

Colossians 1:21-23

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon, everyone. It is lovely to be with you again. Thank you so much to our musicians for leading us in that time of worship. Let's continue in an attitude of worship as we seek to understand God's Word this morning. Now, you heard Emma's prayer.

She's prayed that you'd stay awake so you can all contribute to that prayer being answered by giving attention to what God has to say through His Word this morning. So I'm actually going to start with a bit of a test called the attention test just to see how well you actually are really focused and attentive this morning. Are we able to get this up on the screen, gents at the back? I may ask you to pause it at particular points just by way of warning. Let's run this little attention test then. We'll see how we get on.

It's easy to miss some of the details. If you do want to rewrite, if you refuse to believe that the moonwalking bear was there first time round, you might look around at some of the others and recognize that a small minority saw the moonwalking bear. Incidentally, was that because you'd seen that before? Ah, yes, you see, it's so easy to miss the details. Why on earth am I showing you that? Well, I have to confess, when I realized that for my passage today, I only had three verses, I thought, goodness, that's not very much. I quite like the broad brush. I spent a lot of time at work doing the kind of skimming of things and reaching quick conclusions. That's the way I kind of have got used to operating. Three verses for us today? I probably feel more comfortable. If you're going to travel somewhere, get there as fast as possible. Go by plane. Don't think about going by bus. I know some of you like your bus trips where you can take a couple of days to get to your destination. No, no, get there in a couple of hours. And today our challenge is to just slow down a little bit and see if we can capture some really vital details. See if we can capture some things which in this passage, even as Emma read these verses, I think some of us may have missed, or at least we may have missed, what I would suggest is enormous life-changing significance in these verses. So since it was only three verses, I'm going to take the liberty of just reminding you of them again and suggesting that if you have a Bible in paper version or by phone, you might want to just reflect on these verses. We're in Colossians. We've had a couple of great messages in previous weeks from Colossians already. If you've missed them, do feel free to listen online. They are all there. We've had a marvelous description earlier on of Jesus in these verses and how supreme he is over everything. And then we crash in, in verse 21, into what we are like in the context of all of these verses about what Jesus is like. And we read that once you were alienated from God, verse 21, and were enemies in your mind because of your evil behavior. 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. If you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

And that's it. I have to say, as I've got into these three verses, I've begun to think there's far too much in these three verses to even cover in the short time that we have together. So I'm going to say very little about that interesting final sentence about the gospel that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and leave you perhaps to have some discussions afterwards about what might be going on there. And we're just going to look at what I think are nine words right in the middle that have really impacted on my mind and heart this week. And that I want to just really encourage you to slow down, but not fall asleep, and really pay attention on. Those nine words are going to appear on the screen. They are the nine words, holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation. Did you spot them? I'm sure you did. Do you know we've actually sung songs that capture already quite a lot of the language used in the nine words? And I wonder whether some of the truth of those songs has actually landed with us or whether it's kind of, it's kind of, kind of gone over our heads. Because if you've come to church like this a lot, we do actually use this language quite a bit.

We do speak about all that Jesus has done and the fact that through what he has done, this is what we are.

[5 : 08] Holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation. The words are written in a particular context. They're written to new followers of Jesus Christ living in Colossae, but just as they are true of those followers of Jesus in Colossae, so they are true of all followers of Jesus, past, present, future, holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation. Now if we go back to the start of the passage at verse 21, it's very, very clear that none of us have started out life that way. Paul, having provided this amazing description earlier on in the passage of Jesus, the one who holds everything together, the one who existed before the world began, the one in whom all of God's fullness dwells, the one who has made peace with everything by his blood on the cross. Paul then turns the spotlight away from this glorious picture of Jesus and just for a moment says, I need to talk to you about how you fit in to all of this. Because I'm afraid if this is the glorious stuff that God is doing in Jesus, you start off outside of it all. Imagine a big map where you're seeing all that going on and you're a bit lost. Where do you fit in? And actually as you look closely, there's a pin and a sign saying, you are here. And the you are here sign shows that you're not even part of all of this grand story.

You're outside of it all. This is all going on and you are alienated from God. Verse 21, enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. You're not just a little bit distant.

