

Colossians Part 3: Fullness and Freedom

Week 4: Death to Life!

Sunday, February 5th 2023

✠ Paul's sixth sense

- **One of the more memorable movie quotes of the late nineties is from M. Night Shyamalan's brilliant- and exceedingly creepy- 'The Sixth Sense.' Bruce Willis plays a depressed child psychologist who meets a withdrawn and frightened boy with a disturbing secret. In the movie's critical scene Cole (the weirded out little boy) whispers to Malcolm (the psychologist) words that will not only change Malcolm's life, but explain his life- even though he won't understand this truth until the movie's end.**
- **Do you remember the line? "I see dead people... Walking around like regular people. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're dead."**
- **Like I said, creepy factor ten. (humorous memes)**
- **That said, the story's central concept- that our world is filled with the spirits of dead people who don't realize they are dead- has a profound biblical parallel.**
- **It's where we've arrived in our text today- Colossians 2:13-15. Last week we saw INCREDIBLE statement that IN CHRIST we have been brought to fullness, that our FLESH has been circumcised- (if missed...)- emptied of its power- and we see in the image of baptism the reality that by FAITH we have been joined- buried- with Christ in his death, and joined with Christ in his resurrection. WE ARE PEOPLE OF RESURRECTION, we are FULLY, SPIRITUALLY, ALIVE.**
- **But this wasn't always the case! Keeping in his theme of what Christ has ALREADY ACCOMPLISHED- what is ALREADY TRUE OF YOU BY FAITH- Paul takes a step back and says... BEFORE YOU WERE IN CHRIST...**

As for you, you were dead...

Colossians 2:13a *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh*

✠ When you were dead...

- **In 1989 Bob Dylan released his 20th studio album, and the title track, SAVED, opens with this:**

*I was blinded by the devil- Born already ruined
Stone-cold dead- As I stepped out of the womb*

- **HARD truth- but LIBERATING truth if we will hear- and necessary precursor to truly understanding gospel's astounding hope. Separate Christ's regenerating work on our behalf, we are spiritually dead.**
- **We tend to think of our SIN being humanities fundamental problem, but it's not. If we could go dig up Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, and put them on trial, convict them, and punish them for their crimes against humanity, they wouldn't care, because they are DEAD!**
- **The root cause of the human condition, our inheritance from our spiritual ancestors, A&E, is that apart from what only God can do- and has done In Christ- we are separated from the Life of God and spiritually dead!**
- **Paul gives two realities about this spiritual deadness.**

- **First, we are dead ‘in our sins’.** This preposition **IN** is important: for the believer, our defining reality and identity is that we are **IN Christ**. But apart from Christ, our reality is that we are **IN our sins**. We continually live in the midst of the brokenness, shame, guilt, pride, self-centered living that results from the lack of being connected to the life, influence, goodness of God.
- **OF COURSE, this looks different in different people- there are non-believers who are kind, generous, and compassionate people.. AND, for that matter, there are believers who live as if they are spiritually dead!**
- **But apart from Christ we are mired in the brokenness of our separation from God, whatever that may look like- and if we zoom out just a bit to observe the overall human condition- it doesn’t look good!**
- **In Romans 6 Paul compares spiritual death to being a slave:**

Romans 6:20-21 *When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!*

- **Not only are we dead in our sins – we have the ‘uncircumcision of our flesh.’ TWO MEANINGS HERE!**
- **First, the majority of these Colossian believers would have been GENTILES. So, when Paul says they were dead in the ‘uncircumcision of their flesh’, on the most basic level, he means this LITERALLY. Up until Christ, God’s work, God’s promises, God’s covenant- was through the nation of Israel, and the mark of that covenant was physical circumcision. THIS WAS NOT TRUE of the gentile population of ancient Asia Minor-**
- **PAUL CAPTURES this succinctly in Eph 2:11-13**

Ephesians 2:11-13 *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.*

- **DEEPER MEANING- our flesh understood as we explored last week- our strategies of coping and living out of our own wisdom, strength, and resources (or the lack thereof). POINT- SPIRITUALLY DEAD, apart from Christ and estranged from God... our flesh is ALL WE HAVE. It is our only option and resource for life... and THIS IS KEY- no matter what our FLESH LOOKS LIKE- how corrupt or refined it may be- our flesh will not yield to God.**
- **Paul makes this clear in Galatians 5, when he says...**

Galatians 5:16-17 *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.*

- **This WAS OUR CONDITION- trapped in bondage to the brokenness of our separation from God, and lacking the resource to live any other way.**

- **But the OPERATIVE word in what I just said is WAS. This WAS our condition- because right here – at least in the English- we have one of the BIGGEST COMMA’S in all the New Testament.**
- **WHEN YOU WERE DEAD in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh... COMMA...**

