



THE BASIS OF OUR NEW LIFE

(Colossian 2:11-15; Isaiah 12:1-12) Becky Douglass

The Context

Paul has written the book of Colossians to the church to encourage them to keep growing in their relationship with Christ. He praises them for *“your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God’s people”*. (Col 1:4) and he prays that they will continue to learn more about God and His will for them. He focuses their thoughts on the greatness of Christ – who he is as God and Creator and Redeemer. He wants to make sure that they see Christ as the centre of their lives as Christians. But Paul now wants to talk to them about how they need to go on in the faith because being a Christian isn’t just about believing as set of facts, it is a relationship with a person which transforms all of our lives.

Last time we looked at Colossians, we explored the key verses of the whole book:

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him (or walk in him, live you lives in Him). Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness. (Col 2:6,7)

Not only is Christ the source of our initial salvation, but our every day lives should be transformed by our relationship with Him.

In the rest of the book, Paul is going to explain how this transformation happens. But before he gets into that discussion, he is aware that there are some people in the church – in Colossae and elsewhere – who are trying to bring into the Christian community wrong ideas about how this transformation will be brought about. They say that Christ is enough to initially save us, but to live rightly, there are other things, other rituals and practices, which are needed in addition to Christ and his work on the cross. Paul knows that these could be deadly to their walk with Christ. At a minimum, they are an unnecessary distraction and at their worst, they could replace Christ as the centre of their lives, taking them away from the truth.

This next section is a warning by Paul to beware of anything that distracts them from Christ. We’re going to take two weeks to look at this passage. It starts with a general warning to not *“let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense”* (v.8). It ends with a survey of what these people are teaching and some specific rebuttals to them. But in the middle, Paul slips in a few verses which seek to expand the Colossians’ understanding

of all that Christ has done in saving them. He gives the theological basis for their new life and in doing so, shows them that nothing else is needed beyond Christ.

These few verses (v. 11-15) will be our focus this morning and then next week, we will apply them to them to the wider discussion. They pack a punch theologically and explain the basis of our new life in Christ. I think it is worth taking the time to investigate them closely before moving back to the main discussion. Paul manages to get a lot of information across by using four different pictures of our salvation in Christ.

Four Windows into our Salvation

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of Play School! I am sure you remember these windows. I haven't watched Play School for a long time, but I am told that they now have four windows and that they are digital – such is progress! In each episode of Play School they look through one of the windows and see a short video about the theme of the week. For instance, if the theme is animals, one window might be about a child taking care of a pet, another might go to sheep station, and another show a family exploring the zoo. They are ordinary situations which give the children glimpses of different aspects of the theme. They don't explain everything there is to know about those situations, but they get them thinking.

I think this is what Paul is doing here. In other passages, he will explain these ideas in more detail but here he is just seeking to paint a picture, using things they would encounter every day, to remind them of all that Christ accomplished for them. In quick succession, Paul asks them to “look through the window” at some religious, legal and military processes – circumcision, baptism, debt cancellation and triumphal processions - which can help them to understand what Christ did for us when he died on the cross and rose again to new life.

What makes it a little difficult for us to understand is that most of these things no longer occur in the same way as they did in their world. To understand what Paul is saying, we will need to travel back in time and seek to understand how Paul's original readers would have understood what he was saying. Then we can use what we learn to help us understand the spiritual realities Paul is talking about.

- Circumcision

First Paul looks at circumcision:

When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure.

Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. (v. 11)

Circumcision is talked about in a couple of ways in the Bible. The term comes from the Hebrew word “to cut off”. In a physical sense, it refers to the physical cutting away of a flap of skin performed by Jewish priests or rabbis on all Jewish males as a physical sign of their membership in the people of God. But right from the beginning, the Bible also talks of a spiritual circumcision, the circumcision of the heart. For instance, Moses, in his final talk to the Israelites, says, “*The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*” (Deuteronomy 30:6) It refers to the “cutting away” of their rebellious nature that stops them from loving and obeying God.

It is this picture of circumcision that Paul uses here. Our problem is that we have a sinful bent in our heart – a sinful nature that means that we want to be the boss of our own lives and make our own decisions rather than follow God. Our natural instinct is to rebel against

God, to not trust Him and do our own thing instead. This is what Christ “cuts off” when we turn to Him. This is not something we can do ourselves. Christ must do it. And how does he do it? Through His death – the ultimate “cutting off” - and His resurrection – a rebirth into a new life not ruled by the old sinful nature.