It's not just that you're going to have to try a bit harder to get into this great big story of all that Jesus is doing and all that God is doing. Nor is it that God has abandoned you.

It's the fact that you, we, me have made conscious choices to turn away from God. Very clear, enemies in your minds. Why? Because of your evil behavior. Day after day after day, we've made choices not to follow him, not to honor him, not to live up to his holy standards. And note that it's not that these Christians had then making a decision to clean up their act, to stop their bad habits, to use better languages, to go on a pilgrimage, to commit to living a life of greater prayer or of fasting or of greater church attendance. None of that would have made the slightest bit of difference to their situation of where they were in the middle of God's big story. They would have remained just as alienated than they had ever, than they set out being, as with us. And I wonder if some of us here in church today, as we've sang and we've heard a bit about God's great story and all that God is doing in Jesus, we recognize that if the pen is put in the map and we have to identify where we are at in it, there's going to be a big flag that says you're here. You're here. You're still in this place of being alienated from God and enemies in your mind because of your evil behavior. And Paul wants us to understand, God's word wants us to understand that the challenge to us today then is not about modifying our behavior. It's not going to work. The challenge to us today is going to be about embracing who Jesus is, why he came, and having faith and trust in him. And in doing so, we understand from this passage the marvelous difference between alienation and reconciliation. That's what's offered here. Verse 21, once you were alienated from God. Verse 22, just so close, but now reconciled. Once alienated, but now reconciled. Reconciled how? Reconciled by Christ's physical body through death. Let's just pause on that word. Reconciliation. It's an amazing word. Reconciliation. Those far apart being brought together. I wonder if some of you can think of examples in your own life of where there has been reconciliation. Perhaps reconciliation in a family or a friend's situation. And I'm sure if you've seen that, you can capture something of the joy of broken relationships being restored. But I'm sure you will also be able to think of the hard, hard work that has gone into that reconciliation. And I know that I'm on sensitive territory here, because for many we will be conscious of relationships still marked by alienation, where we feel that there is no prospect of reconciliation due to the actions of one or other party. Let me broaden it out from the personal to some of the big things that we're seeing in politics. And this year, I think one of the greatest things we've seen, one of the most encouraging things, is some of the scenes of reconciliation between North and South Korea. As we've seen, the leaders there take sometimes what looks like just a simple step towards each other. But as I've looked into some of that and heard a little bit from those who have been doing a phenomenal amount of work behind the

scenes in terms of what's going on in North and South Korea, I've been reminded again of the fact that that reconciliation has only been possible through a vast amount of work, planning, preparation, steps forward, steps back, all sorts of effort and endeavour that lies behind the reconciliation that we are beginning to see. And I think Paul wants these Colossians to be in no doubt that the reconciliation that they can enjoy is not because of a huge amount of effort and endeavour on their part, but it absolutely is reconciliation that has been achieved at great cost. Such a cost that it took the death of Jesus Christ in order to achieve that reconciliation. I know for some of you, this is bread and butter stuff. But I hope that for some of us, we might be able to enjoy again the truth of all that it is that Jesus Christ offers us through his death and resurrection. And so if we are willing to put our faith and our faith in Jesus, what this passage is that we have been reconciled and we are actually brought before God's throne. Look again at the language of verse 22. Now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish, free from accusation.

[13:11] This is not about us feeling wretched and feeling that somehow or other we must, with shame and guilt, come towards God's throne. There is absolutely a place for coming towards God in repentance, as has been echoed in some of our prayers. But the sense here in verse 22 seems to be that because of what Jesus Christ has done, he is the one who now presents us right before God's throne and says, these people, these Christians in Colossae and followers of Jesus past, present and future, these people now are holy, without blemish and free from accusation. Let's just unpack briefly these three phrases to try and get a bit more of an understanding of what's actually going on.