Colossians 2:13b *God made you alive with Christ.*

† **When you were dead... God made you alive!**

- **Back in Ephesians 2...**
you WERE separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world. BUT NOW in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
- **This is one of the great proclamations of the New Testament and the Christian faith- that we who were dead.. and being dead possessing NO CAPACITY WHATSOEVER to bring ourselves back to life- have instead been GIVEN new life by GOD, WITH GOD, and IN CHRIST.**
- **This great hope may be most dramatically seen in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son... you remember... the son comes to his senses, returns home in great humility, and says to his father... (Luke 15)**

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ **HE REALIZED HIS PLACE OF SPIRITUAL DEATH.. HOW did the father respond?**

²²‘But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

- **Multiple times here in Colossians (and other scripture as well) Paul will assert- as believers and part of God’s family, that we have been RAISED to a new life... that our new life has a new SOURCE- LIFE OF GOD, PRESENCE OF CHRIST- and SIGNIFICANTLY, WITH THIS NEW LIFE comes a new WAY of life.**
- **And here we take the next crucial step. Foundational to our new life, Paul describes how in Christ God has fully, completely, and totally, dealt with the issue of our sin.**

Colossians 2:13c *He forgave us all our sins,*

- **We discussed this at length back in chapter one- we must realize that when Paul says ALL... that through Christ God FORGAVE ALL OUR SIN... that**

† **All means all**

- **I could build you a HUGE biblical case demonstrating this reality, but I’ve done that many times, so not going to now. FOR NOW, let’s just clarify a few things- and if this is new to you or you struggle with it, then let’s have a cup of coffee and talk about it.**
- **FIRST, God’s gift of forgiveness to the believer has ALREADY HAPPENED. He FORGAVE us all our sin. When you entered into faith in Christ, the NT cries out that YOU HAVE BEEN MADE NEW, THE OLD HAS GONE, THE NEW HAS COME, and the NEW YOU is totally, completely, from eternity past to eternity future, FULLY FORGIVEN.**

- **One of the eternal attributes of God is that God is OUTSIDE OF TIME- God is active in present in the midst of time, but exists outside of time. MEANING that God has seen your ENTIRE LIFE. God knows EVERY THING you have ever done, thought, and ever will... AND SEEING ALL OF YOU... ALL OF ME... Christ calls us to himself and says... YOU ARE FORGIVEN. YOU ARE MINE. YOU ARE my workmanship, my masterpiece, holy and dearly loved.**
- **You've heard the joke- 'lonelier than the third verse in a Baptist hymnal'... The greatest third verse in the history of hymns is from IT IS WELL with my soul.**

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
 My sin, not in part but the whole!
 It was nailed to his cross, and I bear it no more,
 Bless the Lord, bless the Lord, O my soul!

- **God forgave us ALL our sin... and to explain and expand how God did this, we are told our sin debt against God has been...**

✝ Cancelled!

Colossians 2:14 *'he forgave us all our sin'... having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.*

- **OKAY... the phrase "charge of our legal indebtedness" is very unique in the Greek, and can be understood from two perspectives.**
- **FIRST there's the idea that Paul here refers to the LAW- the Mosaic Law, the code of moral requirements under the old covenant. As is so easily demonstrated, the LAW has no power to bring us to God. In fact, all the law does is bring GUILT AND CONDEMNATION, because when our lives are held up against God's moral perfection, we ALWAYS fail. Horribly!**
- **SO, FIRST, Paul declares- this entire legal system that has brought you under guilt—IT HAS BEEN TAKEN AWAY. IT NO LONGER HAS ANY POWER OF CONDEMNATION OVER YOU.**
- **The SECOND perspective is that this charge of legal indebtedness is the LIST- the indictment of all our sin and rebellion that the law revealed.**
- **Let's say I'm a career criminal, I've been caught, hauled before the court, and the prosecuting attorney says.. HERE'S THE US PENAL CODE- the list of ALL THE LAWS OF our country. AND HERE... list just slightly shorter... is the record of every way Ethan has broken them.**
- **AND PAUL SAYS.. BOTH of these- both the system that placed us under guilt, and our own sin that violated that system... ALL OF IT has been placed on the cross with Christ, ALL of it's power of condemnation against me, against you DIED WITH CHRIST, and the system and its charges against you has been CANCELLED.**
- **In Christ God has forgiven ALL YOUR SIN, and YOU ARE FREE. Can I get an AMEN!**
- **NOW, THAT would be an awesome place to stop. But Paul has one more connected thought there, and it's important.**

