

Sermon Series:

New Life in Christ

A study of the book of Colossians



HOSTILE TO HOLY

(Colossians 1:19-23; Ezekiel 36:22-28) Becky Douglass

One thing I occasionally like to watch on TV are renovation shows. Sometimes they are renovating people – changing their hair and clothes, or maybe deeper than that, changing their weight and fitness levels. I usually don't like these as they tend to treat people as projects, not real people, which is not good. But other programs renovate businesses – particularly restaurants – or houses. The latter are my favourite. I love seeing what can be done with even the most derelict properties. These range from “quick fixes” - mainly cosmetic changes like new paint and furniture - all the way to total overhauls. One of the latter that I watch is called “Good Bones”. These are no surface renovation projects. They usually involve stripping everything back to find the “good bones” of the house. Sometimes they need to go right back to the house's framing to deal with a poor layout, crumbling walls, or structural damage. When the house is finished, it is “reborn” as something totally new.

Today, Paul is going to talk about a renovation project, the renovation of our hearts. This is no quick fix. Our hearts need a total overhaul. What emerges will be as different as a caterpillar is to a butterfly. Paul finished the “Christ Hymn” by saying:

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

Paul now turns his attentions from describing Christ and all he has done, to how this has impacted the Colossians themselves.

What we were

*This includes you who were once far away from God.
You were his enemies (had a hostile heart),
separated from him (alienated)
by your evil thoughts and actions.*

Like all of humanity, the Colossians were far away from God. Paul gives two pictures of this. Firstly, they were God's enemies. They weren't just indifferent to God; their hearts were actually hostile to Him. Secondly, they were separated from God or alienated from Him.

There was a wall separating them from God and that wall was made up of all their evil thoughts and actions. This is a wall that gets ever higher as we continue at enmity to God.

We discovered this in Genesis 3. Before Adam and Eve did one thing wrong – before they ever took and ate the fruit - they turned away from God in their hearts. They stopped trusting Him to show them the truth and decided He was keeping something from them. Their heart, the very core of their being, turned against God and became hostile to Him. This hostility then led to the action which separated them from God. They hid from each other by covering themselves with clothes and hid from God when He came looking for them in the garden.

Sometimes we like to think that without God, we're not so bad. The best of us are misguided in our understanding and would follow God if we just understood salvation better. On the other hand, the worst of us are just damaged and in different circumstances would be better. But Paul doesn't let us get away with this. He says that all of us, at our core, are in rebellion against God and willfully choose to go our own way rather than acknowledge His rule over us. We are not innocent. We are not a house in need of a paint job, we need a total overhaul. But it is exactly people like this whom God has chosen to take the initiative to save.

What Christ did

Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body.

Here Paul returns to the theme he has touched on several times in this chapter – what Christ has done to save us. If we bring some of these thoughts together (v. 14, 20,22), we see that the Father, through Christ, has:

- Rescued us from the kingdom of darkness
- Transferred us to the kingdom of His Son
- Purchased our freedom (redeemed us)
- Forgiven our sins
- Reconciled us to himself through His blood on the cross, His death
- Brought us into His own presence

This paints a vivid portrait of salvation. Picture, if you will, a son who decides he no longer wishes to be a part of his family. He leaves home to find his own way in the world. In time he runs out of money and gets into debt. When he can't repay the debt, he is sold into slavery to someone who ships him to another country and forces him into hard labour in a mine that leaves him broken, starved, and barely clinging to life. His parents hear what has happened to their son and set out to rescue him. They travel to that other country, and find their son, pay off his debts and purchase his freedom. But that is not all. They strip off his dirty clothes, clean him up, dress his wounds, give him good food and rest. Then they dress him in new clothes and bring him home in celebration. Like the prodigal son ... but so much more!

And this is what has happened to us! We not only commit sinful acts, but we are in slavery to sin due to our own rebellion against God. This sin ultimately breaks us, destroying all that God made us to be. But God chooses to love us still, and in love He comes after us. He rescues us from the kingdom of darkness by purchasing our freedom and forgiving and cleansing us from our sin and healing us from our brokenness. But he does more. He doesn't just take care of the negative. He then brings us back into relationship with Himself, reconciling us to Him, bringing us into His kingdom, into His very presence.

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at a passage from Exodus in which God promised to redeem the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This is a powerful picture that shapes the Bible's discussion of God's salvation. Today we read from Ezekiel, which also talks about God's salvation of His people – this time after being taken into exile in Babylon. This is another key event that demonstrates God's heart to save His people. You will see some very similar words here. God says that He will:

- Gather you from the nations - rescue them
- Bring you home again to your land - transfer them to a new kingdom
- Sprinkle clean water on you – forgive their sins
- Give you a new heart – in place of their hard, hostile heart
- Put a new spirit in you – the Holy Spirit who enables us to change our actions
- Be your God – restore their relationship with Him

God has always been and always will be in the business of saving those He loves! His ultimate goal is always the total restoration of His relationship with us so that we can come into His presence. Here we find a difference of opinion among commentators. Does this refer to our eternity with Him in heaven, or does it refer to our present reality? Both are mentioned elsewhere in Paul's letters, so it is not a matter of which is right theologically – both are. The question is, what is Paul talking about in this passage. At the beginning of Colossians 3, Paul seems to bring the two together, saying that “... *set your sights on the realities of heaven ... for your real life is (present tense) hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.*” This seems to indicate that in a very real way, we are in God's presence now. But one day, the heavenly and the earthly will come together and what is true spiritually now, will become true physically as well. Because of this, I believe Paul is talking primarily about a present reality – we are really in His presence right now. But the future reality is there in the background as the ultimate reality.

