

The Gospel and You

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[0 : 00] So we're going to read chapter 1, starting at verse 21. Actually, I'm going to start at verse 19, even though we've read this part before, but it just gives you a little bit of context of what we're walking into. But the main passage is 21 to 23, but we'll start at verse 19.

For in him, that is in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

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.

Amen. This is God's word. Maybe sometimes in life you've read a book or you've watched a story, and you read that book and it has nothing to do with you, and yet you look at it and you say, that's my story.

[1 : 19] That happens to us all the time, right? And that's what makes a good story. And Paul, he's kind of doing something like that. For the past few verses before what we just read, he's been talking about kind of the cosmic glory of Jesus.

He's the one who reconciles all things to himself. And it's a lot of theology. And we talked about that two weeks ago. And then here in this passage, in verse 21, Jesus, not Jesus, Paul, Paul looks at the people and he says, and you.

And what he's doing is he's saying all this glory I've been talking about, all these cosmic wonders about what Jesus has done, he said it also has to do with you. This is your story. And there's a really simple idea in this passage about what Paul's doing, and it's this.

Paul is, he's teaching us how, he's challenging us, how to see in the gospel story the story of our lives. Can you see in the gospel the story of your own life?

And then secondly, he's also challenging the Colossians and you and me to continually commit to anchoring ourselves directly over that hope so that we never move from it, even if we drift sometimes.

[2 : 27] Okay. So those are the two ideas that we're talking about this morning. And the first thing that Paul wants people to see is the gospel is your story. When you read the gospel, it's not just talking about God's love for the world and sinners out there.

He's talking about you and me, if you're a Christian. And he's here at the beginning of a letter. In verse 21, he starts talking about our past.

And he says, there's two things you got to know about your past. The first is that you were alienated. And the second thing about your past is that you are now reconciled. Okay. Now that word alienation is, it may sound theological.

It is theological, but it's also personal. He's talking to these people in language that they know because alienation is something that you and I encounter all the time in our lives.

It's when, you know, you know that feeling. Someone you once loved becomes a stranger or an enemy to you. It can happen for a day. Maybe you get in a little fight with your spouse.

[3 : 26] And for a few hours, they're the enemy. And you're estranged from each other. But it can also last a lifetime. You can have someone that you loved so much, and now they have nothing to do with you, and you have nothing to do with them.

Whether it's a friend or a parent or a child or a spouse. You know, one of the most famous lines in all of literature is, it's a Latin sentence, but a lot of you know it from high school English.

You know that phrase, etubrute? Etubrute from Julius Caesar. And it's that moment when Julius Caesar, there's a conspiracy to kill Julius Caesar.

And at the very end of the play, or halfway through, I think, all the conspirators come together and they assassinate Caesar. But the last person who draws the sword to kill Caesar is Brutus.

And if you know the story, it's so painful because Brutus is like a son to Caesar. And he's the last one to look him in the eyes and stab him. And so Caesar's famous last words, etubrute, he looks at him.

[4 : 27] What he means in English, he says, you too, Brutus. And it makes for great theater. But it makes for great theater because we all can imagine that pain of having someone that you look at and you say, you're my guy, you're my best friend, or you're like a son to me.

And then have that person stab you in the face. It hurts. It hurts. And we all know that on some level, in some relationship that we have, for some of us, it's the deepest pain that we carry with us wherever we go in life.

That one relationship that fell apart and that we can't put back together. And I think it's also significant to us because it's also one of the main themes of Scripture.

From the Garden of Eden, you know, Adam and Eve, that story starts great, right? They have a home. They're living in a place where all their needs are provided for. They've got a father who loves them, who walks with them in the cool of the day, it said in Genesis.

And what happens? They turn away from God and then they end up kicked out of the garden. They're alienated from God. They're estranged from someone who cared about them and who loved them.

[5 : 33] And the whole story of the Bible is about that alienation, which all of us know on some level. And it's about how God, that relationship having been broken, God keeps calling his people back to himself and saying, though you've been alienated, come back to me.

But to understand that, you have to understand the alienation. You have to understand there's a real rupture in that relationship between God and man. And each one of us is a part of that story. That's all of our stories. And the pain of the Genesis alienation, the alienation that the Bible talks about, is that it's self-induced.

It's not like God turned his back on us and we had nothing to do with it. The whole story is we looked at God and we said no. We looked at God and we said, we're not going to obey you.

And some of you know what it's like in a relationship where the relationship fractures and it was your fault. It was my fault. We were the perpetrators and now we can't fix what's been torn apart.

