

Only Faith Hope And Love Will Not Pass Away

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- [0 : 0 0] I develop a certain phobia for that piece of furniture up there sometimes, but I don't want to go up there this morning. And so if you'll bear with me, I'll stay here.
- And I want you to look at Colossians chapter 1 and verse 21 following, the passage which was read as the first lesson this morning. Colossians chapter 1, verse 21.
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- And all of us in different ways come from very different places, and we're just very different people, different intellectual capacities, different successes and different patterns of failure in all our lives.
- And here we all are. And God addresses us through St. Paul, and he says, you, all of you.
- [1 : 2 2] Not you individually, but all of you. Sometimes people are rightly or wrongly led to tell me, you spoke directly to me this morning.
- And I'm grateful, but I don't. But what God is doing is speaking to every one of us. And not only is he speaking to every one of us, but it is his purpose to speak to everyone, through everyone.
- We need to hear from one another. Now look what it says. You, verse 21. And that you is all of you. You once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.
- That's the condition in which God found us, or may indeed find us, estranged from him, alienated.
- Now, this alienation means that there used to be a relationship, but there isn't one now. And the results of that alienation, you will see, are enmity of mind, or hostility in our minds.
- [2 : 3 8] And the hostility in our minds expresses itself by our doing evil deeds. Because if you have an enemy, you don't mind hurting them. So the alienation results in hostility of mind, and the hostility of mind results in doing evil deeds.
- And you don't have to scratch people very deeply when you meet them in all sorts of casual circumstances to find the reality of that enmity, that hostility towards God.
- I, in my business, run into it all the time. A deep hostility towards God. A relationship that is broken down so badly that people don't have anything to do with each other.
- That is, across this barrier between God and man. There is real anger, real hurt, real wrong, a real desire, really, to do evil things in order to show God our independence of him.
- That's the position we're in. Basic, estrangement, enmity of mind, and the evil deeds which result from it. Am I telling you something you never knew?
- [3 : 5 6] Well, I don't mean to be. I'm only telling you something that I hope we all know, but I don't know that we understand the implications of it.
- So the first word I want you to get hold of is alienated. The second word I want you to find is reconciled. And this is what God has done for us in Christ.

Look how it's written. You who are astrayed, verse 22, he has now reconciled in his body. I am concerned about this.

Do you know that there is a whole lot of what you have to call one-issue politics around? Like, if you haven't seen any stop signs in this area, you will see that they now serve the purpose of saying stop the cruise missile.

And the cruise missile, as far as the parliament is concerned, has not been stopped. And people are lining up to stop the cruise missile. And people are lining up to stop abortion.

[5 : 11] And people are lining up to stop killing whales. And people are lining up to stop killing baby seals. And people are lining up to protect the gun lobbyists.

And people are lining up to protect the tobacco lobbyists. And what we're being confronted with as people is all sorts of one-issue things that a whole group of people can get behind and give tremendous trust to them.

And I confess to you, and this isn't my way of protesting anything, I confess I don't know what to do with single issues. Because all sorts of people can come from all sorts of backgrounds and all get behind a single issue for all sorts of different reasons.

But I, and I, if you can help me with this, I'd be grateful. I'm in my office all week. Come and tell me what the answer is. The difficulty that I have with single issues is I want to know why.

Why do you want to stop the cruise missile? Now I can think that there's lots of good reasons why you might want to do it. But is it because you believe that there is the possibility of a world in which men will not organize armies to fight against men?

[6 : 39] Why do you want to do it? What's the basic issue that these single issues bring to life?

Because they must bring certain things to life. Is it our conception that all men from all colors and all creeds and all economic systems can all dwell together in love and charity with one another?

How are they going to do that? I don't mean to be disdainful, but if you happen to put a pail of pig slop in a trough and you have eight pigs and you get in there and argue with them about who should come first, to the trough, you're going to get trampled into the mud.

