

RECONCILIATION WITH GOD
COLOSSIANS 1:19-23

I.

There is probably no more famous place associated with Memorial Day than Arlington National Cemetery. (PROJECTOR ON--- ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY) You may not know the story behind this most famous American cemetery. The land was bought in 1778 by George Washington's adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis, affectionately known as Wash. Fifty years later Wash's daughter married a young army lieutenant by the name of Robert E. Lee.

The Lees made Arlington their home and raised a family there, in the midst of the army officer's military assignments.

Because of Lee's military success and reputation, he was offered command of a Union army at the start of the Civil War. He declined. He decided to go with the Confederacy. When war broke out, the US Army took over Arlington. Initially it was a military post. As the war grinded on and Washington's cemeteries began to fill up, the War Department saw the opportunity to use the Arlington estate as a Union Cemetery and as a way to stick it to General Lee who had gone over to the rebels. Thus Arlington became a national cemetery.

After the war, the son of Robert E. Lee, George Washington Custis Lee, sued in federal court to regain the family estate, which had become Arlington National Cemetery. Eventually the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that General Lee's son had rightful claim to the property. Lee's son, however, recognized the spiritual and national significance of this land. So he asked only for fair compensation. In 1883 he deeded the land back to the federal government for \$150,000. The one who accepted the deed was the Secretary of War. He was a man by the name of Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of Abraham Lincoln. Thus was achieved a fascinating act of reconciliation involving the firstborn son of the great president and the firstborn son of the rebel antagonist. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our nation today is again in great need of reconciliation. There is a sharp divide today between Republicans and Democrats. The one year anniversary of George Floyd's death has reminded us of a racial divide. The truce established in Israel about ten days ago has reminded us of the problem of anti-Semitism and the Jewish-Muslim divide. The Bible tells us that the greatest divide in life is the separation which exists between a holy God and sinful human beings. The only path to reconciliation involves another person labeled as a firstborn. The Book of Colossians describes Him as the "firstborn of all creation" and "the firstborn from the dead."

We human beings do desperately need to be reconciled with God. For the Bible tells us that unless we develop the proper relationship with Him, we will become the objects of

His wrath. Fortunately He has provided a way to be reconciled with Him. We are going to look at the passage before us this morning to find out what reconciliation with God involves.

We have begun a study of the New Testament Book of Colossians. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter when He was a prisoner in Rome between 60 and 62 AD. (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSAE MAP 1) Colossae was a small town in western Asia Minor. The small church in that town was being threatened by false teachers. Paul wrote the letter to the Christians there to help them be straight in their thinking about this Christianity thing and the threats directed against it. Last week we saw how he stressed the sovereignty of Christ. Today we shall see what he says about reconciliation with God.

I.

From vv. 19 and 20 of Colossians #1 we are going to consider first THE PURPOSE OF RECONCILIATION. (I. THE PURPOSE OF RECONCILIATION) Verse 19 says, “**For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...**” We dealt with this verse last week. But since it is the beginning of a sentence that continues on into v. 20 in our passage, it is hard to start without it today. The fullness, I pointed out last week, refers to all of the characteristics of God. The false teachers at Colossae seem to have been saying that Jesus was less than fully God. He was just one of many angelic beings. Paul asserts that Jesus Christ has all of the attributes of God. He is God in the flesh.

Paul continues in the beginning of v. 20, “**...and through him to reconcile to himself all things...**” The original Greek word for “reconcile” means literally “to change,” or “exchange.” It came in common usage to refer to changing from being an enemy to being a friend. In the New Testament in 1 Corinthians #7 it is used of a restored relationship of a woman with her husband. Most often in the New Testament it has to do with a new relationship between man and God. In v. 20 it is clearly God the Father who desires to have some ones or some things restored to Himself.

The question is: Who, or what, are the objects of this reconciliation that needs to take place with God? Paul speaks about “all things.” Some interpreters have tried to limit the “all things” just to people, or even just to Christians. The problem is that just a few verses earlier, in vv. 16 and 17, the expression “all things” appears four times. There the “all things” clearly refer to everything that has been created in the universe, even invisible spiritual beings.