And Jesus, when he talked about that kind of alienation, probably the best picture that he gave us in all of scripture is the prodigal son. The prodigal son who had a dad who loved him.

[6 : 48] And he looked at his dad and he said, dad, I want to leave the house. I want to leave. I want to take my inheritance now. And he leaves his family. He's alienated from his family and he goes and spends all his dad's wealth, the inheritance that belonged to him.

The prodigal son was alienated from the father. And, you know, what makes that story powerful, what makes it resonate with all of us, is that anybody who hears the first part of that story looks at the prodigal son and watches him fall apart.

You know, he ends up in a feeding trough with the pigs and runs out of all of his money. And he realized that he's miserable. Any person who reads that story and they read that far, they say to themselves, good riddance.

You know, he was so rude to his father. He alienated himself from his own dad. Good riddance. Let him feed with the pigs. But what does Jesus do? Jesus says this this boy went back to his dad.

And what did his dad do? Did his dad say, good riddance, I've already given you the money. No, he his dad runs to meet him on the road, throws his arms around him, throws him a party, gives him the finest robe that he has.

[7 : 59] And what is he doing? What's the father doing there? He's reconciling with his son. You know, Paul says you were alienated and you are now reconciled.

And those two words, they're they are. They're mutually interpretive, if I could say that right. That to be reconciled is to be no longer alienated and to be alienated means you're not reconciled.

Right. So one one explains the other. And how does how does Jesus say that this happens? He says you have been reconciled. He has reconciled you to himself in his body of flesh that he is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.

Now, the it says that the pronouns get confusing there. It says he. And when it says he there, if you read back, that's talking about God. He God has now reconciled in his Christ's body of flesh by his death in order to present you blameless.

So what is he saying? He's saying you were alienated, but God, the father came and he threw his son. He reconciled you to himself. He he restored that relationship.

[9 : 09] Think about have you ever thought about the cross like this? This is what Paul is getting at here. He's saying, you know, at the cross, what happened to Jesus? Jesus was alienated from the father.

That's why he looks up at God and he says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And it's you know, it gets confusing because it's not like the father has stopped loving Jesus.

He always loves Jesus. But in that moment when Jesus is he's bearing the weight of the world's sins on him. He you could say he has no felt experience of God's love.

He looks up and because he's experiencing the penalty of sin, he can't feel the father's love in that moment. I think that's the best way to explain what's going on there. But what is what's what's going on?

Because Jesus bore our sin, he became alienated. So for what? So that we could be reconciled to God. That's the gospel in a nutshell. Right. And Paul is saying that's that's not just the theology.

[10 : 08] That's you. That's your life. You were alienated and God came and through Jesus, he he reconciled you to himself. Each one of you that believe in Jesus Christ. OK, the two things that means for us.

And they hang together. Number one, grow. Well, I'll say about the same time. Growing in grace to grow in grace, grow in the Christian life. It means both growing in an awareness of our sins, the gravity of our sins, how bad it is, and growing in an awareness of grace at the same time.

You know, I think one temptation that a person might have, certainly I have, when you've been in church for all of your life is you begin to see yourself as as kind of God's helper.

And the people outside are the people who are dealing with sin. And what the Bible says is all of us, all of us have sin that has to be dealt with equally.

This was illustrated well for me from a preacher that I heard this week. He's a guy about my age, but he's been going through really bad cancer. And the part of the story that's relevant is that ever since he was about 22 years old, he has been the leader of a large church.

[11 : 21] So for several years now, he's been the leader of a large church. And what he said that he was learning through his cancer experience that had to do with his spirituality is, you know, for most of his adult life, when he came to church, he was always the one that was the strong one, that was helping other people, that was showing other people how to find Jesus, that was showing other people that they could find grace.

And what he found was, as he was going through this season of cancer, the only way that he could relate to his church was through weakness. He wasn't strong enough to get in the pulpit and preach. All he could do was have other people come and serve him.

He was he was he was weak and he knew it. But what it taught him was, well, he put it like this. He said, it's easy to believe that God's grace is for the whole world.

It's a whole lot harder to believe sometimes that God's grace is for you or for me, because it's not what we want to do. Sometimes we want to say, you know, we want to go to the world and say, God can forgive you.

And we forget that we need to be forgiven, too, and that God is still working grace in us as well. OK, so he talks about the past here, but then he talks about the future. And I'll just touch this momentarily.