Colossians 2:15 *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

- **FOUR TIMES** here in Colossians 2 Paul has referred to either the ‘powers and authorities’ or the ‘elemental spiritual forces of this world.’... also translated the ‘elementary principles’ of this world.
- There are many different thoughts about who these are, what Paul means- but some consensus they are basically the same. **SO, WHO (what) ARE these powers and authorities?**
- **ONE** reality we struggle with in our modern and postmodern world view- but is a biblical reality nonetheless- is these powers and authorities are the demonic forces, fallen angels, and satanic forces that for all of history have sought to corrupt and undermine the goodness of God and enslave God’s creation. There are multiple references to this in Genesis and hinted at throughout scripture.
- **OUR UNIVERSE** is not just a physical reality, it is a **SPIRITUAL REALITY**, and there are dangerous spiritual forces that seek to kill, steal, destroy, and lead the nations astray. **THAT** is a big and strange topic to explore, but it is real, and it is important.
- A step closer, our lives are filled with powers and authorities that **WE** create, and then place in positions of power and authority over us. Some of these may be perfectly morally neutral, even good, but if we look to them in place of God they become **IDOLS**, and our idolatry could well be included in what Paul calls the ‘elemental principles and spiritual forces of the world.’
- **BUT HERE’S THE THING.** Regardless of what these texts specifically refer to, Paul describes the indisputable truth that there always have been, there are, and there always will be (this side of eternity) spiritual forces, powers, and authorities that seek to resist and undermine the good purposes of God.
- And Paul’s **POINT** is that **ON THE CROSS**, by Christ’s death and resurrection, **ALL OF THESE POWERS HAVE BEEN DEFEATED.** For the person made alive in Christ- and for the community of Christ- these powers hold **NO SENSE OF AWE** from us, **NO AUTHORITY** over us, and no power of **FEAR** to extract from us.
- **Not only that, using very evocative language, we are told these forces have been...**

✠ Humiliated

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

- With the word ‘triumphing’ Paul draws upon the greatest spectacle of the ancient Roman world- what was literally known as a **TRIUMPH.**
- From time to time a Roman Emperor, or less common a Roman general, would accomplish an incredible victory on the field of battle or in a military campaign. When they would return home to Rome, the greatest honor they could receive was a **TRIUMPH**- a majestic parade throughout the streets of Rome, all the way to the Forum, with the returning hero leading the way. The entire population would be present, the parade would include floats

and artwork depicting the emperors victories, and MOST IMPORTANTLY, the parade would include the vanquished enemies- the conquered generals, soldiers, heads of states, you name it- chained and humiliated before the jeering crowds of Rome. If the triumph was the greatest honor a Roman could receive, then being the conquered enemy was one of the greatest humiliations Rome could dish out.

- *THIS IS PAULS image of the enemies of God- through Christ, they have been defeated, captured, and revealed as utterly humiliated and powerless.*
- *THAT’S an image! But there’s even more. The word for ‘disarmed’ is more literally translated ‘stripped’- and some scholars have suggested Paul here is painting a deeply ironic picture of what actually happened on the cross. I’m going to use here the words of NT Wright.*
- *“... all of these powers, angry at Jesus’ challenge to their sovereignty, stripped HIM naked, held HIM up to public contempt, and celebrated their triumph over HIM.*
- *INSTEAD, in one of the most dramatic paradoxes of the gospel, ON THE CROSS and in the spiritual realm, God stripped THEM naked, held THEM up to public contempt, and led THEM in his own triumphal procession.*
- *IN DOING SO God exposed these powers for what they were- usurpers of authority which was properly His. THE CROSS therefore becomes the source of HOPE for all who are held captive under their rule, enslaved in fear and mutual suspicion. NOW, Christ welcomes all these captives into a NEW FAMILY in which the ways of the old world- it’s behavior, it’s distinctions of race, class, and sex, it’s blind obedience to the forces of politics, economics, prejudice, and superstition- have become simply out of date, a ragged a defeated rabble.”*
- *THAT is awesome! If you know what it means to ‘drop the mic,’ THAT is a time to drop the mic.*
- *Let’s close with this. We began with Paul’s assertion that apart from Christ we are spiritual dead.*
- *NOW, because of what Christ fully accomplished on the cross FOR US, TOTALLY FORGIVING US and MAKING US ALIVE- you could very accurately say we are now...*

† Dead to being dead

- *Martin Luther described the message of this passage as the ‘Glorious exchange’... Through the cross Christ took our sin, and in exchange gave us His righteousness. As the wonderful Easter song says: “OH the wonderous cross.. bids me come and die, and find that I may truly live.”*

Romans 6:6-8 *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*

And our new life and new identity in Christ- this is who we are and the reality in which we live, TODAY.