

Col 1:21-23

Introduction: Paul's Concern (2:4)

Now we began last week by seeing that Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians because he was concerned for them. And we saw he expressed his concern in Chapter 2 and v4 – lets just have a look at that again: Colossians 2:4 ⁴ **I tell you this**, everything that's gone before ⁴ **I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.**

So it seems that they're in danger of being confused and deceived by various arguments. But do you see what kind of arguments: he says by fine sounding arguments – in other words attractive arguments. Because there are many arguments against Christianity – but most of us can see through most of them most of the time – because quite frankly they're clearly wrong or fairly stupid.

- ⌚ But what if an argument against Christianity was so attractive that it sounded reasonable?
- ⌚ What if there was an argument which was so fine sounding that it really caught your attention.
- ⌚ In fact what if there was an argument that actually looked so much like Christianity, that you didn't even notice that it wasn't Christianity.

Well that would be a very dangerous argument to fall for indeed. And that's what seems to have been the kind of problem in Colossae. It's not that anyone was trying to do away with Christianity altogether, it's just that they were moving away from the simple gospel message of the apostles.

And time and again throughout the history of the church that kind of thing has happened.

- ⌚ So for years and years the fine sounding arguments of the Roman Catholic church told people that in order to find full

peace with God you needed the sacrifice of the mass and all kinds of ceremonies in addition to the gospel of Jesus Christ – and it looked like Christianity, but it wasn't.

- ⊙ And then from time to time people have come along with fine sounding arguments and said in order to experience a fulfilled relationship with God you don't just need to be converted, you need some kind of other experience as well – you need a so called second blessing – and it looks like Christianity, but it isn't.
- ⊙ And in our own lives we sometimes deceive ourselves with fine sounding arguments which say that unless I've had a quiet time today, then I'm not right with God, and unless I've been to church this week, then I'm not right with God – and that kind of thinking sounds like Christianity, but it isn't.

And the question is: well what is it in that case that establishes and keeps us in a friendly, right relationship with God? How can we avoid falling for fine sounding arguments which sound Christian, but which aren't Christian? Well Paul's going to tell us, and in order to tell us he takes us back to our conversions, in fact before our conversions, because here's our first point this morning -

1. What you were: ALIENATED (21)

Paul asks the Colossians to look back – to think back – what was your situation before you were a Christian. So maybe I can ask you to do the same this morning – what's the difference between you now and what you were like before you were a Christian? The difference Paul picks out is that before you were a Christian you were alienated.

And alienated is a word we use about relationships. There are all kinds of good words which we use about relationships – friendship, marriage, intimacy, companionship and so on...but they're all good relationship words. Alienation is a bad relationship word: we use it about relationships that have gone wrong. And it's an idea

which for many people conjures up all kinds of sad and uncomfortable memories.

- ⌚ The husband who's become a stranger to his family – he no longer lives in the family home – he's been alienated from his wife. That perhaps that describes a few people here?
- ⌚ The daughter who's become a stranger to her parents – they haven't heard from her, she hasn't heard from them – she's been alienated from them. That perhaps that describes a few people here?
- ⌚ Or the human being who's become a stranger to his creator – he never worships or serves or lives for him – he's become alienated from God. That perhaps – no not perhaps – that certainly describes what used to be true of every single person in this building, v21 - **Once you were alienated from God..** Which means that our relationship with him was in tatters.

And against the background of the story of the Bible that's a tragedy... Do you remember way back at the beginning – Genesis 1 and 2, we're in the garden of Eden and God created Adam and Eve and do remember the kind of picture that we're given of God's relationship with them. God used to come to the garden to look for Adam and Eve, to take a walk with them, to talk with them. In other words it's a picture of friendship, it's a picture of companionship, of fellowship.

And then when Adam and Eve turned away from God, do you remember their instinctive reaction was to run, which is a normal reaction to a sense of guilt isn't it?

Genesis3:8

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

There used to be intimacy, and now what are they doing? They're hiding and skulking in the undergrowth.

And God calls out for them – and there's poignant note in his questions – he says "**Where are you?"** , "**Who told you that you**

were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?"

And it's not that he doesn't know the answers of course, but the fact that he asks them at all, that he calls out after his friends, serves to reveal his deep disappointment and sadness.