Holy in his sight. I've found the word holy, as I've looked at various Bible passages about it, quite a difficult one to define. It's one that we'll use in lots of our songs here. It's one that is a characteristic attributed to God himself throughout the Bible on many, many, many occasions. A one that comes with a sense of absolutely pure, set apart, perfect, acceptable in God's sight. And holiness is something that we are absolutely challenged to pursue as Christians. So you might want to look later at 1 Peter chapter 1, where we're challenged to be holy because God is holy. So there's something about consciously actually acting to seek to be holy. But the Bible also teaches us gloriously that Jesus died, the Holy One, to pay the price of our sin. And because he is holy, he, through trusting in him, makes us holy. Hebrews 10 verse 10 says this, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Jesus, the only holy one who ever lived and breathed on this earth. The one who himself chose to experience separation from God, chose to take on himself all of our unholiness, chose to bear all of the sin and shame and stuff that makes us unholy in order that we can stand before God as holy. And so now I can say with confidence, and I can encourage you to say too, that if you're trusting in Jesus, you can come to God's throne, you can be brought to God's throne by Jesus. And Jesus says to his father, God, look at what I have done, rather than what this person has done. I love this person. I've died for them, and I've made them holy. Look around.

We're looking at people who are defined by God, not by all that we have done in the past, not by all of our failures past, present, and future. You're looking around at people who, if simply trusting in Jesus, are defined as holy in his sight because we bear the holiness that Jesus alone had. Hebrews 10 again, by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. Without blemish. What's going on there? If holiness is something that's deeply internal, something that Jesus gives us on account of his holiness and his death for us, without blemish, maybe gives us that sense of what's there externally. Jesus is described in 1 Peter 1 as a lamb without blemish or defect. And so once again, the sense we have is that Jesus is the only one who truly bore these characteristics. But yet Jesus was the one who died for us in order that we can now bear these characteristics. In the Old Testament, God specified time and time and time again, I counted 46 references, and I'm sure I missed plenty of them, specifies the need for animals who were being sacrificed to provide temporary cover for the sins of the people to be without blemish. Time and again, they must be without blemish if they're going to provide cover. And I look at myself and my own heart, and I look through this book in Colossians, which, come chapter 3, has got big, big lists of the sorts of characteristics that we human beings that certainly I can see myself as being marked by.

All the sorts of things that create so many blemishes. And we'll explore them in weeks to come, but Paul talks about anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying. And I guess a lot of us can look at these lists and we can say, yep, that's what we're like. And it's very easy then just to feel so blemished. And I think hard sometimes to really enter into this ability to come to God free from blemish. As I was just reflecting on this, I was thinking about our youngest son, Sam, who many of you know, who has a particular ability, as Elizabeth is very well aware of, to become absolutely filthy within minutes of putting on what might be a lovely outfit of clothes. And it seems there's a bit of a movement to encourage children to play in mud and just to kind of scrabble around with mud, rocks, branches. And apparently it's great for the development of our children, but it's probably not great for the calmness of their parents or the long life of our washing machines. But nonetheless, it doesn't take too long to tear off the filthy clothes, to get into the shower and to put on a fresh outfit, which might stay reasonably clean at least for a few minutes. Jesus offers us new clothes this morning. Jesus says, do you know what? Yes, you've got clothes that are full of blemishes. Do you know what? Let me take them. Let me take them. In fact, I've dealt already with all of that stuff and let me offer you a new set of clothes. Let me offer you my righteousness, my purity and stand before God, holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. What does it mean to be free from accusation? I've been struck, as I'm sure many of you have, by the way in which in recent months, many, many people in public life have been accused of a whole bunch of stuff that they may or may not have done in the past. But it seems that many of them did do the stuff in the past. I'm thinking of the whole Me Too movement. And they've been accused of this stuff, I suspect, many years after it had happened. And they've assumed that there would never be any accusation brought against them, perhaps because of their power or their position or due to the passage of time. And then suddenly they found themselves, maybe 10, 20 years, accusations are brought. And whole lives and reputations crumble. We've seen it even this week as suddenly accusations are brought. They're brought in many cases legitimately because the thing giving rise to the accusation has never been dealt with.