- Baptism

But how is Christ’s death and resurrection applied to us? Paul now moves on to a different picture to explain this.

For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life ... (v.12)

When we think of baptism today, we automatically think of the physical Christian ceremony – either the pouring of water or immersion in water. But in Paul’s day, there were many uses of the concept. In fact, we can see many different uses in the Bible. For instance, when it talks about the Pharisees and their ritual washing of hands before eating, it talks about their “baptisms”. At the last supper, when Jesus dips a piece of bread into wine and gives it to Judas he is said to have “baptised” the bread. Other places it talks about fabric being coloured by being “baptised” in a vat of dye. It was a word which was in general use to talk about cleansing or dipping in liquid. Even when talking about the religious practice of baptism, there are several different “baptisms”. There is the ritual which was part of the process of converting to Judaism, there was John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance, and what we know of as the Christian baptism.

It was also used in a metaphorical way. When James and John came to Jesus asking to be given special status in the kingdom, Jesus asked them if they were ready to “*be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?*” (Mark 10:38), referring to having a similar difficult experience to what he would experience. Even today we talk of someone having a “baptism of fire” when they go through a difficult time as they start in a new situation. I think any new minister who started at a church at the beginning of last year had a “baptism of fire” in their new role as they had to quickly settle in to help their church through the pandemic!

I think it is important to realise that Paul is using baptism as a metaphor in this instance, he is not talking about the physical act that we know as baptism. All the other “pictures” he uses are metaphors and I think we need to assume he is consistent throughout this passage. Other passages do talk about physical baptism, but here Paul is using the common idea of baptism, or dipping in water, to talk about how we share in Christ’s death and resurrection.

How is God going to “cut it away” our sinful nature so that we can walk with Him? The solution is to unite us with Christ. As we are united to Him in His death (go into the water), our sinful nature is cut away and, as we share in His resurrection (come out of the water), we are given new life. This idea of identification with Christ is re-enforced in this passage by Paul’s repeated use of the word “with”. We are buried “with” Christ and we are raised “with” Him. In saying these things, Paul makes up some new Greek words to emphasise the “togetherness” of our experience with Christ.

Baptism is about change. When a piece of cloth is dipped into a vat of dye, it goes in white and comes out the colour of the dye. It is fundamentally changed to become like the dye into which it has been dipped. The same is true for us as we are identified with Christ in His death and resurrection. It is as if we have died (been cut off) and come back to life again ourselves. Our sinful nature no longer controls us because we are living in new life, the life of

God. Our sinful nature, or our natural rebellion against God, is cut away and it no longer controls us. Is that all that needs to happen? Obviously not, because Paul keeps going!

- Debt cancellation

I think it is helpful to understand that there are two parts to sin that Paul talks about here. First there is our sinful nature – our natural desire to go our own way rather than to walk with God. Satan feeds this desire by surrounding us with many temptations. Secondly there is what happens when we give into those temptations and commit specific sins. One is a natural tendency and the other is an act that we commit. Jesus was talking about this when He said, *“A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. Luke 6:45)*

Because of our sin nature, we commit sins. As God gives us a new nature, we are then able to choose to do what is right. But what happens to those wrong things that we do? And let’s admit it – even though we don’t have to sin, we still choose to do so at times, even as Christians. These sinful actions leave us guilty before God. The good news is that God has a plan for that as well! And this is what Paul now talks about with his final two pictures.

Paul says that God deals with our sins through the cross as well.

*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.
(v. 13,14)*

This is another picture which was common in Paul’s time. When someone was crucified, the Romans would write out an account of all the things they had done wrong and nailed it to their cross so that everyone could see why that person was being crucified. The person’s wrong-doing brought that person death, but once death occurred, the record of charges was cancelled – marked “paid in full”.

When Jesus was crucified, the Bible says that, *“Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (Matthew 26:36)* He had done nothing wrong, so they had nothing to write against Him.