And from that moment on the Bible's message is clear – the relationship between God and humankind has gone bad.

There are certain pictures in the Bible that make it crystal clear for us aren't there?

- ⌚ When Adam and Eve are banished from the garden a flaming and flashing sword is placed in the way – there's no way back to the presence of God – mankind is alienated.
- ⌚ And then eventually the nation of Israel comes into being and God institutes the law and all the sacrifices and they're told to build a tent, the tabernacle, and that later becomes the temple. And it's often said that the temple was a sign of God's presence among the people – which is true, but it was also a sign of God's absence – because when you enter the temple and you get to the room where God's presence is said to dwell, what do you find? You find a huge, thick curtain barring your way. And no one, no one is allowed to enter – the message is clear: mankind is alienated from God.

And what was true of Adam and Eve, what was true of ancient Israel was also true of these Colossian believers **Once you were alienated from God** – and it was also true of you and me – and for good reason, because look what Paul says. What is it that characterizes people who are alienated from God? Why is it that you were alienated from God? Well for two reasons says Paul:

First of all because you were enemies in your mind

Once you were alienated from God, says Paul **and were enemies in your minds**. Now do you see the point of that phrase. It is possible to be someone's enemy and yet not want it to be that way. In other words you're on the receiving end of the hostility:

- ⌚ when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Kuwait became his enemy. But they didn't want to be.
- ⌚ when the bully picks on a smaller child, that child becomes his enemy. But he didn't want to be

Yet do you see Paul's point isn't that we were enemies like that. It's not that we were on the receiving end of hostilities – we were the hostile ones! You **were enemies in your minds**. That's where the hostility arose from. God didn't set out to become our enemy. We set out to become his.

And it's easy to get deceived about this – when I think of my own friends or family, the thing that stands out to me is their apathy about Christian things. They don't seem actively hostile towards God it's just that they couldn't care less, they're not really bothered. But actually that's just superficial. The truth about the human heart is that it is hostile to God.

You see I think of a friend:

- ⌚ he's basically good at heart
- ⌚ he's just rather apathetic towards the whole Christian thing
- ⌚ and in fact if I could just stir up some enthusiasm in him I'm sure he'd be interested.

But you see the problem with that kind of thinking is that it's superficial. My friend is not basically good at heart. My friend is an enemy of God in his mind. In other words behind the apathy about God there is antagonism towards God. And the evidence for that antagonism is in behaviour. Because if we are enemies in our minds, we are also...

evil in your deeds

And actually our translation slightly confuses things just here because it says – you **were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour**. It would be better if it said you **were enemies in your minds** and your behaviour was evil. Because actually that's the way it works isn't it – what's inside leads to what's outside. Do you remember what Jesus said in Mark 7–

He said that it's **from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,** ²² **greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.** ²³ **All these evils come from inside** that's Jesus analysis of the situation. And that's what Paul's saying: alienated from God, because we were enemies in our minds and evil in our behaviour.

And that described all of us at one stage. And of course it may *still* describe some of us here this morning. I wonder how would you describe your relationship with God – is it that you are still alienated from God? Because if v21 still describes you, then v22 is just what you need.

Point 1: What you were: alienated

Point 2. What you are: RECONCILED (22)

Now Paul says that the Colossians have been rescued from that desperate position in v21. V22, he says - **But now he has reconciled you** Which of course is a way talking about relationships being restored:

- ⌚ So if that husband who'd become a stranger to his family is welcomed back, and if the problems are worked through, and if he returns home – then he's reconciled.
- ⌚ And if that daughter who'd become a stranger to her parents gets back in touch, and if parents are overjoyed to hear her and to see her – then she's reconciled.
- ⌚ And if that human being who'd become a stranger to his creator is brought back into friendship with God, in the kind of close and intimate way that we remember in the Garden of Eden – then he's been reconciled.

And that's what Paul says has happened! **But now he has reconciled you.** In other words that flaming sword has been removed so to speak. That barrier curtain in the temple has been torn in two – literally. There's a way back into friendship with God.

And Paul explains what it is: he says God it in the past through Jesus' death to prepare you for judgement day. That's what Paul means when he says that we've been reconciled. So let's take it bit by bit.

