

BEING RECONCILED TO GOD Colossians 1:21-23

If asked to describe their relationship to God, many Christians would simply and instinctively say, "I am saved." This is definitely a biblically appropriate way to describe your relationship with God. But the New Testament uses other key works to explain the believer's relationship to God, like born again, forgiveness, justification, redemption, and adoption. Our text introduces another important term for the Christian experience: RECONCILIATION. It means a change of relationship. In **1 Corinthians 7:11**, husbands and wives have divorced on grounds not permitted by God are told to remain unmarried or be *reconciled*. Or picture two warring nations that come to peaceful terms and restore diplomatic relationships with one another. That's reconciliation. It is the end of hostilities and restoration of peace between two opposing parties. This is what it means to be saved. The enmity between a holy God and sinful man has ended, bringing man into right relationship with God through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

This discussion of what it means to be spiritual reconciliation follows what Paul has written about the supremacy of Christ in **Colossians 1:15-20**. It is one of the most important statements about the Person of Christ in the New Testament. It declares the supremacy of Christ in terms of three relationships. First, the supremacy of Christ is seen in his relationship to GOD. Verse 15a says, "*He is the image of the invisible God.*" Likewise, the supremacy of Christ is seen in his relationship to CREATION. Verses 15-17 say: "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" Finally, the supremacy of Christ is seen in his relationship to the CHURCH. Verses 18-20 say: "*And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood by his cross.*"

Colossians 1:21-23 may be understood as the fourth relationship in which the supremacy of Christ is seen; namely; his relationship to the Colossians, and by extension, to all Christians – to you and me. Paul says, "*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 verses 15-20, the readers of this letter are totally ignored, as Paul exalts the unrivaled preeminence of Christ. In this context, Paul honors Christ as THE GREAT RECONCILER. Verse 20 says that God was pleased "*through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*" That is a global, universal, all-inclusive statement. Christ has reconciled all things to God through the blood of his cross. The entire created order is brought back into right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Verse 21 begins, "*And you...*" In verse 20, Paul declares that God has reconciled all things to himself through Christ. Then he says, "*And you...*" THE COSMIC CHRIST who has brought the world into right relationship with God is the same one

who works in our lives to reconcile us to God. And the supremacy of Jesus Christ is put on display by his work in our lives just as much as it is in the fact that he is the creator of the world, sustainer of the universe, and head of the church. **Psalm 85:10** says, “*Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*” **Romans 5:10** says, “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*” **2 Corinthians 5:18-9** says, “*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*” Only the Jesus can reconcile a holy God to sinful people like you and me. **Colossians 1:21-23** teaches us what it means to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

I. RECONCILIATION WITH GOD IS NEEDED BECAUSE OF OUR SIN.

A certain preacher taught his church about the sinful condition of human depravity. After the sermon, one of his members came to him and said, “I just can’t swallow what you said today about depravity.” “That’s all right,” responded the pastor, “It’s in you already.”

It’s in all of us. Many people struggle with the idea of how God could send good, nice, and moral people to hell. But there are no such people. When asked why bad things happen to good people, R.C. SPROUL responded, “I don’t know any good people.” Neither do you – yourself included! All of us come into this world as sinful people filled with iniquity that inevitably results in transgression against Almighty God. Verse 21 describes Christians as those “*who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.*” Paul was directly speaking to the Colossians here. But he was talking about every person who has not been reconciled to God through faith in Christ. Every unbeliever is an enemy of God. That’s what you were before you ran to the cross. You were not a citizen of a neutral kingdom located next to the kingdom of God, which coexisted in a friendly way with God and his people. You were a loyal citizen of an enemy kingdom that actively opposed Christ and his kingdom. **Psalm 58:3** says, “*The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth.*” In verse 21, Paul gives three aspects of the unbeliever’s sinful estrangement from God.

A. THE SINNER’S ALIENATION FROM GOD

Verse 21 says, “*And you, who were once alienated.*” To be “*alienated*” is to be shut out from participation, fellowship, and intimacy. It denotes a desperate state of utter separation and isolation, which is humanity’s state prior to reconciliation. **Ephesians 2:12** says, “*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*” And **Ephesians 4:18** describes unbelievers by saying, “*They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their hearts.*”

That was our spiritual condition before we were reconciled to God. We were alienated from God. We were estranged from God.” Sin alienates us from God.

B. THE SINNER’S ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD

The unbeliever’s problem does not stop with alienation. Verse 21 also says you were “*hostile in mind.*” The word “*hostile*” refers to something hated, odious, or adversarial. When it is used in the passive sense, it means to be an enemy. But when it is used in the active voice, as it is here, it is best translated “*hostile,*” indicating a sense of aggressive animosity. Note the stronghold from which this hostility operates: THE MIND. Before we trusted Christ, our mindset was hostile toward God, our thoughts were opposed to God, and our entire way of thinking was contrary to God. **Romans 12:2** says, “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” To think God’s thoughts after him, you must stop letting the world squeeze you into its mold. You must reject the false value system of the world. Your hostile mind must be changed to accept the will of God.