The false teachers at Colossae, remember, said that matter is evil. The physical world is inherently bad. They didn’t think that the true God would want to have anything directly to do with it. Paul is countering that notion by claiming that God will be reconciled with all of the created universe.

So in what sense does the physical universe need to be reconciled to God? The Book of Genesis says that the sin of Adam and Eve had physical effects upon the world. Animals came to have a fear of people. Animals started eating each other. Thorns and

weeds became a problem. (ROMANS 8:20) Romans #8 vv. 20 & 21 tell us, **“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope (ROMANS 8:21) that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”** That release from corruption comes with the return of Christ.

My guess is that the Second Law of Thermodynamics has something to do with the futility and corruption which relates to our present world. That law of physics says that the available energy in our world is being used up. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is used up ultimately as heat. Matter and energy cannot be destroyed--- that's the First Law of Thermodynamics. But energy can and does move to a state of less usefulness.

In what sense will the physical universe be reconciled with God? The Book of Isaiah describes at several points what life will be like when Christ returns to establish His earthly kingdom. We looked at that in more detail a few weeks ago when we were considering the ideal civil government which will one day be established upon the earth.

Isaiah #11 seems to describe a reconciliation of the animal world to God. (ISAIAH 11:6) Beginning in v. 6 we read, **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:7) The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (ISAIAH 11:8) The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. (ISAIAH 11:9) They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”**

How this all works we can only speculate. But the Bible suggests that at some point in the future we are going to have a part in this ideal world. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But what about fallen angels, and what about people who don't turn in faith to the true God? How is it that they can be reconciled to God? A few people have pointed to this verse as evidence that all people and all angels will in the end go to heaven and have a great eternity. But there are too many passages that speak specifically of fallen angels and unrepentant sinners spending eternity in hell.

So it seems to me that this must be, in some cases, a forced reconciliation. Verse 20 also speaks of making peace. When Christ returns He will establish peace. Some beings are going to be forced into this peace unwillingly. For Revelation #19 describes fighting against Jesus and His forces when He returns.

Perhaps this is how a passage in Philippians #2 comes into play in regard to what will be forced reconciliations in some cases. (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 2:9) The Apostle Paul writes, **“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, (PHILIPPIANS 2:10) so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,**

(PHILIPPIANS 2:11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father...”

There is one other thing about the Greek word that Paul uses for “reconcile” in our passage that makes it special. He adds a prefix, an extra syllable at the beginning of the word, which gives it an extra “oomph.” (PROJECTOR OFF) That’s the technical grammatical term. This is total reconciliation. In the end God is going to be totally reconciled with everything in His creation. Unity and peace will be established in our universe. In some cases it will be established with force from God. But in the end everything will be made right. Peace will reign. God will get the glory that He deserves. We who are faithful to Him will be rewarded.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE NEED FOR RECONCILIATION) In v. 21 the author goes on to describe THE NEED FOR RECONCILIATION. Here he is talking about man’s need for reconciliation. He is specifically addressing the Christians at Colossae. But what Paul says has application to all of humanity. He begins a sentence by saying, **“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...”**

The Bible here indicates that prior to the time when we humans become Christians we are alienated from God, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds. Don’t unbelievers do good things? Yes, they do. But they also do evil things. All of us do evil things. But aren’t there lots of people who profess that they believe in God and do lots of religious deeds? Yes, there are. But they are hostile in mind to the God who is really there, to the God of the Bible, and they are alienated from Him.

In Romans #5 v. 10 (ROMANS 5:10) the same Apostle Paul also wrote, **“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God...”** The implication of the original Greek grammar is that we were enemies before we were reconciled to God.

Earlier this month Yahoo News (May 5, 2021) reported on a survey of American adults which found that 81% believe that humankind is inherently good, 75% of people surveyed believe that they are fundamentally a good person, and 46% of those questioned believe that they are better than everyone else whom they know.