What we are

*... he has brought you into his own presence and
you are holy and
blameless as you stand before him
without a single fault.*

As we stand in His presence, we no longer need to hide in shame as Adam and Eve did. For now, we are (1) holy – set apart, separated to God and his service, and (2) blameless – without spot or defect, and (3) without a single fault – above reproach and free from even a suspicion of guilt. There is nothing to separate us from God and no one can lay any charge against us. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, this is what we are now! However, while we live in this world, we stand in two camps - with God and in the world - and sometimes we fall back into our old ways. Later in Colossians, Paul will explain how we can gradually change our actions to line up with our new identity in Christ. It is a process. Yes, there will be times when we sin. But even as we sin, Christ's blood cleanses us from that sin and restores us to fellowship with God once again. Nothing can separate us from Him.

What next?

*But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it.
Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News.*

Paul here presents a positive and a negative. Positively he says that we need to stand firm in our new relationship with God based on the truth of all that Paul has been saying about who Christ is and what He has done. His though is actually stronger than just continuing to believe something. He is calling the Colossians – and us – to remain in our commitment to this truth, to continue to build our lives on it and rely in its trustworthiness.

And if we do this, then we won't drift away from the hope, the assurance we have. What causes a boat to drift? It isn't an intentional movement is it? It is what happens to a boat that isn't moored to anything. It moves with the tide and the current and the wind. It is easily pushed around. But, if its anchor is securely fastened, then these forces will not move it around.

Our lives need to be anchored to the truth of who Christ is and what Christ has done. Nothing can then push us around – not difficult circumstances, not false teaching, not personal doubts or temptation, not antagonism from those around us. This doesn't mean we won't feel the push and pull of these things. We will still feel the very real negative forces in this world. But if we are firmly anchored to Christ, He will hold us firm.

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of an old hymn I loved singing as a child because it paints such a clear picture that, even as a child, I could understand what it was saying:

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift or firm remain?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

That is the assurance we can have if we build our life, if we anchor our lives, in Christ. And as we participate in this reconciliation with God, God calls us to become agents through whom He can accomplish His work of reconciliation.

*The Good News has been preached all over the world (in all creation),
and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it.*

The next section of Paul's letter to the Colossians will detail Paul's mission and we will see that he believes that if all this is true, then it is worth giving everything to share it with others. We also see a hint of this reconciliation's cosmic nature; this salvation isn't just for humanity – it is for “all creation”, which is a better translation than “all over the world”. The Good News still hasn't been preached in all corners of the world- although it is getting there! But it is being applied to all spheres of creation and one day, all of God's creation will know God's restoration and renewal.

For us ...

As we come to think about what this means for us, there are a couple of questions that come to mind.

Firstly, “Do you realise all that God has done for you?” I think one way Satan tries to shake us loose from our anchor in Christ is to make us complacent about God’s salvation by minimising it. He tries to get us to minimise how bad we were before we were saved. We like to think we were OK – just not as good as we could be. Paul pulls no punches when he says that we were hostile and alienated – we were bad and needed a total overhaul. Or Satan minimises what Christ did to buy our freedom and forgive our sins. To counteract this, Paul frequently references the blood that was shed when Christ died for us. He wants us to remember this was a real, physical event which was incredibly costly to God. But maybe most often, Satan seeks to minimise our understanding of our reconciliation and present standing before God as holy and blameless. This is how God sees us and we don’t have to hide in shame anymore. We can come to Him with confidence, knowing He will meet us with open arms. If Satan can get us to shrink from God, he knows we are vulnerable because we will avoid the one person who can help us. The more we understand our salvation, the stronger will be our ties to Christ.

Secondly, “How is your anchor?” I love the second verse of the song. It says:

It is safely moored, 'twill the storm withstand,
For 'tis well secured by the Saviour's hand;
And the cables passed from His heart to mine,
Can defy the blast, through strength divine.

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

I love it because it states clearly that our anchor is not dependant on us. It is “secured by the Saviour's hand” and “can defy the blast, through the strength divine.” The problem is really not with the anchor, the problem is that we forget the anchor and become afraid and confused as we look around at the storm. We need to constantly remind each other of the truth of Christ and His salvation and that he firmly holds us. As we read and study His Word and pray to Him – individually and as a community – our ties to Christ will be strengthened and nothing will cause us to drift away from Him.

Songs are a great way to remember these truths, aren't they! Even though we can't sing together at the moment, I hope this last song will encourage you and I pray that God will use it to bring these truths to your mind during the coming week.