

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

Ask a few people in the group to briefly tell their story about how they became Christians. Get them to tell it in 3 bits: what I was, what happened, what things are like now. (Do try to keep it brief! Maybe limit them to 30 seconds per bit!)

Read Colossians 1:15-23 together. In 21-23, Paul gives us an outline of every Christian's testimony! As we read it let's be struck again but what Jesus has done!

QUESTIONS

What were the Colossians once like? (21)

What was their attitude towards God?

How did this work itself out in practise?

Can you relate to this situation in your life? In your past? In others you know?

How would you answer someone who says, 'people are basically good at heart'?

If nothing changed from the situation in 21, what would happen to them/us?

What *has* happened to them? (22)

What does "reconciled" mean? Could you explain it to a non-Christian friend?

How does this address the problems of 21?

Who did the reconciling? And why is that important?

How did Jesus reconcile us?

Why did Jesus reconcile us? What was His aim?

How will God see us on that final day?

How can Christians say they expect to be presented to God "holy and blameless and above reproach"? Isn't that arrogant? Why or why not?

Is the hope of 22 what you believe will happen to *you*? Why or why not?

Compare 21 and 22. How would you describe the difference?

Why do you think we're being told about this turnaround?

What impact does it have on you to think about it?

Is everything in 22 guaranteed? What does it depend on? (23)

What does it mean to "continue in the faith"?

Why might they *not* continue?

How might it be possible to stay very religious-looking but not actually be continuing in the faith?

Are there things which might tempt *us* not to continue with the gospel?

When do we most feel that pressure?

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

Looking back at this passage, what are you most grateful for?

Using this passage, explain the difference Jesus has made to your life.

What should we do about the fact that some people are stuck in verse 21?

How can we encourage one another to "continue in the faith"?

How does this passage encourage us to do that?

Give thanks to Jesus for reconciling us. And pray we'd all continue in the faith.

Colossians 1:21-23



Colossians at a glance

The church in Colossae was planted by someone called Epaphras, who Paul says was a "beloved fellow servant... [and] a faithful minister of Christ" (1:7). Paul heard about this new church and was so pleased with how they were growing. But he also wanted to warn them...

There would be people who might try to take them captive, pulling them away from Jesus with clever arguments and ideas (2:8). These people would make them feel they were missing out on everything God had to offer. This might be through promoting special religious activities, judging anyone who didn't join in (2:16). It might be through making them feel inadequate if they weren't enjoying the same super-spiritual experiences as them (2:18). It might be by enforcing a set of rules about things to avoid (2:20-21).

Paul wrote this letter to remind those Christians what they had – everything! All the fullness of God dwells in Jesus, and Jesus dwells fully in believers (2:9-10). It doesn't get fuller than that! All we need is Jesus for knowing God, being saved, growing in godliness, and arriving safely in glory.

We still face the same kinds of influences today, tempting us to add to all Jesus is for us, leaving us feeling less than the genuine article. These studies in Colossians aim to amaze us with the Jesus we first received through the gospel, not shifting from there, and strengthening us to go on walking in Him (2:6-7).

Theme Sentence for 1:21-23

We were alienated from God but have been reconciled by Jesus, if we continue in the faith.

How this passage fits in

This passage takes the mind-blowing truths about Jesus from 1:15-20 and shows how they relate to normal Christians. It's not just "all things" which are being reconciled (20) but us as believers. What we used to be is spelt out in unflattering terms, and what Christ has done for us to fix that is briefly but gloriously explained. We also hear the first explicit indications that there is a danger of being pulled away from that gospel. Because of these truths about Jesus and us in relation to Him, we must stick with Jesus. He's all we need.

Application

- Continue in the faith, not shifting from the gospel
- Be amazed again at what Jesus has done for us

A Passion For Life

Don't forget that next term is *A Passion For Life*. Now is the time to prepare people for that, so please make a special effort to talk about the mission each week and show how each passage spurs us on to share the gospel.

[NB]

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Commentary

Verses 15-20 have been deliberately stretching our understanding of and appreciation for Jesus. He is supreme over all things and is reconciling everything in creation to God. But it begs the question, where do we fit in?

This passage neatly breaks into 3 points, coinciding with the verse divisions. We have what Christians were, what Christ has done and why, and then what the implications are for Christians now.