(PROJECTOR OFF)

Several years ago I read a report in *Scientific American* (Nov. 2012) about psychologists from Harvard and Yale who tried to set up an experiment to determine whether human beings are naturally good and cooperative. It looked pretty goofy to me. But this was their conclusion: **“These results suggest that our first impulse is to cooperate--- that Augustine and Hobbes were wrong [both of them said that humans are basically selfish and not inherently good] and that we are fundamentally ‘good’ creatures after all.”**

My first reaction to that was: These guys have clearly never had kids of their own. I never saw it happen with my infants when they woke up in the middle of the night and

were hungry that their first impulse was to cooperate. “Stop crying, Poopsie. Give me five minutes to get your bottle ready.” That was really effective.

Consider what is going on in big cities across our country in recent months. Police and the institution of the family are two restraints upon evil. Police have been defunded and marginalized, and broken families have come to be prevalent in inner cities. As Dr. Phil would say, “So how is that working for you?” Are people being naturally cooperative in these cities? In Portland the murder rate has increased 800% in the last year. Other cities like Chicago and Los Angeles and New York City and Baltimore have experienced double digit increases in murders and other serious crimes.

The Bible says that we are created in the image of God and have great value and worth. But because of the sin of Adam and Eve, we have a sin nature. We are not inherently good. We are alienated from God. The original word in our text means that we are strangers to Him. We don’t really have a relationship with Him.

In fact we are hostile in mind to the God who is really there. When we don’t have a proper relationship with Him, we reject the notion that there are absolute moral truths. We object to the notion that God of the Bible should be in charge of our life. We want to do our own thing. Some of the things that we do are evil in God’s eyes. We kill babies in the womb. We do sexually whatever we want. We take God’s name in vain. We engage in addictive behaviors.

Lady Huntington was a Christian woman who urged her friend, the Duchess of Buckingham, to come with her to hear the famous 18th century evangelist, George Whitefield. She got a reply from the duchess saying, **“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 would relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.”**

Such is the thinking of many people today. The truth is that from the perspective of the holy God of the Bible we are all wretched sinners. Before we can be reconciled to the God who is there, we need to understand and believe that we have a need for reconciliation with Him. We are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. We can either accept God’s offer of reconciliation now, we will be forcibly reconciled later on.

III.

(PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MEANS OF RECONCILIATION) At the beginning of v. 22 and in the middle of v. 20 the Apostle Paul talks about THE MEANS OF RECONCILIATION. At the beginning of v. 22 he writes, **“...he [God the Father] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death...”** There are at least two things that this tells us about reconciliation. One, God the Father is the initiator of the process. Two, the means are the death of Jesus Christ. The middle part of v. 20 also mentions His death. Paul speaks of making **“peace through the blood of His cross...”**

The apostle says a similar thing in Romans 5:10 (ROMANS 5:10). I read the first part of the verse a moment ago. Paul continues, **“For if while we were enemies--- that’s the need for reconciliation--- we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son--- that’s the means of reconciliation--- ...”**

The Old Testament system of sacrifice taught by its symbolism that the wages of sin is death. The regular requirement of animal sacrifices taught that God is holy and that man’s sin has serious consequences. Sin is deserving of death. God graciously provided for substitute sacrifices of animals to be made. Eventually Jesus Christ became the final and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. His sacrifice was sufficient because He was both God and man. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The false teachers at Colossae seemed to deny Christ’s full humanity. That’s why Paul in v. 22 stresses that it was Christ’s “fleshly body” that died.

The basis for our reconciliation, then, is a historical event that happened 2000 years ago. It is the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The benefits of the substitute sacrifice, however, become ours only when we personally receive the forgiveness of sins that is offered to us. Our responsibility is to trust in Jesus and what He did for us by dying on the cross.

