

“Fullness in Christ”
Colossians 1:21-23
September 25, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

One of the clear themes of Colossians is the fullness of our salvation in Christ. As we mentioned last week, the Colossian heresy featured a “second blessing” teaching that posed a threat to the idea that we have all we will ever need in Christ. A “second blessing” is the effort to live the Christian life by something other than dependence on Christ. It seeks to find in something else the “secret” to the successful Christian life. The Colossian second blessing featured a fascination with angels and visions. Given some of the false teachings present at this time, it was likely that their second blessing was a vision of angels that came as a result of following certain ascetic practices.

Though the exact content of the second blessing changes over time, this general false teaching has been a constant threat to Christianity. Second blessings today include things like a baptism of the Holy Spirit after one’s initial conversion, the proof of which is indicated by speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is not a second blessing that tempts many Presbyterians. But one that is closer to home for most of us is the idea that I can achieve some higher level of holiness by knowledge of theology.

The problem with all of these second blessing teachings is that their inevitable result is to diminish the first blessing of salvation in Christ. So Paul counters the second blessing theology by reminding the Colossians of their first blessing. The fullness of our salvation in Christ is seen here in three ways.

I. Our Total Depravity – v. 21

When theologians speak of total depravity, they don’t mean that all humans are as bad as they could possibly be. God is gracious even to those who don’t know him, and one form his grace to unbelievers takes is to give them certain qualities of virtue that bring good to them and to others. Those apart from Christ can have remarkable levels of honesty, courage, love for others and many other noble virtues. Total depravity means not that everyone is totally sinful, but that sin has affected the total person.

Notice how this is taught in verse 21. **“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...”** We know that Paul doesn’t have specific Colossians in mind because he didn’t know this church. He had never visited this city. He is describing the general condition of mankind in our natural, fallen condition. He is not describing the worst among us, but the

best. Total depravity affects our status (“alienated”), our mental attitude (“hostile in mind”) and our actions (“doing evil deeds”). The status of fallen humanity is that of being alienated, of not belonging. Just as Adam and Eve were driven from their home with God in the Garden of Eden and prevented from returning, so we are cut off from the paradise of living with God. Imagine someone being dropped into the middle of Manhattan who speaks only one language, one that is unknown by anyone else in the city. He is dressed differently than everyone else, knows no one and has no money and no way of getting any. That is our situation of alienation, of not belonging. We are totally cut off from the life of heaven.

Our attitude toward God is marked by hostility. Not long ago, I was riding my bicycle with a group of other cyclists when a man who was filling his pickup truck with gas on the other side of the road saw us and yelled, “Get off the road.” We had done nothing to provoke such an outburst. It came simply from his hostility toward cyclists. That describes mankind’s natural attitude toward God. When you are hostile to someone, you will interpret their actions as those of an enemy. I have seen this attitude at work in marriages. When the marriage is a conflicted one that is marked by hostility, words and actions often get misinterpreted. Even a kindness might get interpreted as something manipulative or antagonistic in some way. When your mind is hostile toward God, the warnings of Scripture, such as the warning of judgment to come, get misinterpreted as hate speech, when the truth is God issues such warnings as an act of love. God’s law doesn’t escape this misinterpretation stemming from a hostile attitude. It is viewed not as God’s loving revelation of the path that leads to human flourishing, but as unnecessary, joy-killing limits to our freedom.

Attitudes lead to actions, and the hostile mind leads to “evil deeds.” If we don’t believe that God has our best interests at heart in what he commands, then we just do whatever seems right to us. That kind of self-centeredness lies at the heart of evil.

In his biography of the Great Awakening British preacher, George Whitfield, Arnold Dallimore tells of something told Lady Huntingdon by one of her friends. Lady Huntingdon was a member of the British nobility and a well-known proponent of the revival. Whitfield would sometimes stay at her house during his itinerant preaching work, and she would occasionally invite her friends to come hear him preach. One of those friends, the Duchess of Buckingham, sent her this reply to the invitation.

It is monstrous to be told, that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.

I think something of that same attitude has taken root in the parenting of our generation. Children are thought to be innately good and innocent rather than depraved in every part of their being. If we are to see the fullness of Jesus, we must start here by seeing the desperate condition of our natural state.

II. Our Complete Salvation – v. 22

Notice the emphasis given to the word “you” in verse 21, and how that emphasis is carried over to verse 22. It is precisely those who were alienated, hostile and evil who have now been reconciled through the death of Jesus. It is not those who think they’re good who Jesus came to reconcile to God, but those who acknowledge themselves to be so desperately needy.

There is no need for a second blessing, because look at what has happened with the first blessing. Following this reconciliation, how could things possibly be improved on? I was trying to think of an analogy for this full salvation in Christ, and I thought at first about the Swiss army knife. It is the kind of multi-tool that comes in handy for a wide variety of tasks. But that is not a good analogy because the problem with the Swiss army knife is that it doesn’t do any of those things particularly well. Jesus does one thing very well, and we are told what it is in this text. He reconciles us to God. No other means of reconciliation exists in the universe. He alone can do this. It is our most basic problem, and when it is resolved, everything else in life will fall into place.