Now, that may be too low a view of human nature, but the fact of it is that unless men have some underlying and basic agreement about what the meaning of human life is and what the meaning of human history is, and if I may use the words, what the purpose of God is among men, then what are we going to do when we win victories in all the areas of the single issues which we take to be of paramount importance?

Now, the World Council of Churches, I'm sure, is going to be ruined by some people if they get the chance by making them line up on single issues.

[8 : 10] And every possible lobby group will get the World Council of Churches to endorse their issue, whatever it is. And these may be very legitimate issues.

I'm not arguing that point. They may be entirely legitimate issues. But the basic function of the Church of Jesus Christ will be overlooked on every front page unless something miraculous happens to show what the fundamental issue is to get a bishop and archie.

There's a little story. I just thought about it. There's a story about the archbishop that you've probably all heard of.

But it illustrates how you can confuse. The archbishop of Canterbury arrived in New York City, and one of the reporters came up and said to him, Archbishop, you're going to the nightclub.

And the archbishop said, do they have nightclubs here? And so the newspaper headline comes out, Archbishop's first question, do they have nightclubs here?

[9 : 26] Well, you may see quite a lot of that when this week gets going. And it's because of the problem of saying what the Church is all about.

And what the Church of Jesus Christ is all about is here, I think, in Colossians, when he's writing and says, you who were once estranged have been reconciled by Christ.

And he wants, it goes on to say, and I want you to look at the very words in which it says it, he wants you to be reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

Now this is a picture really of unilateral disarmament. It's unilateral in the sense that Christ comes into the world and approaches the very throne of the power of evil unarmed.

He doesn't bring anything with him. He comes in this body of flesh and he approaches the throne of principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world and they do what they inevitably must do.

[10 : 51] They destroy him. Now, that I think is recognized by most people who are not in favor of unilateral disarmament.

That the danger is that the powers of death in the hands of men will be used. So how can you affect a reconciliation if the cost of it is that you're going to be wiped out anyway?

And you see, that I think is where the mystery of the gospel may begin to break through to us. That's just exactly what did Christ do?

Well, he faced the enemy unarmed and the enemy put him to death. But God in his glory raised him from the dead and he went on with the same mission.

Now, not subject to a life which could be destroyed but in the power of the resurrection to effect the reconciliation between God and man which has got to be the basis of the reconciliation between men and men.

[12 : 04] No matter what their political views may be no matter what their present ideologies may be no matter what their hopes and ambitions may be that there has got to be a fundamental ground of reconciliation between men the world over.

And that's why Paul says you, all of you were alienated and you hath he reconciled in his body by his death on the cross that God has effected unilaterally without our consent participation or necessary agreement he has effected a reconciliation.

And this is what we come to believe as a community of Christians among the community of men we are to believe believe that God has in Christ by his death on the cross effected a reconciliation by which all men can find that oneness and unity for which we deeply long in our hearts but which we dare not hope for because we haven't the means of bringing it about.

Christ has reconciled us by his body in his death and do you see what the purpose of him reconciling us is?

Watch this because you're going to get passed by it. He's done it it says in order to present you all of you again holy and blameless and irreproachable.

[13 : 55] How many of you want to be holy blameless and irreproachable? Well I know it's not one of my great ambitions I like me pretty much the way I am just another pig at the trough but I think yeah it's some people call it clean pure and without blame holy blameless and irreproachable that's not the burning desire of my heart to be that but you see this is the point this may not be the burning desire of your heart or mine in our human pride but it is the purpose of God and part of what happens is that God has his purpose in our lives to make us holy pure and blameless to present us to himself now what are the conditions the conditions are as it describes it there provided that you continue in the faith stable and steadfast in other words it's required of us to hang in this is the faith that we have as Christians that our profound reconciliation the grounds of a profound reconciliation have been established in Christ and we're to hold on to it to that reality now whether your cause is amnesty international or whales or nuclear disarmament or cruise missiles whatever that may be that God may lead you into hold on to the underlying reality of the reconciliation that God has affected between himself and all of us through