Therefore, it doesn't matter how much time has passed. The accusation is still legitimate if the underlying offences have never, ever been addressed. How is it then we can be confident that we can stand before God, holy, without blemish and free from accusation? Well, we're back to the wonder of what we call the gospel. We're back to the fact that Jesus has promised he will never bring accusations against us on the basis of what we've done in the past or done in the present or will do in the future because he has dealt with it all fully. It's not as though it's sort of like, yes, of course, our actions past, present and future may have consequences for us in this life. But in terms of our life with God, if we are trusting in Jesus, then he says to us, you can come into my presence free from accusation. Psalm 103 contains that promise that we worship the God who removes our sins as far as the east. No, it's that way. As far as the east is from the west. Jesus was accused of so many things.

[22 : 26] But because he bore all of what we were accused for, we can now stand before him forgiven and free.

Of course, we do have an accuser. We still have one who will prowl around trying to accuse us of all sorts of stuff, trying to say there's no way we can come before God like this. There's no way. Do you realize how much of a failure you are? Do you realize, oh, no, just give up on church because, look, these other folks seem to be living life better. But come on, there's no point in you going because if they knew what your life was really like, you wouldn't be welcome there. That's the devil's accusation into our life. That's not us holding on to Jesus and to all that Jesus has done for us.

We sang earlier, when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, what do I do? So what's this all about? What's the relevance of this for our lives? Well, I hope we, as individuals, despite all of our sin and shame, can be reminded again this morning of the invitation through Jesus, through his death, to approach God's throne with confidence, not defined by our past, not defined by our failures, but knowing that as we look to Jesus, we are welcomed as his own. Every one of us welcomed into the presence of God through Jesus. Encouraged not to be obsessed with past feelings and sins. Of course, we need to repent of our sin and turn daily to God. But this, brothers and sisters, is about freedom from guilt. This is about grace. This is about mercy. This is about a fresh start, day after day after day. This is about joy and confidence in God's presence. This is an end to beating ourselves up time and time again. This is freedom. Freedom to love and serve

God, knowing that we are accepted and forgiven. Now, I'd love to just stop there, but I cannot get away from the fact that Colossians, even in these little verses that we watched, do go on to give us a real challenge. And you'll have seen it there in verse 23. All this is true, but the challenge here in verse 23 is that we must continue in our faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. Do we look at it and think, oh no, oh no, is this where actually all of this wonderful truth about Jesus all kind of, actually we are going to have to work really hard in order to keep hold of this? Well, absolutely not. That is not what is going on here at all. As Wayne touched on yesterday, the Bible has an awful lot to say about faith, an awful lot that we're not going to be able to do justice to today. But there's absolutely a recognition here that in order to enjoy all of this, we must continue in our faith, established and firm. Some versions contain a warning against drifting. Maybe just reflect on that word drift. Not something that happens overnight. It's not so much a sense of, oh yes, I'm following Jesus today and no tomorrow I'm going to abandon it all.

More of a sense of a slow fading. And I wonder if some of you are recognising that that just might be going on in your own heart and life. So let's guard against a risk that we feel that our acceptability before God is down to our works. It absolutely isn't. Our works will continue to do nothing in terms of our acceptability to God. But also let's guard against any sense of cheap grace that says that because of God's unconditional love, we can just live however we like.

[26 : 37] Because therein lies the risk of drift. And I think the answer, the balance may lie in a song that those of us who were there yesterday sang time and time again in our two worship times, where we challenged each other, where we encouraged each other to turn our eyes upon Jesus, to look full in his wonderful face, and there to see the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

I'd love to give you just a couple of minutes to reflect on these small verses. Not many verses, lots of truth in them. And I'd like to play just an excerpt really from a song which echoes some of the words of the song that we sang earlier. But I'd invite you as you just watch and perhaps reflect on the words of this song and reflect on the chorus. Boldly, I approach your throne. Blameless now, I'm running home. By your blood I come, welcomed as your own into the arms of majesty.

Jesus wants you to run to his presence. In fact, he presents you in his presence and says, this person trusting in me is now holy without blemish and free from accusation. May we be individuals and may we be a church that knows what it is to run to God rather than run away from him and have great confidence in all that he is and all that he has done for us. Let's watch this as we just reflect for a minute or two and I'll close and pray. Father God, may what we have read and thought about today be a reality in each of our lives. May we know what it is to be freed, to be forgiven, to be rescued through all that you have done for us, Jesus. And we say simply, thank you, Jesus. Amen.