

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Logical Shift of Focus

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.... (Colossians 1:21–23)

After the introduction, Paul moves directly to a powerful affirmation of Jesus' full deity, His role in the creation of the material universe, and His ultimate preeminence in that work. He integrates Jesus' redeeming work on behalf of His chosen people into the creative role, in both affirming Jesus' full deity and unquestioned accomplishment in our redemption no less than in the creation of the material universe. To this point Paul has focused on God and on Jesus' work as both the eternal God, and God Incarnate, God manifest in literal human flesh.

Paul draws a clear distinction in this first chapter of Colossians between the work of God in Christ that secures our eternal peace with God and our present fellowship with God. God in Christ met all the conditions He required for our eternal salvation. There are no remaining conditions, none whatever, remaining for us to perform in order to secure that happy state. It is securely ours because of the finished and successful work of our Surety, the Lord Jesus Christ. When Paul moves in our study lesson to our discipleship and to our present state of mind, he just as clearly imposes specific conditions on our enjoyment of the temporal blessings of the gospel. We may rationalize sin, alienate our minds from God, and live empty, fruitless lives in lonely distance away from fellowship with our God. Or we may remain faithful and steadfast in the gospel when faced with trials, and taste the sweet joys of heaven on earth long before we arrive in heaven itself. God has guaranteed our eternal state based on the finished work of Christ. Scripture exhorts our present enjoyment of the gospel, but Scripture makes this blessing contingent on our faithfulness to our Lord and to His teachings in the gospel.

Beginning with our present lesson, Paul shifts the locus, the logical "location," of his message, from God and God's creation and continuing maintenance of the universe that He created, and His redemption of the family that He chose to Himself, to the appropriate manner in which we,

as God's chosen and regenerated people, should act in God's family. While the finished work of Christ irreversibly altered our legal and familial standing with God, we often struggle within our minds regarding this truth and its abiding implications for our behaviors and attitudes. Paul will now address our mental perspective and lead us through that maze into a clear posture of godly outlook and conduct that presently gives the Lord Jesus Christ the preeminence due to Him by His beloved children.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works.... Often folks who advocate salvation by human works will cite this verse, emphasizing the "If" condition that begins in the twenty-third verse. They interpret all the work of God's saving grace through the paradigm of their own decisive behavior, errantly concluding that, regardless of how much God purposed our salvation and Jesus died to accomplish it, all is vain unless we perform the necessary conditions. Their ultimate conclusion is that salvation occurs by and through what we do, not by what Jesus did. If all that Jesus did was not sufficient, but our actions effect our ultimate salvation, what other conclusion can we reach than that this belief vests ultimate and true salvation in what we do, not in what Jesus did? If Jesus did as much for Paul as for Nero, and if, based on their lives, Paul was saved and Nero lost, Paul's salvation must rely on what Paul did to avoid Nero's end.

This errant view wholly ignores the shift of locus that Paul identifies in the twenty-first verse. We cannot understand Paul's teaching or come to the correct interpretation apart from his simple statement of locus, "...*in your mind*...." With this verse, we have moved from heaven's courtroom into the conscience, the mind, of the child of God. While there are no remaining human decisions or actions left to effect God's ultimate redemption, His translating us from the power of darkness into (not near, not potentially into, but factually into) the kingdom of His dear Son. However, when we

shift into the world of the mindset and behavior of God's children, conditionality is a central point that we must respect. All children of God whom God has translated into this glorious and eternal kingdom do not reach the mental state of peaceful reconciliation or of holy, unblameable, unprovable conduct "...in his sight." Even the Apostle Peter on at least one occasion (No doubt we could add more to this list) is described in Scripture as engaging in blamable conduct.

*But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because **he was to be blamed.*** (Galatians 2:11; emphasis added)

If we interpret our study verse as referring to one's eternal standing, or rather eternal *insecurity*, we are forced to conclude that, for the moment at least, Peter himself was in danger of losing his eternal salvation and standing with God. However, if we follow Paul's point, both passages affirm the same reality that we all experience quite regularly. Our attitude, mental outlook, and conduct do not always mirror our spiritual secure standing, our "translated" standing in the "...kingdom of his dear Son." Like Peter, we allow wicked works and flawed attitudes to alienate our minds from sweet fellowship with God and to lead us into error and grief, grief to ourselves for our sins and grief to our God and Savior for our failure to maintain active fellowship with Him.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works.... Isaiah made the same point some eight hundred years before Jesus came.

Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; Neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, And your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2)

For Isaiah as for Paul, the problem with God's people and their personal conduct did not have to do with a limitation on God's part, but a sinful failure on the part of His people.

As with Isaiah's words and Paul's, when God's children today suffer from coldness and distance in their relationship with God, a grievous breach of fellowship with Him, we cannot attribute the problem to God. Each of us must look in the mirror for the cause when we suffer from that distant coldness between God and us. The alienation, indeed the enmity or animosity, of which Paul writes, resides in our minds when we turn away from God and indulge in wicked works or conscious, intentional refusal to do what we know God in Scripture directs us to do.

...yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight.... If we consider our faltering state from God's perspective, we could quite easily justify full and permanent alienation. Despite our state of mind, God has reconciled us lovingly and graciously to Himself through our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than keeping score, He *loves* us, regards us as righteous, and continually convicts us to repent, turn to Him, and find healing for our breach. If in fact we do repent and return, He graciously receives us and blesses us beyond measure. He doesn't hold our past against us. Rather He views us today in faithfulness as if we had always lived according to that rule. The fact that the readers of this letter were actively engaged in serving God as members of the church in Colosse evidences their repentance. Paul refers to this alienation as a past state of mind. When describing their present state of mind, Paul introduces the point with "...yet now hath he...."

If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard.... Our present enjoyment of Jesus' finished work, our active fellowship in that blessing, is not an absolute guarantee. Nor is it a divinely orchestrated decree. It is specifically contingent on our present course of action. We may so live in the here and now as to sit at His banqueting table and eat a "feast of fat things," provided by His loving hands *if* we continue in the faith.... Since the locus of this lesson is "in your minds," the locus of the blessing is also "in your minds." Paul is not here holding out a condition or contingency on our eternal end. He is rather reminding the Colossians, and us, that our present fellowship with Jesus and our present rejoicing and spiritual maturity depend on our personal choices. Will we continue in the faith, grounded and settled in the gospel, even when adversity or false teaching surrounds us? When the world around us sings her siren song of enticement, "Yea, hath God said," will we stand fast in the hope of the gospel? In the face of a stark choice between the pleasures of sin, though we know they last only for a season (Hebrews 11:24-25), will we choose to suffer afflictions with the people of God?

Paul makes a powerful point. Our conduct in the gospel begins in our minds. Before any action appears in our conduct, we determine what those actions will be in our minds. Paul will continue this exhortation to the end of this chapter and on through much of the Colossian letter. He will occasionally reach back to the finished work of redemption to anchor his exhortations in that truth. But for most of the remainder of the letter, Paul will lay out the active, fruitful Christian life in

contrast with the empty alienation and mystical distance from God that served as the foundational teachings of the Gnostic error that presently threatened this little church. Interestingly the ancient Gnostics taught that no one, not even the lesser deities themselves, could know anything of significance about the supreme deity of Gnostic belief. The word Gnostic comes from a Greek word for knowledge, but, when we examine the belief system of ancient Gnosticism, it seems that a better descriptive term for them would be agnosticism, not Gnosticism.

By Paul's emphasis on our abiding in the faith and living in the joyful knowledge of our peaceful and intimate relationship with God, he was striking at a central error that the Gnostics taught. Either God is remote, mystical, and unknowable, or He is loving, knowable, and intimately involved in the lives of His people, creating a beautiful material world in which they may presently live. Beyond the present creation in which He shall ultimately have the preeminence, the God of Paul's gospel, the God of the Bible, our God, also personally became a man, lived as a man, a real, material man, for a season of years, but He also died at the hands of wicked men. In the end, He shall have the full preeminence for our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, and our joyful and intimate peace with God as in the natural world that He created. Paul could not have contrasted the warm and winsome truth of the gospel more fully against the cold, mystical darkness of Gnostic agnosticism, Gnostic not-knowing-ness. We may easily conclude that Paul repeatedly challenges the Colossians, "Look at these two religions, these quite different worldviews. Why would you remotely entertain any thought of embracing this cold, Gnostic error when you have such a God and such a gospel?"

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