiritual circumcision that would take place through the work of Christ. Through the person and work of Jesus, the hearts of God's people are made new. They are given new life and their hearts are spiritually circumcised (Romans 2:29). Apart from such a work, one remains dead in sin. Before they encountered Christ, both Jews and Gentiles alike at Colossae were figuratively uncircumcised in their flesh.

There is perhaps reason to believe that Paul's words in verse 13 were aimed first at his Gentile readers. This seems to be true because of the way he switched from the second person ("you") and first person ("us") pronouns in the verse.⁵ In using "you," he pointed to Gentile readers who were both physically and spiritually uncircumcised before they encountered Christ. In using "us," he coupled Jews and Gentiles together, speaking of the true Israel (Romans 2:28-29).

In God's program of redemption, ethnic Jew and ethnic Gentile alike needed forgiveness of sin through Christ. Jews at Colossae weren't somehow exempt because of their allegiance to ceremonial observances. Nor were Jews still required to engage in such ceremonial rites. Such things had a purpose of pointing people forward to Christ. With the coming of the substance of Christ, the shadow of the Ceremonial Law was no longer needed (Colossians 2:17). God has always had one plan of salvation — faith in the work of the Promised One who performed a work on behalf of sin.

"Made Alive"

Despite the Colossians' pre-conversion condition, the Lord made them "alive with Him." Paul's words concerning life alluded back to what he said concerning resurrection in verse 12. Remember the way he spoke of how his readers "...were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God" (Colossians 2:12). Paul's intent was to

³ Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 195.

⁴ Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 450.

⁵ Wright, 110.

express the way believers receive supernatural, soul-transforming life through the person and work of Christ.

Interestingly, the Greek word rendered “made alive together” was a compound word. The preposition for “with” (sún) was affixed to the front of the word. As used by Paul, it depicted believers being simultaneously made alive with Christ at regeneration. The apostle’s intent was to once again emphasize realities associated with the believer’s union with Christ. At salvation, believers join Christ in dying to sin (Galatians 2:20) and inheriting resurrection life. Although believers do not experience the blessing of such things until the moment of faith, the Lord historically accomplished such things at the cross of Calvary.

Through the person and work of Jesus, the Lord provides His people with eternal life, life characterized by the Eternal One. Paul used the same language from Colossians 2:13 to speak of the same realities when writing to the church at Ephesus: “...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). Whereas original sin brought spiritual death upon humanity, Christ’s work secured spiritual life. The Parable of the Prodigal Son declared this reality. When the wayward son returned to his home place, his father declared, “For this my son was dead, and is alive again...” (Luke 15:24).

Many at Colossae were looking for spiritual life in all of the wrong things. Some thought circumcision would profit them spiritually. Others were looking to legalistic observances or mystical encounters with angels. Paul reminded his readers of the true source of life. The work of Christ was the only means of dealing with humanity’s sin and spiritual deadness. Jesus, not religious rules or rituals, was the Colossians’ source of life.

It seems that the problem at Colossae persists to this day. Though the particulars related to the problem may be different, the issue is still the same. All of humanity has a sin problem. However, some professing believers get caught up trying to remedy that problem via means apart from Christ. Many, like the Colossians, look to external forms of religion — devoted Christian service, being baptized again, turning over a new leaf, and more — as a grounds for overcoming their struggles with indwelling sin. In all generations of God’s dealing with men and women, the means of salvation and sanctification is the same. An abiding trust in God’s promised Redeemer is the means of spiritual sustenance and strength.

“Having Forgiven Us All Our Trespasses”

On top of being made alive in Christ, believers are also forgiven. Along with the word rendered “made alive together,” the word for “forgiven” in verse 13 appeared in the past tense. Paul meant to display the once for all action of Christ’s work.⁶ The Colossians didn’t need to look to ceremonies, rules, experiences, or observances for spiritual life and forgiveness. The work of Christ had decisively provided such things. They had all they needed for spiritual life in the finished work of Jesus.

Verse 14

⁶ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 63.

In verse 14, Paul continued his description of Jesus' work in the lives of God's children by saying, "...by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14). Paul's words in verse 14 can be seen as an expansion or explanation of the forgiveness he spoke of at the end of verse 13. Through the content of verse 14, he explained differing aspects of the forgiveness believers enjoy. In doing so, he assured his readers that all sins were forgiven through Christ and that there was no need for adherence to Mosaic customs or ceremonies.

"Cancelling The Record of Debt That Stood against Us"

The word rendered "cancelling" was used in ancient accounting. It described the act of a wax document being smeared of entries, or of a sheet of papyrus being scraped off records.⁷ It was also used of one wiping out the memory of an experience, of authorities cancelling a vote or annulling a law, or the cancelling of a charge of debt.⁸ Paul used the term metaphorically to describe the effect of Christ's work in our lives. At salvation, the debt of sin is radically and completely erased from the Christian's life. Peter used the same term in his preaching in the book of Acts, saying, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus" (Acts 3:19-20).

Paul further described the work of salvation by speaking of a "record of debt" that stood against believers before salvation. The original language of the text was used of a handwritten IOU from the first century.⁹ In the ancient world, a handwritten certificate of debt was signed by contractual parties when one went into debt by another. Paul's language was used of such a certificate.¹⁰

Paul's point in verse 14 was that the Mosaic Law served as a record of debt for sinners, since its laws and requirements exposed sinners of their sin. The apostle made mention of such realities elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 4:15, he said, "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." In Romans 5:20, he reasoned, "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

Despite the spiritually incriminating nature of the Law, Christ did a work to cancel all spiritual debts. At salvation, the Lord wiped away all of the obligations contained upon the figurative IOU that listed all of our sins. He metaphorically nailed that document to the cross by placing all of His wrath toward sin upon His Son. Those who are "in Christ" are completely forgiven, their spiritual debt has been fully paid.