[12 : 33] But what does he say there in verse 22? He says he's reconciled you to his body of flesh by his death in order. So in the future, he's going to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

I would talk about this in the Sunday school class this morning when we talked about what is the gospel. But I think a lot of times we think about the gospel in terms merely of forgiveness. So you come to Jesus so that you can have your sins forgiven.

And that is that is 100 percent true. You cannot have the gospel without forgiveness of sins. But but to understand the whole gospel, you can't stop there, because every time whenever the Bible talks about the gospel, there's always two parts to it.

There's the forgiveness of sins, but there's also the being made new when the Bible talks about being made in the image of his son. And the point is, you and I don't need to just be forgiven.

We need to be fixed that our hearts have have sin in the deepest part of it. And we have to be washed clean. We've got to be purified. And that's a process that takes our whole life.

[13 : 42] But you see the hope that Paul's giving the people. He's saying if you if you're in Christ, if you've been reconciled to Christ, then here's the hope you have to look forward to that one day you will stand before God in heaven and he will look at you and he will say you are blameless.

You are spotless. You are perfectly righteous. And and it'll all be because of his grace. You'll turn around and you'll say not because of me, but all because of what Jesus Christ has done.

And, you know, I was at this retreat last week learning about church revitalizations and I've got all kinds of new tools I can pull out of my tool belt now. But I remember one preacher said this.

He said he was talking about his own life. He said, you know, my father only told me that he loved me seven times. And he said, I know that because he only told me he loved me seven times.

And I remember every single one of them. And all of us have different relationships with our parents and with our, you know, with the people who raised us. And some of them are very complicated. But imagine what it will be like when the God of the heavens and the earth looks at you and says there's nothing wrong with you.

[14 : 53] I have made you perfect. And and he says, I could not make you better because I was it's not the idea that God God one day is going to make you as perfect as he can make you.

That's a beautiful idea. And and that's the hope that we have one day that that Tenda Thompson right now is standing before the father and she is perfect. She has there's not a sinful thought in her mind.

She is she is as perfect as God can make her. That's beautiful. That's the hope that Paul holds out if you have been reconciled to Christ. But now the second part.

So Paul wants us to see in the gospel our story. That's me. I was alienated from God. That's how bad my sin was. I've been reconciled to God and God is working in me until he'll present me perfect himself.

But then the second part, and this is equally important. Paul saying you've got to anchor yourself to that truth. Because it's so easy to get swept away into other things. And this is this is a theme that Paul's going to pick up over and over again in this letter that we'll see in the next few weeks.

[16 : 02] But the danger that Paul's talking about here is drift. Right. It's drift where you look up one day and you realize that you're much further away from whatever you were trying to hang on to at the beginning.

Because maybe you just stopped paying attention and you didn't realize it. And I saw this a couple months ago when we were at the beach with our kids. You would notice that our four-year-old and our eight-year-old, they would be playing out in the water in front of you.

And about 15 minutes later when you would look up, inevitably they were about 10 or 20 yards down the beach. And it wasn't because they were trying to get away from us. It's because they were playing and they had kind of lost.

They had forgotten to look up and see me and mom. And so inevitably they drifted further and further away. And what Paul's saying here is that that happens in the Christian life.

If you're not keeping your eye on Jesus, if you're not keeping your eye on the gospel, you'll begin to drift. And, of course, the danger is, you know, if you drift a little bit, maybe you can come back. But you can drift so far that you actually can't get back to where you started.

[17 : 08] That's the danger of a riptide, right? You get into a place where you're not consciously running away, but you just find yourself totally taken out into the ocean. And there's all kinds of ways that the Bible can talk about drift.

You know, maybe drift happens when you let a secret sin in your life. Or you know there's a sin that you're practicing, and it feels like a small thing. But you do it over and over again.

You let it fester. And over time, it just consumes you. It overtakes you. It changes you in ways that you did not intend to be changed. Or think about COVID.

Think about almost every pastor that I talk to, people at all different churches, they talk about how COVID was so hard for their churches because people just drifted away. You know, people, they didn't come to church for a year, and they got comfortable with it.

And they stopped coming to church altogether. They probably didn't intend that to happen when they stopped going to church, but they drifted, right? But that's not the kind of drift Paul's talking about in this passage.

[18 : 07] Paul in this passage is talking about what you might call gospel drift, okay? When you are actually no less religious than you were before, you're coming to church every Sunday, you're doing all the right things, but you've drifted from what the gospel is all about.

And, you know, there's two dangers as a Christian that we all face. One is to say my sin is not as bad as the Bible says it is.