21 "And you..." is a very fitting opening to this section. We are turning from the reconciliation of all things (20) to the reconciliation of individuals and gatherings of Christians (22).

Paul starts their story with what they "once were". It was a bleak beginning! They were "alienated". This means primarily that they were cut off from God by their sin. Consequently, they were alienated from God's people & promises (see Ephesians 2:12). A knock-on effect of all this is that they were also alienated from other sinners, Christian or otherwise. Alienation is what sin does. It's worth noting at this point, that it's very likely that the Christians in Colossae were mostly Gentiles.

If their status was one of alienation, their attitude was hostility. "Hostile in mind" implies a fixed position pervading every part of their decision-making and desires. Many people today believe themselves to be apathetic to God, but the reality is far more antagonistic. Apathy is in itself a terrible form of hostility when one realises that we were made by and for Jesus (1:16).

The result of their status and attitude was their behaviour, namely "doing evil deeds." Sin is the big problem; sins are symptoms of that bigger problem.

Their situation before Jesus came along was desperate. And it's a situation shared by all who are without Christ. Few unbelievers would be happy with this description, but looking back on our life pre-conversion, Christians can admit that our situation was hopeless.

22 But now there *is* hope! Not because they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps but because Jesus stepped in. Note that doesn't say, "You once were... but now you have..." The focus is on Christ. "You once were... but now He has..."

He has "reconciled" them. This is the solution to alienation; we are now united and together with God and His people. Reconciliation is also the solution to hostility; peace has been established between us.

How has this reconciliation come about? It happened "in his body of flesh by his death". Just as all things are being reconciled through Christ "making peace by the blood of his cross" (20), so too these individual Christians are reconciled by the death of Jesus.

This passage doesn't outline the precise mechanics of how that works, so this isn't the place to major on that. But suffice it to say that Jesus, the offended party, takes all the punishment for our hostility to Him so that there can be "redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (14).

So we know *what* happened (reconciliation) and we know *how* it happened (Jesus' death), so the only remaining question is *why*. Jesus did all this "in order to present you... before him." Who the 'him' is referring to is a little unclear. Is it Jesus Himself or God the Father? Also, the timing of the presentation is up for debate. Have Christians already been presented or will we be presented in the future?

I believe the 'who' is God the Father and the 'when' is in the future. My main reason is in 1:28 where Paul talks about his own aims in ministry; "that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Here the presentation is in the future, since it is something Paul is still aiming for and those he teaches are not yet fully mature. And since Christians are being presented "in Christ", one would presume that they are being presented to someone other than Christ. If these two presentations are the same event, then Jesus aims to present us to the Father in Himself, and Paul wants believers to be as mature as possible on that day.

It's not a major point and we mustn't try to separate the Son and the Father too distinctly sometimes. Not least because the focus of this verse is what state believers will be in when we are presented. We will be presented "holy, blameless and above reproach".

In the Old Testament, sacrifices were presented to God at the temple, and they had to be blameless too. Because of Jesus' perfect offering of Himself as a lamb without blemish, we can be seen that way before the Father as well. To be "above reproach" means that there can be no legitimate claims that we don't belong there. We will be made perfect and able to stand before God on that day. What a hope!

23 However, all of the above has a big "IF" hanging over it. The blessings of 22 are ours only if we do as outlined in this verse. Otherwise we are stuck in the alienation of 21.

The thing we need to do is "continue in the faith". This is what Paul has already prayed they would do in 1:11 when he asked that they might endure with all patience and joy. This "if" shows there is a real danger that they might *not* continue. This is the major theme in Colossians – that they stick with Christ and not be tempted to move away from Him or try to add to what He has done.

Note that they are to continue in the faith, which shows this is about the content of the message not just that they have faith generally. They need to be "stable" (being well-acquainted and established in the truth), "steadfast" (loyal to those truths) and "not shifting" (not easily persuaded away from the truth). It's "the hope of the gospel" which they must stick to. So there is a body of truth to adhere to but also the future hope which this truth brings about. This future hope is theirs... *if* they stick with that hope through sticking to the gospel. This isn't meant to scare us but keep us close. It's actually really encouraging to know there's nothing else for us to do; just stick with Jesus!

The gospel they should stick with is the one they first heard (see 1:5-7), the one which is publically available information, not secret knowledge for the few. And it's the one Paul serves, which will be the focus of the next section in 1:24-2:5.