Paul says that our sins had caused us to be separated from God – spiritually dead. But when we turned to Him in repentance, he took the record of our wrongs, nailed it to Christ’s cross and Christ took the punishment of death for us when He died. And then when he rose again, we were raised with Him into new life. Christ paid the punishment that we “owed” God for our sin and our debt was cancelled. There is no longer any record of our sin.

- Triumphal procession

But there is more! When we sin, we are doing what Satan wants us to do. And through this we become his captives. He accuses us and can seek to hinder us living in Christ because he constantly reminds us of what we have done wrong and how we are no good. He uses our past sins and failings to limit us and defeat us.

But Paul’s final window into salvation shows us that Satan does not have any power over us if we are in Christ. Again, Paul uses a picture which would have been familiar to his readers. When the Roman armies came home after a successful military campaign, they would march into the city in a triumphal procession. The soldiers would march in their best uniforms

and the leaders would ride gleaming chariots. They would show off the spoils of war they had captured, including the people. The captives would march in the parade and then many would be killed as part of the celebrations. The captives weren't dead yet, but there was no hope for them.

Paul says that this is what God has done to Satan.

"In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross." (v.15)

By forgiving our sins through Christ's death on the cross, God has stripped Satan and his angels of the power they seek to have over us. They are doomed, shamed by the cross and destined for final defeat when Christ returns in power. They may try to make you think that they still have power to defeat you, but they do not. Christ has won the victory over them through his death and resurrection.

Making it real in our lives

So, Paul has used four pictures to help us to understand all that Christ accomplished for us on the cross. He wanted the Colossians – and us - to understand that there is nothing else that we need outside of Christ and all He has done for us. And it is all about what He has done, not about what we do. This is great news because we all know our own weakness in fighting sin and its effects in our lives. But how does this come to be a reality in our own lives?

You might have noticed that I skipped over a phrase right in the middle of the passage. It says that all these things are true of you -

... because you trusted (or had faith in) the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. (v.12)

All that God has done for us through Christ is made real in our lives through our response of faith to what God has done. To be honest, we may not always feel like it is true, but our faith tells us that we can trust God to do what He said would do, even though we don't understand it all. Through faith, we believe that He has the power to do what He has said He has done and that His salvation is complete – we need nothing else.

It is also helpful to understand that this is a process which is worked out in our lives over time. This is what the rest of Colossians will be about – how to we can walk with God each day and increasingly see our new nature influence the way we think and act. While we are free from the penalty and power of sin, temptation still exists, and we can still choose to do the wrong thing. Old habits and wrong thinking need to be changed. But God is at work in our lives, and He will bring about changes if we trust Him to do so.

All of this is because of God's love for us and as we see His work in our lives, we will come to trust His love more and more. If you don't take away anything else from this morning, please know that God's love for you is backed up by all that He did for you through Jesus' death and resurrection. Your salvation cost Him everything, and yet He willingly gave it because He loves you. One of my deep concerns about those who water down the Gospel is that they are, in effect, watering down God's love. Anything which detracts from the enormity of our need or the completeness of God's salvation, lessens the immensity of God's love that bridged the gap between Himself and us.

This week I had an exam in my Greek class. Although I had studied quite a lot, when I came to sit the exam, I really struggled to think clearly and remember all I had learned. Up until now I have been doing quite well in the class, but this time I definitely didn't do well. When I

finished it, I was discouraged and sent a text message to Scott telling him of my struggle and how the exam had defeated me. He sent back the best message ever. He simply said, "I love you". Now, anyone could say those words and they would be nice, but I know what Scott means when he says that. I know it means that he will do the dishes when it is my turn so that I can study my Greek. I know that it means that he is happy for me to get whatever books will help me with my studies – even they are always expensive! I know that it means that he will give me a backrub when I've been slogging away at the computer all day. I know it means that he is willing to help me remember my vocabulary words even when we are on holidays. Those words "I love you" are backed up by loving actions which make my studies possible. Those words in that moment told me that he was willing to keep doing those things even if I didn't ace the class – just because he loves me. And that gave me courage to go on.

Now, Scott and I are not perfect and so even though we love each other, we don't always do the right things. We fail each other and hurt each other at times. But God's love is greater. It never fails. His love gave us everything on the cross and His love continues to give us all that we need. I am reminded again of one of the verses we read at Easter from Paul's letter to the Romans, *"Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32)*