But another is to say my sin really is bad, but I can fix it. And what you get the sense of in the book of Colossians is that what the people in Colossians were struggling with is these people coming into the church, or they were already in the church, and they had all these new rules or new theology and new regulations.

And they were saying, Jesus is great, but if you do this as well, then you'll be right with God. That's what Paul is saying. He's saying, no, remember the message that I delivered to you.

Remember the gospel that I delivered to you. If you hold fast in that, then you'll be safe. If you can realize that Jesus is all that you need, then you'll be safe. The Colossians were getting sidetracked, and all of us have to look at ourselves and say, where's my danger?

[19 : 21] Where is my danger of getting sidetracked in the gospel? And it can be as simple as saying, you know, I've talked about this before, the one-year reading plan, where you start with your one-year reading plan because you want to get serious about the word of God.

So I'm going to read my Bible every day. But before you know it, if you're not careful, you begin to get proud of the fact that you do your one-year reading Bible plan. And suddenly faith becomes about how, look what I've done.

Jesus, do you see how faithful I am to you? And not realizing that anything that we do that's good in this life is a response to what Jesus has already done for us.

It's not the thing that justifies us, okay? Now, there's one word here that trips up people a lot, and it's that word if. If, you know, you have been reconciled.

You will be presented to God blameless if, what does he say in verse 23? If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

[20 : 23] And it's confusing, but it sounds, because it sounds like Paul is saying you've been reconciled. God has reconciled you to himself if you stay stable and steadfast.

And it kind of sounds like you could lose your reconciliation, which doesn't really make sense because the whole point that Paul is saying here is that it's God who's reconciled you to himself. It's not that you fixed the relationship.

He's fixed it. So how can you lose that? And I think maybe the easiest way to think about it is if you flip the sentence around. And I'll read it this way. The meaning is the same, but I think it makes it more clear.

So if you put if at the beginning of the sentence, if you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Then 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.

What I'm trying to say is what Paul would believe is if you do continue stable and steadfast, what that must mean is that you have been reconciled.

[21 : 32] Because only the person who has been reconciled by God is the person who can continue stable and steadfast in the faith. And just another another passage that kind of proves this is in first John two, where Paul's talking about false teachers that were in the church who left the church.

And one of the points that Paul makes is if they were if they were really Christians to begin with, they would have stayed with us. They would have stayed stable and steadfast. And he says this. He says they these false teachers, they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.

For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But they're going out shows that none of them belonged to us. Now, what Paul in our passage is trying to encourage these people and he's saying, listen, I believe that you are all sincere Christians.

I believe that you've been reconciled to the gospel. And now, you know, hear the if as a real command. You you've got to remain stable and steadfast. But you'll look back and you'll say, if I have remained stable and steadfast, it's only because God has been working in me.

And ironically, the best way to hold on to God is to realize that he's holding on to you. Because that's where you get your strength from is realizing that my faith is not of my own doing.

[22 : 52] And anything that I do that is of any worth in this life is not of my own doing. It's because Jesus Christ has been working in me through his Holy Spirit. That that is the gospel, realizing that you're held and anchoring yourself to that.

OK, now, in the next few weeks, we're going to get way more practical about this because Paul, he wants this gospel to filter down into everyday life and the way that we love each other. But I want to close with this thought from the Puritans.

Now, you may not know much about the Puritans. Sometimes they get a bad reputation. But one thing they were good at was diagnosing the heart and talking about what it's like to walk the Christian life.

And there's a famous book that was put together called The Valley of Vision, which is just a series of Puritan prayers that you can. I'd recommend it to you can buy it. And it offers some great prayers that were written 300 years ago, but they still feel fresh.

And I want to close by reading the second half of one of those prayers. This is a prayer that's called Continual Repentance, written probably 400 years ago. But it's about it's my short answer this morning to how can you stay stable in the faith.

[24 : 04] And one of the ways is continually remembering the gospel and and living a life of repentance, the kind of repentance that says without Jesus, I'm nothing. OK, so this this prayer is called Continual Repentance.

It begins by saying God of grace. And this is about halfway through God of grace. I am always going into the far country. This is prodigal son language here.

I'm always going into the far country and always returning home as a prodigal, always saying, Father, forgive me. And thou art always bringing forth the best robe.

Every morning, let me wear it. Every evening, let me return in it. Let me be married in it. Let me be wound in death in it.

Let me stand before the great white throne in it and enter heaven in it shining as the sun. Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness and the exceeding wonder of grace.

[25 : 15] Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the exceeding wonder of grace this morning. As we come to the table, help us to see in Jesus all we have and all we need.

Amen.