Jesus Christ hold on to that and that's our primary responsibility no matter what cause we may get caught up in is to hold on to the reality of that reconciliation to continue steadfastly in that faith never to be dislodged to maintain a firm position these are different translations you see we've got to do it together that's why we need each other within the fellowship of the church because we're not going to hold on by ourselves we're not going to hold on unless we have the support and encouragement of others otherwise we're just like a balloon in a circus sideshow sitting there and somebody is there with a dart you know it's too easy we can be finished off in no time but together we've got to hold on and to maintain this faith in the reconciliation which God has affected in Christ and then

Paul goes on to talk about how this is to be achieved how we are to hold on to it and how we are to maintain it and what he says to us is this that it involves suffering it involves his suffering I rejoice in my suffering for your sake in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of his body that is the church of which I became a minister notice he said it twice the gospel of which I Paul became a minister and the church of which I became a minister according to God according to the divine office which was given to me so that what the church is to do is to serve the purposes of the message of the gospel and to serve the community of the church that's what ministry is that's what it's important for us to do as Paul did to share in the sufferings of Christ in this world and to share in ministering to one another so we might hold on to the reconciliation that God has effected and know that that's where man has to come to finally we all have to come to and we all very much need each other in order to do it you need one another we need one another that's why

I want you all to belong to a Bible study group that's why I want you all to learn to pray together that's why I want you all to get together and meet and discuss and debate and argue and do anything you want but let's hold on to the reality of what God has done for us in Christ we need one another you can come if all you've got to say from my point of view there's a lot of questions I'd like to ask awesome nobody is going to be destroyed by them and on the other hand you might come and say it has been my experience that what God has done in Christ has been the basis of a reconciliation on which the whole of my life is built tell somebody about that well that's what the ministry involves and that's what Paul was as a minister or a servant of the gospel and a servant of the word of God so that there is a message of reconciliation which is to be got out to everybody and then it says there's a mystery to be understood and look at it in verse 27 to them

God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery Paul recognizes that there is a mystery there is a mystery at the basis of the life of the church why does it exist why does it carry on in a world where it suffers from massive indifference in a world where it suffers from people who don't want to participate from people who have lost sight of the objective in a world where all sorts of people are locked into issues which ultimately are not final issues in that kind of a world there is a mystery to the reality of the gospel what is it that God is doing what is God doing in bringing us together on this Sunday morning to worship him what is God doing in our tenuous relationships with one another if poverty hit us really hard we'd appreciate one another if illness overcame you we could support you or we could support one another in that situation but as long as we can get by we tend to live in a deluded world where we don't think we need one another and we don't understand the mystery of the gospel now I'm not going to tell you what the mystery is it's seven words and it's in the bible and you can look it up for yourself but having looked it up you might still not understand it it might still be a riddle and again that's what you need to figure out and that's why we need one another to take that riddle to one another and say what does this mean what does this mean to you what does it mean to us to work out this riddle in the circumstances of our of our lives well having worked out the riddle you know

[21 : 46] I I I need a lot of unbelief in the course of a week and one of the one of the great comforts of going to lectures at regents this past couple of weeks is to watch other people try and explain the mystery and to see words fail them when they get too close to see learned professors try and put it in words so anybody can reach out and grab it and just at the point at which they want to to do that they can't quite find the words to put their hands or to help you put your hands around the mystery of what God is doing in Christ it remains in some peculiar way a mystery a mystery in the sense that we can't comprehend it one of the lovely pictures I got this week of our whole discussion of God and I think it was from Dr.