C. THE SINNER’S ACTIONS AGAINST GOD

Not only is the sinner’s isolation from God reflected in a position of alienation and a hostile mindset; it also shows up in sinful lifestyle choices. Verse 21 says we were “*doing evil deeds.*” *Evil* refers to the harmful, painful, and destructive effects of wicked activity. Of course, we hurt ourselves when we do evil deeds. And they hurt other people. But Paul is not speaking about the personal or social affects of sin. He is talking about the spiritual implications our evil deeds have on our relationship to God. The greatest problem with sin is not what it does to our relationship to self or to others, but what it does to our relationship with God. Sin alienates and separates us from God. It sets our minds in hostile opposition against God. Then it causes us to attack the authority and character of God by doing evil deeds.

Notice the progression of the verse.

We are alienated from God, which leads to hostile thinking against God, which results in doing evil deeds. People are not inwardly hostile against God because of their outward acts of sins; they commit sins because they are inwardly hostile. This is why the unbeliever must repent before he can be saved. VANCE HAVNER succinctly summarized the meaning of repentance: “It is a change of mind about sin and self and the Savior.” Some object at this point. Grace is free, they argue. And all you have to do to receive the grace of God is believe. But to say what that salvation requires that we repent and believe is to add works to the gospel. But this is just not true. First of all, scripture commands us to repent and believe. **Mark 1:15** summarizes the message of Jesus: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God*

is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.” Likewise, common sense requires that faith and repentance go together. You cannot believe the gospel of salvation without changing your mind about the guilt of sin that separates you from God.

II. RECONCILIATION WITH GOD IS ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

There is a sharp contrast between verse 21 and verse 22. Verse 21 describes our spiritual condition without Christ: *“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.”* Verse 22 describes our spiritual position in Christ: *“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.”* The reminder of what we were before we met Christ is meant to highlight the exclusive work of God in reconciling people to himself. God is the only one who has the authority and ability to reconcile sinful people to himself. As one person put it, “I deserved to be condemned to hell, but God interfered.” Thank God for divine interference!

A. GOD’S MEANS OF RECONCILIATION

How does a holy God reconcile himself to sinful people? Verse 22 answers: *“He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.”* It has been well said that Christ is the central figure of biblical revelation. And the cross is the central fact in biblical revelation. This verse bears out the truth as it teaches we are reconciled to God through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

WE ARE RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH THE INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST. Verse 22 says, *“He has now reconciled in his body.”* This reference to the physical body of Jesus confronts the false teachers in Colossae who claimed that Jesus was truly God but was not really human. False teachers today accept the humanity of Jesus but deny his deity. But in the early church, they readily accepted the idea that Jesus was God. But they could not accept the fact that God would condescend to take on the form of humanity. But Paul writes the Colossians to make it clear that Jesus both complete deity and perfect humanity. **Colossians 1:15** says, *“He is the image of the invisible God.”* **Colossians 1:19** says, *“For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”* And **Colossians 2:9** says, *“For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”* Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. This is essential, because a mediator has to be able to represent both parties. **1 Timothy 2:5** says, *“For there is one God, and there one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”*

WE ARE RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS CHRIST. Verse 2w says we have been *“reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.”* The incarnation qualifies Christ to reconcile us to God. But the crucifixion is where our reconciliation to God was accomplished. We are reconciled by the death of Jesus on the cross. **Colossians 2:13-14** says, *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”* There are many who object to the

message of the cross because they cannot tolerate the idea of God sending his own Son to die on a cross. So they try to conjure up a way of salvation that accomplishes divine forgiveness without an atoning sacrifice. But this fails to recognize the holy nature of God and the offensive nature of sin. God's perfect character demands that our transgressions against his holy law be punished with death. The good news is that what God demands he provides in the death of Christ. **Isaiah 53:5-6** says, "*But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

A husband and wife became estranged and chose to separate. They moved away and lived in different parts of the country. The husband happened to return to the city on a matter of business and went to the cemetery to the grave of their only son. He was standing there by the grave in fond reminiscence when he heard a step behind him. Turning, he saw his estranged wife. The initial impulse of both was to turn away. But they had a common interest in that grave, and instead of turning they clasped hands over the grave of their son and were reconciled. They were reconciled by death.