First of all he says God did it

That is to say – reconciliation is a work of God. In other words the story of the Bible is not the story of man's search for God. That's not true of the Bible and actually it's not true of any other religion. Sure all kinds of religions speak of God - some even speak of searching for God – but not the true God.

- ⊙ The truth is that religion is a flight from the true God.
- ⊙ 'Verse 21' people - people who are enemies in their minds and evil in their behaviour – that kind of person – in other words every single person – that kind of person is not searching for God. That kind of person is a settled enemy of God. There'll be no hope of peace unless God undertakes the peace making.
- ⊙ But actually the situation's worse than that. Because even if we did want a restored relationship with God there is still the problem of God's wrath.

Because turning your back on God and making yourself God's enemy is just the most serious of matters. And just as it won't do for an offender to sorry to the judge – justice must be done – so it won't do for the sinner to say sorry to God – Divine justice must be done.

But the problem is this: divine justice demands that those who have cut themselves off from God shall be cut off from God by God forever. In other words those Old Testament symbols of a flaming sword and a barrier curtain are actually very chilling symbols – because they're saying the way back to God has been closed. No access. You became God's enemy, and now God has rightly become your enemy.

You see it's true that sin is a big problem. But it's not our biggest problem. Our biggest problem is God's righteous response to our sin – the wrath of God.

And so when we say we need to be reconciled to God – what we primarily mean is this – not that our sin needs to be removed – although it does. No what we primarily mean is that God's wrath needs to be removed. That flaming sword, that barrier curtain, that no access sign into the presence of God needs removing. God put it there. And only God can take it away. That is why reconciliation is only something which God can do. Hence v21 - **But now *he*, God, has reconciled you**

Reconciliation: God did it – only he could.

But then next: God did it in the past

In other words reconciliation is something that has already been accomplished.

Actually you can see that if you look back at last week's passage – just glance up at vv19 and 20: **For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.** Do you see – when was it that God made peace – it was when Jesus died on the cross. Paul says it again in our verse, in verse 22 - **But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body** In other words reconciliation is something that has already been accomplished. God has already done it in the past.

- ⌚ He did it before we were even aware we needed to be reconciled.
- ⌚ He did it before we even dreamed of becoming Christians.
- ⌚ He did it before the *Colossians* even dreamed of becoming Christians.

But do you see that makes this reconciliation rather different than reconciliation in human relationships.

So just imagine I fall out with someone –

I've been an idiot, I've treated someone badly and I've said something that I shouldn't have said.

- ⌚ Eventually I come to my senses and I realise this is no good, I need to sort the problem out, I need to be reconciled to that person. What do I need to do? Well I guess depending on who the person is conventional wisdom would suggest a bunch of flowers, or a bit of grovelling and then maybe I'll be forgiven and we'll be reconciled.

But do you see – that is not what is going on here. What Paul is saying here is that reconciliation has already taken place.

- ⌚ So that by the time I come to my senses with God and realise that this is no good, I need to sort the problem out, I need to be reconciled to God - What do I need to do? Well here's the thing: I discover there's nothing left to do. I discover that God's already done what needed to be done in the past. In other words reconciliation is something that has already been achieved.

And so when the Holy Spirit melts my heart and turns my mind away from being God's enemy and turns me back towards God – what do I discover: I discover that the way is already opened – the barrier is already gone – God's wrath is already removed.

- ⌚ Which means that peace with God is not something that has to be achieved by me.
- ⌚ No it means that peace with God is simply something that has to be accepted by me.

So you need to know...

- ⌚ So if you're not yet a Christian you need to know – there's nothing left to do – offer is on the table, God has already made it possible for you to return to him.
- ⌚ And if you are Christian you need to know that peace with God is not something that you will one day enjoy – it's something that you already enjoy.

Already enjoy because of Jesus' death.

God reconciled us in the past through Jesus' death

Because the question is how is it that God can do this? How can God simply remove the punishment for sin?

- ⌚ After all a Judge in a human court can't simply say to the defendant 'Look you've said you're sorry, I think that's enough, I'll let you off' – That wouldn't be right – it's not justice: if he did that he'd be an unjust judge - justice must be done.
- ⌚ So how can God say to us 'Look you've said you're sorry, I think that's enough, I'll let you off' – that wouldn't be right either – it's not justice: if he did that he'd be an unjust God – and justice must be done.