Thistleton who described what you do is you try and take the oceans in your two hands when you try and describe the mystery of the purpose of God you're trying to take the ocean in your two hands but God by his Holy Spirit gives us an awareness of what this mystery is of what it is that he's doing in our lives the mystery and it's because of that mystery that we continue on we hang in we contend for the faith and bear witness to that reality among the nations because God has effected this reconciliation well that's what Paul says belongs to all of us I'm confused now let's just stop for a minute and pray and then I want to carry on can you just sit where you are and bow your head with me for a moment now

Father there is no way but by your Holy Spirit that we can see how you are at work in our lives and we desperately need to see you need to see what it is you are calling us as a congregation in this place at this time in history what it is you are calling us to do how we might fully know the mystery hidden for ages and generations that you have chosen to make manifest to your sins God grant that we as a congregation may come to grips with us in Christ's name

I insist that I feel that we need to be faced with that reality and to recognize that in the formality of our church we must encounter the reality of that mystery which has been hidden and which has now been manifested then look what happens in the last verse verse 28 and 29 Paul describes what his work is him we proclaim warning every man teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man mature in Christ that's what he has for us he has a maturity remember that when it talks about Christ wanting to present us pure and holy and blameless now it comes back to Paul's ministry is to present men warned taught and instructed in the faith he wants to present them in that way and you know how I think it works out the thing that the reality that I think you and I and we together have to grasp and live and that is the reality when you come to church as I come to church you see

I come full of pride and arrogance and all sorts of things which are just part of my sinful nature and your sinful nature may be more modest but it's still sinful and we come with all that pretension about who we are and how important we are and that I think confuses the picture because it's the work Paul says which he's involved in that every man Christ may be proclaimed to every man and that he may be taught in all wisdom and that every man may be presented mature in Christ if you look back at the mystery the riddle that I wanted you to look at you'll see that he talks about being in Christ too but what I think Paul is teaching is this that though we by nature say

[27 : 20] I hope you know who I am and then if they don't you tell them and you tell them about what you've done you may have been you may be one of the great beauties of the 20th century you may be a great athlete you may be a great businessman you may be a very important person you may have made great discoveries and you have to tell people who you are in order that they will respect you on the other hand you may be one of those people who's a disaster and you identify yourself in terms of your personal disaster which is bigger than other people's disaster well either of them are acceptable as being ways in which we can present ourselves this is who I am I have survived this disaster or I have attained this goal this is who I am and then we spend the rest of our life as the years go on trying to protect what we once were do you know who I once was do you know who I am do you know where

I went do you know what I did I hope you do and all that becomes the way we live but when Paul says I want to present every man mature in Christ he means I want to present every man not in terms of what he is or in what he has been but what he will be to live now in terms of what you're going to be then instead of living now in terms of what you used to be then to live now with the full impact of what God has done for you in Christ as the central reality about who you are and what you're going to be and what we're going to be so that as Christians we don't come together to compare our accomplishments we come together to rejoice in what we're going to be as God fulfills in us the purpose that he has begun in us now that's what we're to be that's what we're to be right now not the sum total of what we have been which we're trying to hold on to but we're to be right now the sum total of what we're going to be mature in

Christ every man mature in Christ that's who you are whatever you are now it'll fade I took communion to an old people's home the other day and in terms of maintaining our human glory it's pretty hard to do at that stage when physical life has left you and when sanity may even have left you you can't there's not much you can do about rejoicing what you have been there there's tremendous amounts to rejoice in about what you're going to be that's terribly important and that's who you are right now not what you have been but who you're going to be that's why Paul says that I work on I press on with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me in order to present you mature in Christ that's what he wants to do for you he wants us to be now and to hold on to what we are now as the foretaste of what we're going to be and not the aftertaste of what we have been because what we're going to be is what

God is going to bring us to that's the heart of the midst of our being in Christ that's the heart of what God is going to do for us well there's Colossians chapter 1 verses 21 to the end and God grants it by his Holy Spirit you'll be able to take hold for yourself of some of the reality of the purpose of God it began with you all of you but it ends with you each of you and for the each of you it's this him we proclaim warning each of you and teaching each of you in all wisdom that we may present each of you mature in Christ and this is the word for which Paul toils striving with all the energy that God inspired within him and came everyone whose heart stirred him up and everyone whose spirit made willing and they brought the

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