⁷ Nielson, John B. *Beacon Bible Commentary: Volume IX*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1965), 403.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

⁹ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), [CD-Rom].

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

“With Its Legal Demands”

The word rendered “legal demands” is one with which Paul’s readers would have been familiar. In the ancient world, it spoke of legal edicts that were put on display in public places for all to see.¹¹ Paul used the word to speak of the requirements of Moses’ Law. In order to fully understand the meaning of Paul’s words, it is important for us to consider the nature of such law. The famous creeds and confessions of the Reformation commonly expressed the way God’s Law for the Jews can be thought of in three senses — Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial.¹² In the context of Colossians 2:14, it seems Paul had the Moral Law and the Ceremonial Law in mind.

The Moral Law, as expressed in the Ten Commandments, was relevant to Paul’s readers because such Law is what makes everyone moral transgressors in the sight of God. In his letter to the Romans, Paul told of the way this aspect of God’s Law convicted him of his need for salvation: “What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7).

Paul’s point in Colossians 2:14 was that the Law makes all guilty of sin. He expressed such truth elsewhere in his letters. In writing to the Galatians, he said, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’” (Galatians 3:10). The Law, with its “legal demands,” served a purpose in God’s program of redemption. It exposed humanity of sin and pointed to the need for a redeeming sacrifice.

Despite the Law’s condemning nature, Christ performed a work in which he cancelled the debt incurred by the Law. He figuratively nailed the guilt of sin to the cross, securing pardon and freedom. None at Colossae needed to feel under compulsion to keep the ritualistic requirements of the Torah. Christ had fully fulfilled such things through the cross of Calvary. While on Earth, Jesus himself said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

On top of the Moral Law, one also sees reference to the Civil Law of Moses in Paul’s words in Colossians 2:14. Such things were certainly relevant to Paul’s readership. Jewish legalists placed undue emphasis on ceremonial observances of the Torah. Things like circumcision, offerings for purifications, and ceremonial washings certainly had a purpose in the Lord’s program of redemption. Primarily, they made worshippers aware of their guilt before God and they revealed the need for a sacrifice for sin. Ultimately, the Ceremonial Law pointed worshippers to the coming sacrifice of Christ for sins. John Calvin once said, “...there are two things to be considered in the ancient ceremonies — that they were suited to the time, and that they led men forward

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

¹² *The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 82-83.

to the kingdom of Christ.”¹³ The Colossian heretics erred, however, through the way they made such ceremonies a prerequisite for godliness within the New Covenant.

Although the ceremonies of the Mosaic Law had a place and purpose, they became unnecessary once Christ had fulfilled his work on behalf of sins. The author of Hebrews spoke of such things in Hebrews 10:1-10. Likewise, Paul told the Ephesians that Christ’s work had the effect of “...abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (Ephesians 2:14). John Calvin is once again helpful at this point. Speaking of Old Testament rites and rituals, he said, “Whatever was done at that time shewed in itself nothing but obligation...This is full liberty — that Christ has by his blood not only blotted out our sins....”¹⁴

“This He Set Aside”

Paul continued his discussion on “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” by saying, “This he set aside.” The original language of the New Testament employed a perfect tense verb. It stood out amongst Paul’s repeated use of past tense verbs in the section (“made alive” and “forgiven” in verse 13; “canceling” and “nailing” in verse 14).¹⁵ The language emphasized the Lord’s act of permanently setting aside the sins and ceremonial customs mentioned in the first part of verse 14. One has said the language carried the idea of “he put out of sight.”¹⁶

The moral guilt and ceremonial requirements of the Moral Law were completely and permanently set aside with the work of Christ. There was no need for Paul’s readers to keep legalistic observances or pursue mystical experiences. Walking in Christ, in light of their salvation, was to be their means of spiritual strength. Interestingly, John the Baptist used the same word rendered “set aside” in his preaching. Speaking of the work of Christ, he said, “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

“Nailing It to The Cross”

In the ancient world, there was a certain custom associated with crucifixion with which Paul’s readers would have had great familiarity. When the Romans crucified a criminal, they often nailed a government document to the cross that listed the criminal’s

¹³ 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, 189.

¹⁴ Calvin, 190.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

¹⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

crimes.¹⁷ This placard was called the “titulus.”¹⁸ We see such a practice described in the account of Jesus’ crucifixion (John 19:17-22).

One should not interpret the apostle’s words in a strict literal fashion. He used the word “cross” as a metonym for Jesus’ suffering. Paul’s aim was to provide a picture of what took place at Calvary. The list of all of a sinner’s sins was completely destroyed by the work of Christ. The ceremonial requirements of the Law were also erased. In Christ, both sin and Old Testament ceremonies were made obsolete. God’s people only need to live by faith in the person and work of Christ. There is no need for shame over sin or burdens concerning ceremonial observances. The cross of Christ was and is the means of forgiveness for believers of all ages and dispensations. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul said, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

¹⁷ Johnston, 64.

¹⁸ Wright, 113.