Through Don Moberger I got to know an ex-offender who was converted to Christ in prison in Rhode Island. His name was Bob. Bob was manning a prison ministry booth at an annual Christian convention in Boston a number of years ago when an elderly woman came up to him and stared intently at him. After looking at his identification badge, she said, **“I have a bone to pick with you!” “Do I know you?”** Bob asked.

She replied, **“We’ve met once before, back in 1967. But at that time you were holding a gun to my head, and you were so intent on getting out of my establishment that we were never properly introduced.”** Bob then recognized her as the Jewish woman whose liquor store in Rhode Island he had robbed.

Bob didn’t know what to expect next. But the woman gave him a big hug and said, **“Isn’t it great how the Lord has changed both of our occupations?”** Bob asked, **“Does this mean that I have been forgiven?”** She answered, **“You were forgiven from the day I came to know Jesus Christ as my Savior in 1971, but I have not had the opportunity to tell you about it until today.”**

Bob was surprised that the woman would be able to recognize him after so many years. But she explained, **“I kept the picture of you that appeared on the front page of the *Woonsocket Call* on the day you were arrested. I put it on a wall in my house and I would curse you and throw darts at it almost daily until the day I was saved. From that day on I began praying daily for your salvation.”**

The basis for Bob’s reconciliation with this woman was an event that happened in her life in 1971. But Bob benefited from that only when he personally received it many years

later. The basis for our reconciliation with God is the death of Jesus Christ that happened 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. But the benefits of that event come to us only when we receive the gift of forgiveness offered to us in Christ by trusting in Him.

IV.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE GOAL OF RECONCILIATION) Consider then THE GOAL OF RECONCILIATION, as described in the second part of v. 22. Paul continues a sentence, saying, “...**in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...**” The word for “present” was used in the first century of bringing another person before the court. So this is legal language.

The New Testament teaches that when a person trusts in Christ as his or her Savior, he or she is justified, another legal term. That means that he is declared righteous. But in this verse the author seems to anticipate a future presentation, a presentation that happens at the end of history when Christ returns. The question is: What courtroom scene is pictured here? Is it a judgment situation where people may be sentenced to hell? I don't think so. Paul in this letter does not seem to doubt that his audience is comprised of Christians. He speaks of them as having been reconciled to God. It seems more likely to me that he is speaking about a judgment of rewards that awaits every Christian. Paul speaks of this judgment in 1 and 2 Corinthians.

In 2 Corinthians #5 v. 10 (2 CORINTHIANS 5:10) he says to Christians, “**For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.**” The apostle gives a more detailed description of this in 1 Corinthians #3. (1 CORINTHIANS 3:10) Beginning in v. 10 he writes, “**According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. (1 CORINTHIANS 3:11) For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 CORINTHIANS 3:12) Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— (1 CORINTHIANS 3:13) each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. (1 CORINTHIANS 3:14) If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. (1 CORINTHIANS 3:15) If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.**”

The picture that I get of this scene is that of a kind of graduation ceremony. Everybody will be happy to be here. Some will get more rewards than others. But the person who is last in his class will still have reason to be happy that he or she is graduating.

The goal here is to have rewards--- to be found holy and blameless and above reproach, to be commended by our Savior for a life well lived. The author is not talking about sinless perfection. He is talking about maturity. In 1 Timothy # 3 Paul says that one of the qualifications for elders is that a man must be found to be “above reproach.” This does not mean sinless. It is a description of spiritual maturity, of a generally

consistent lifestyle. This is what Paul wants for the Colossians; this is what God wants in us.

V.

(V. THE EXPECTED RESULT OF THE RECONCILIATION) Finally, in v. 23 we have a description of THE EXPECTED RESULT OF OUR RECONCILIATION. At the end of history we will be participants in Christ's earthly kingdom and in His heavenly kingdom, if we are truly Christians. In the present we have been declared righteous by virtue of our reconciliation with God through Christ. So how will this affect the way that we live in the meantime? It means that we should persevere in the faith.