Notice what the text goes on to say about this reconciliation. We have been presented as holy and blameless and above reproach before God. The word “blameless” in this verse is often translated “without blemish.” It comes from the world of sacrifice. Do you remember how in the Old Testament the sacrificial animals that were to be presented to God were to be unblemished? When the worshiper brought his sacrifice, he would lay his hand on it in order to identify himself with his offering. It represented a transfer of his guilt upon the sacrificial animal and of the innocence of that animal to him. Jesus has done the same for us, identifying with us in our sin and giving us his innocence.

Jesus reconciles us by becoming sin himself, just like that sacrificial animal. There is a powerful story of Jesus’ love in Luke 7, when Jesus is eating at the home of an influential Pharisee named Simon. A prostitute finds Jesus there and begins acting in a way that raised some eyebrows. She wets his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and finally anoints them. Luke’s account makes it clear that the raised eyebrows are not because of the woman’s actions but because of Jesus’ actions. Simon sees this and becomes critical of Jesus, thinking to himself, **“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him”** (Luke 7:39). Simon was offended because Jesus was allowing himself to be

touched and kissed by a dirty, sinful woman. What had those hands touched and those lips kissed prior to being applied to Jesus? And where had the money come from to purchase the ointment used to anoint Jesus? This ointment was literally the wages of sin being poured out on Jesus. How could Jesus not know this, Simon reasoned. Actually, Jesus knew a lot more than Simon realized. He knew not only that this woman was a prostitute, but also what Simon was thinking. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, identifying with a sinner by becoming unclean in order that she might become clean. At the end of the story Jesus says to her, **“Your sins are forgiven”** (v. 48).

The word “present” in this verse was a word used for presenting someone in a formal setting, such as in a courtroom. When I do weddings, I use the word in that sense at the end of the service. I say, “Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs....” The newly married couple has been through a great deal by the time such a declaration is made. If I’ve married them, then they’ve been through premarital counseling. They’ve been to the county courthouse to get a marriage license. They’ve made a public vow declaring their faithfulness to one another until death parts them. And now they are presented as husband and wife. Can anyone legitimately challenge such a declaration? How much more so if it is Jesus doing the presenting, as in this verse! Can you hear the voice of Jesus say to all of heaven, “And now, based on my reconciling work at the cross, I present to you John, Nancy, Jennifer, Russell, holy, blameless and above reproach”?

III. Our Continuing Dependence – v. 23

If there is no second blessing because the first one was more than sufficient, then how should we think about our Christian lives? If there is no second blessing to pursue, what exactly ought we to pursue? Paul answers this question in verse 23. We are to continue in the faith. We are to live our Christian lives, not seeking a second blessing, but by remaining dependent on Jesus.

Do you find dependence an easy thing or a challenging thing? Everything in our sinful nature craves independence. We want to do things ourselves and find it quite challenging to receive. It is difficult because receiving requires our weakness and helplessness, something we all instinctively resist. I’ve mentioned before one of my firsthand experiences with helplessness and dependence. It happened when I broke both my wrists, resulting in casts being put on that prevented me from bringing either hand to my mouth. I couldn’t feed myself, brush my teeth, shave my face and any number of other essential duties. I became dependent, and I didn’t like it.

But it is only through such helplessness and dependence that we can enter the kingdom of heaven, and it is through the same attitude of dependence that

we are to continue in the Christian life. This doesn't mean that the Christian life is simply a passive life. It is actually a fight, but the fight is not that of acquiring a second blessing but of continuing to depend on the first blessing of our salvation. This is a fight because our instinct is to trust only ourselves. When we wake up every morning, it's like the booting up of the operating system on your computer. But our operating system has a big flaw in that we awaken with the deep conviction that it is all up to us this day. We are on our own, and we actually prefer it that way. It feels good because when we succeed, it will be so satisfying. But this flaw in our software makes us do bad things. It fills our heart with fear and anxiety. It makes us use other people for our own purposes instead of loving others. And it sucks out every last speck of joy from the heart. It also leads to instability in our lives. That why Paul says Paul says that we continue in the faith, **“stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.”**

CONCLUSION:

Dependence is made possible by realizing the first two points of this sermon: our great need because of our total depravity and the great love of Jesus in becoming sin for us that we might be presented holy and blameless. Joseph Damian was a 19th century missionary to Hawaii. He served on the island of Molokai, at the leper colony located there. When leprosy first struck these islands, those who fell victim to the disease were treated cruelly. Molokai was a natural prison, with the ocean on one side and the mountains on the other. When a leper was transported to the island, the crews of the ships refused to land there out of a fear of contracting the disease themselves. So they would make the lepers jump into the ocean and swim ashore, throwing their belongings overboard with them. When Damian arrived, he found the island a place of hopelessness, filled with miserable people just waiting to die. He washed and bandaged their wounds, built a church, started a choir and taught the people how to plant gardens.

One morning, when he was preparing his tea, he spilled some hot water on his feet, but felt nothing. He had been around leprosy long enough to know what that meant. That morning, he addressed his people with the words, “We lepers.” His congregation received new insight into God's love for them, that God had loved them enough to become sin for them. He took on their sin that they might be made well.

In the U.S. Capital building in Washington, each state is permitted to select two statues of individuals representing the best of their state. The two statues for Alabama are Helen Keller and Joseph Wheeler. Hawaii selected their most beloved king, Kamehameha I and the missionary Joseph Damian. The fullness of Jesus is seen in the fact that Jesus became sin for us that we might be fully healed.