B. GOD'S MOTIVES FOR RECONCILIATION

Verse 22 says, "*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.*" The word "*present*" means to place near or to set at hand. It is sacrificial terminology that speaks of the act of placing an offering on the altar. **Romans 12:1** says, "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*" **Ephesians 5:25** says that Christ is sanctifying the church "*so that he might present the church to himself in splendor.*" **2 Timothy 2:15** says, "*Do you best to present yourself to God as one approved.*" **Jude 24** says, "*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.*" And here Paul says that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ "*in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*"

This is the goal of our reconciliation to God. We have been reconciled to God merely to keep us out of hell and get us into heaven. That's true. But it is not the whole truth. And it is not the most important truth. To focus on deliverance from hell and the privilege of heaven is to have a man-centered understanding of the purpose of our salvation. Ultimately, the gospel is not about man and his needs. It is about God and his glory. God is glorified by keeping us out of hell and getting us into heaven. God is most glorified by taking guilty, depraved, rebellious sinners and making them what they could never be on their own – *holy and blameless and above reproach*. The ultimate goal of reconciliation is our sanctification. God has saved you to change you! **2 Corinthians 5:17** says, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*" We will not fully become all that we ought to be until Christ returns. But if we have been reconciled with God, there will be evidence of God's sanctifying work in your life. Here is the

good news: You can change! You don't have to be what you have been. God can clear your past, conquer your problems, and change your personality. **Philippians 2:12-13** says: *"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

III. RECONCILIATION WITH GOD IS EVIDENCED BY PERSEVERANCE.

The world uses many different labels to categorize people. But in reality every human is in one of two positions: either you have been reconciled to God or you have not. And of those who have not been reconciled to God, there are two groups: those who know they have not been reconciled to God and those who are walking in a false presumption of salvation. Unfortunately, there are many people in this latter group. I am not talking about outright pagans, cult members, or people who have been deceived by pseudo-Christian religions. I am talking about people who have heard the true gospel in authentic Christian churches and have made public professions of faith in Christ and have even demonstrated some evidence of saving faith. In **Matthew 7:21**, Jesus declares, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

What is the evidence that a person has been truly reconciled to God? Verse 23 says: *"if indeed you continue in the faith."* The word "continue" means to remain, stay over, abide, or tarry. In **John 8:31**, Jesus said, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."* **1 John 2:19** explains, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us, for it they had been of us, they would have continued with us."* And here, Paul says we can know that we have been reconciled to God *"if indeed you continue in the faith."* This conditional statement is not meant to indicate that Paul had doubts about the eternal destiny of his readers. And it does not mean that their final presentation was dependent upon their perseverance. Rather, he is giving the saints practical means by which they may know they have been reconciled to God and will be presented holy and blameless and above reproach before him on the day of Jesus Christ. The evidence of true saving-faith is that you persevere to the end. A faith that fizzles before the finish had a fatal flaw from the first. But those who are truly saved will be *"stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard."*

Let me close by saying that the steadfast perseverance of the saints is possible because of the sovereign preservation of the saints. **Philippians 1:6** says: *"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ."* Let me summarize the meaning of this verse in one sentence: The Lord will not give up on you. Others may give up on you. There may even be times when you feel like giving up on yourself. But the Lord will not give up on you. He never does.

- **When Joseph's own brothers dropped him into a pit, God didn't give up.**
- **When Moses said, "Here I am, send Aaron," God didn't give up.**
- **When the delivered Israelites wanted Egyptian slavery instead of milk and honey, God didn't give up.**

When Aaron was making a false god at the very moment Moses was with the true God, God didn't give up.

- **When Samson whispered to Delilah, when Saul roared after David, when David schemed against Uriah, God didn't give up.**
- **When God's word lay forgotten and man's idols stood glistening, God didn't give up.**
- **When the children of Israel were taken into captivity, God didn't give up.**
- **When he became flesh and was the victim of an assassination attempt before he was two years old, he didn't give up.**
- **When people from his own hometown tried to push him over a cliff, he didn't give up.**
- **When he was accused of blaspheming God by people who didn't fear God, he didn't give up.**
- **When people spat in his face, he didn't spit back. When bystanders slapped him, he didn't slap them. When a whip ripped his sides, he didn't turn and command the awaiting angels to stuff that whip down that soldier's throat.**
- **And when human hands fastened the divine hands to a cross with spikes, it wasn't soldiers who held them steady. It was God who held them steady.**

**BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE.
O WHAT A FORETASTE OF GLORY DIVINE
HEIR OF SALVATION, PURCHASED BY GOD
BORN OF HIS SPIRIT, WASHED IN HIS BLOOD**

**THIS IS MY STORY; THIS IS MY SONG
PRAISING MY SAVIOR ALL THE DAY LONG
THIS IS MY STORY; THIS IS MY SONG
PRAISING MY SAVIOR; ALL THE DAY LONG**