(COLOSSIANS 1:23) Paul continues a sentence in v. 23, “**...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.**”

Is our eternal salvation at stake? Is this a conditional salvation? No. It seems to me that the issue is a blameless presentation at the judgment seat of Christ. What is necessary is a perseverance in hope. The danger for the Christians at Colossians is that they will turn away from the hope of the gospel.

The false teachers at Colossae, like cult leaders today, maintain that grace is not enough. Good works are necessary. Following manmade rules is necessary to win acceptance by God. Over in #2 vv. 16 & 17 Paul speaks about the false teaching that asks of the Christians that they follow dietary rules and observe religious holidays, including the Sabbath. In v. 18 of #2 he writes, “**Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind...**” The concern here and in vv. 22 & 23 of our passage, in my interpretation, is losing out on rewards. The goal is a good report at the judgment seat of Christ. The expected result of our reconciliation and our perseverance in the hope of the true gospel is a perseverance in the faith.

True Christians should not be swayed from the truth of the gospel message. Paul adds in v. 23 that this message has been proclaimed “**in all creation under heaven.**” This is an example of hyperbole. It is an intentional exaggeration to make a point.

Here Paul means that this gospel has been proclaimed all over the Roman world. This is not some obscure sect of which he is a part. The message that has been preached at Colossae is the same message that has been preached throughout the Roman world and has transformed countless lives. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is this message of which Paul has been made a servant. Unfortunately there are too many people around today who try to make the message and God their servant. We want to be healthy and wealthy and successful and happy. So we try to use our understanding of the gospel message and our perverted conception of God to make us

happy. We are tempted to think that God should be our servant to give us what we want. We act as if we are the center of the universe.

That, however, is not the way that it works. Our responsibility is to serve Him, not to manipulate Him to do our will. As we serve Him, He will give us an abundant life. He may not make us wealthy or keep us physically healthy or make us famous.

By nature we humans are sinners. By nature we are hostile toward God. By nature God is holy. By nature God is angry toward sin and toward sinners. By nature, however, God is also loving, and He has provided a way by which sinful human beings can be reconciled to Himself. That way involves the death of His Son, the God-man Jesus Christ. But we can only benefit from that sacrifice if we have put our trust in Jesus for eternal life. Our responsibility then is to keep on walking with God.

There was a popular song from over forty years ago that expresses in touching fashion something of the meaning of reconciliation. It describes a convict, a sinner, who is returning home and wants to know if reconciliation is still possible for him.

(PROJECTOR ON--- LYRICS???? TIE A YELLOW RIBBON)

I'm comin' home, I've done my time.
Now I've got to know what is and isn't mine.
If you received my letter tellin' you
I'd soon be free, then you'll know just what to do.
If you still want me, if you still want me,
Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.
It's been three long years.
Do ya still want me?
If I don't see a ribbon round the ole oak tree,
I'll stay on the bus, forget about us,
Put the blame on me,
If I don't see a yellow ribbon
Round the old oak tree.

Bus driver, please look for me,
'Cause I couldn't bear to see what I might see.
I'm really still in prison
And my love she holds the key,
A simple yellow ribbon's
What I need to set me free.
I wrote and told her, "Please,
Tie a yellow ribbon round the ole oak tree,
It's been three long years, do ya still want me?"
If I don't see a ribbon round the ole oak tree,
I'll stay on the bus, forget about us,
Put the blame on me,
If I don't see a yellow ribbon
Round the ole oak tree.
Tie a yellow ribbon round the ole oak tree.
It's been three long years, do ya still want me?

Now the whole darn (damn) bus is cheering, (YELLOW RIBBONS)
And I can't believe I see

A hundred yellow ribbons round the ole oak tree.

We humans have also been in prison. But our lover has been waiting for us. And He is waiting for us to come back to Him. There is also an old oak tree in the yard. (CROSS WITH RIBBON) It is a cross. It has a yellow ribbon of sorts. It is actually the crucified God-man Jesus Christ. If you have never been reconciled to Him, put your trust in Jesus.