So the question is –

- ⌚ How can a Just God declare unjust sinners to be just and still remain just himself?
- ⌚ How can a Righteous God declare unrighteous sinners to be righteous and still remain righteous himself?

And the answer is – only by the cross. **22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death..**

- ⌚ Not by just forgetting about our punishment
- ⌚ Not by just sweeping it under the carpet
- ⌚ But by being just – by offering to suffer the punishment himself.

Because on the cross God himself received the wrath which was reserved for us. Do you remember those words of Jesus as he hung there – 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' In other words Jesus was experiencing on the cross what each of us deserves – that experience of being cut off from God, that flaming sword, that barrier curtain, that no access sign – Jesus became what we should be: God forsaken. And as he did do you remember what happened to that curtain in the temple? It was torn in two. It was torn in two. As if to say – that's it - the no access sign no longer applies, the wrath is removed, the barrier's gone – *and the way back to God is open*. God himself has paid the penalty for your sin – so you're free to be friends, you're reconciled.

The war is over...

So here's the final thing about reconciliation:

God did it in the past through Jesus death to prepare you for judgement day

Because do you see God's purpose in all this – v22 again: ²² **But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation**

That is to say that one day each and every one of us will have to front up to God on the day of judgement. And that's the day when the final verdict on each of our lives will be announced. There'll be no getting out of it, there'll be no absences, it'll be compulsory attendance.

And by rights what should happen is this – that flaming sword, that barrier curtain – those no access signs should become permanent – imposed on us forever. Shut out from our God and cut off from his friendship. In other words, Hell.

And it will be the most awful moment – standing there before Almighty God without a leg stand on, and maybe you'll say to him – Lord Jesus I am so sorry for the ways I ignored you and rebelled against you and all the things that I did wrong.

And Jesus will say – what will Jesus say – Jesus will say 'What things'. I died for you, and now you are holy, you are totally without blemish.

And maybe at the point the devil will splutter in action and start reminding Jesus, accusing us of all the ways in which we're guilty. And Jesus will silence him and say – what will Jesus say – Jesus will say 'Guilty? I died for this Christian, and now he is totally free – free from any accusation.

In other words – the cross prepares us perfectly for the day of judgement – because through it we've been reconciled to the judge.

Well Paul's told us what we were: alienated
 He's reminded us what we are: reconciled
 And now he tells us...

3. **What to do: CONTINUE (23)**

Because this brings us back to the Colossians. Do you remember they're in danger of being led away from the gospel, the gospel we've just been thinking about – as if it wasn't enough. But of course it is enough. What more could you want or get than a total, final and full reconciliation with God. And just read v22 with me more time: ²² **But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation --** ²³ **if you continue in your faith**
 In other words Paul's saying to them:

stay where you are...

- ⊙ This is the faith that restores your relationship with God
- ⊙ This is the faith that finds you friendship with God

So stay where you are. Continue in your faith – and do you see the two words he uses just there - **continue in your faith, established and firm**. And the thought just there, the word picture Paul is conjuring up is of a house – a house built on a foundation – it's a solid house, it's established and firm – it's not going anywhere. So do you see what he's saying: Christians are to be like houses – built on a foundation of the gospel. So if you're a Christian be like a house - stay where you are on the foundation you were built on – that is stick with the gospel. Be like a house – and don't be like a caravan – because do you see what he says next – he says...

don't move!

V23 **continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard** it's not new – but we often need reminding of it, **and** it's a gospel **that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, by which**

Paul means it's a gospel which people are believing all over the place – in other words, why would you opt for anything else?

- ⊙ Why did people opt for those fine sounding arguments of the Roman Catholic church that you needed all kinds of ceremonies to secure your friendship with God? This gospel secures your friendship with God – so don't move.
- ⊙ And why would you opt for those fine sounding arguments about the need for special experiences to enter into a full relationship with God? This gospel secures your friendship with God – so don't move.
- ⊙ And why would you fall for those fine sounding arguments which say that unless I've had a quiet time today, then I'm not right with God, and unless I've been to church this week, then I'm not right with God – they're important things, but they don't secure your relationship with God – do don't move from the hope held out in the gospel.

The Scottish Preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne once put it like this:

My hope is built on nothing less
 Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
 I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
 But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
 On Christ the solid Rock, I stand;
 All other ground is sinking sand.