

## **Those Reconciled to God Persevere in Faith Campbell Baptist Church (02/23/2025)**

Back in the fall of 1980, a brand-new pastor faced the challenge of confronting a couple who was cheating on each other. This pastor was 34 years old and had zero pastoral experience. The husband and wife he was confronting were both 28 years of age. Bringing the wife in to meet with him, the pastor said, “Now, what are you doing?” She was sleeping with a guy every weekend who was not her husband. And so, the pastor said, “You’ve got to stop that. This weekend, you’re not showing up.” And she said, “I don’t know. It’s really hard.” To which, the pastor said, “There’s no question here. That’s over. We don’t do that. Those who do such things, those who persevere in doing such things, will be damned.”

At that, the wife’s face changed. She said, “That’s not what our previous pastor said. He said that I was eternally secure.” She then quoted the text with which we began our service this morning: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

She thought, “So not even the devil can. He can make me sin and commit adultery, but he can’t separate me from the love of God.” She had this thing theologically all worked out, so she would sleep with the guy every weekend and feel secure. “That’s not what that text means,” the pastor responded. He then went on to quote texts like the one from Colossians that we’re going to look at this morning, texts that hang seem to hang a big “IF” over the idea of eternal security. The woman was absolutely staggered but she and her husband stayed married. It took a while but they worked through their issues and stayed married. This same pastor confronted another woman whose husband caught her in bed with another man, saying, “Let me just tell you that if you don’t break this off, you’re going to go to hell.”

Tell me: What do you think about this pastor and his methods? Would it change anything for you to know that this pastor was John Piper and that he shared these stories twenty-eight years into his thirty-year ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church as part of a 1

conference on the five points of Calvinism?

“[E]ternal security is a community project,” Piper said. “It’s not automatic. It’s not mechanical. It’s a day-by-day, moment-by-moment working of the sovereign God to get a mind back on track.” In fact, Piper looked to our text for this morning in saying these things.<sup>1</sup> If you haven’t done so already, please open your Bible to Colossians chapter 1—that’s on page 983 of the pew Bible—and follow along with me as I read verses 21 to. That’s Colossians chapter 1 verses 21 to 23. Let us hear, now, the word of the LORD:

21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 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.

This is the word of the LORD. Thanks be to God.

Notice the “if” with which verse 23 begins. According to Paul, Christ has reconciled us by his death in order to present us holy and blameless before him, if we continue in the faith. When Richard Phillips first encountered the “if” in our text, he said that it felt like “the grace seemed to drop out of the bottom of [his] salvation.”<sup>2</sup> Is that how you felt when we read our text for this morning? Did it sound like, for all our talk about salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, that now our own personal effort was somehow involved in keeping us saved, that we could drop in and drop out of salvation? If so, then we’ve got some work to do. The same Paul who issued the “if” here in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 23 also said that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. So, what is going on here? To answer that question,

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1 John Piper, “Perseverance of the Saints,” Bethlehem Institute seminar delivered 15 March 2008 [<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/perseverance-of-the-saints-session-8>] accessed 19 February 2025.

2 Richard D. Phillips, *Colossians & Philemon in the Reformed Expository Commentary 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2024), 95.

I want us to look carefully at the verb tenses that Paul uses in our text for this morning. Paul moves from the past to the present to the future in such a way that the “if” that initially seems to put our perseverance and therefore our security into question is clarified to reassure us that “he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

In other words, the “if” in our text doesn’t need to scare you provided you know that you’ve been reconciled to God by Christ’s death. Do you? Perhaps it might help to walk through our text and hear the gospel message unpacked for us once again in terms of our past, our present, and our future in order to find the reassurance that we need in order to continue in the faith as we must.

**So, let’s look at the past and consider how we were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.**

That’s verse 21: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.” We were alienated. We were hostile in mind, doing evil deeds. But our status changed (past tense) if we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we heard. What are we to make of this “if”? In thinking through how best to explain what’s going on here, I was greatly helped by another sermon that John Piper preached on this theme from Hebrews chapter 3, a text containing two more troublesome ifs. In looking at Hebrews chapter 3 and verse 6, which says, “We are [Christ’s] house [his household, his people] if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end,” Piper says,

Notice carefully. It does not say: we will become Christ’s house if we hold fast to our hope. It does say: we are his house if we hold fast to our hope. In other words, the holding fast to our hope is the demonstration and evidence that we are now his house.

He continues:

[Now] look at the if of verse 14: “We have become

partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” Again, notice the wording carefully. It does not say: “We will become partakers of Christ in the future if we hold fast to our assurance.” It says, “We have become partakers [in the past] if we hold fast our assurance.” In other words, the holding fast to our assurance verifies that something real and lasting has happened to us, namely, we became partakers of Christ. We were truly born again. We were truly converted. We were truly made part of Christ’s house.

What then would be the conclusion if we do not hold fast to our assurance? The answer is not that you stop being a partaker of Christ, but that you had never become a partaker of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The same thing is going on in our text for this morning. When our text tells us that we once were alienated and hostile in mind ... if indeed we continue in the faith, we need to be careful to observe what it is not saying. It isn’t saying that we will be freed from our alienation and hostility of mind if we continue in the faith. No, it tells us that we were freed from these things if we continue in the faith. Our continuance in the faith, then, is evidence that we have been set free. And if we are no longer hostile in mind toward God, we won’t want to turn away from him. We will want to continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we heard.

The question is: “How are we set free from our hostile minds, our evil deeds, and our alienation with respect to God?” The answer, in a word, is by being reconciled, reconciled to God. This is the focus of verse 22, which says, “he has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” That word, “now,” that we see at the beginning of verse 22, signals our shift from the past to the present.

**The present tense of the gospel tells us that Christ has now**

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3 John Piper, “Eternal Security Is a Community Project,” sermon preached 18 August 1996 at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN [[https://www.desiringgod.org/4 messages/eternal-security-is-a-community-project](https://www.desiringgod.org/4-messages/eternal-security-is-a-community-project)].

## **reconciled us to God by his death.**

We are now reconciled. But notice how this present reality is still couched in language that looks back to the past. We are reconciled because Christ did the reconciling in his body of flesh by his death 2000 years ago. That means that the observations we made earlier still hold true here. The text does not say that we will be reconciled to God if we continue in the faith. Rather, it says that Christ has reconciled us by his death if we continue in the faith. Our continuance is, again, evidence that that reconciliation has already taken place. I love the way the Apostle John put this in 1 John chapter 2 and verse 19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

How does one become “of us”? The answer is that he or she must be reconciled to God by Christ’s death on the cross. As our text makes clear, we are all born enemies of God, alienated from him and hostile toward him in our minds. But now, because of what Christ did in his body of flesh at the cross, we can be brought together as a community of faith in him, reconciled to both our Creator and to one another, with our every evil deed that stood in the way of reconciliation paid for in full at the cross.

A great deal is made out of the fact that Jesus reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death. “Body of flesh,” that’s an interesting way to put it. What are we to take from this phrase, and how is this “body of flesh” our means of reconciliation with God? Tom Wright asks and answers this question in his commentary, saying that two parallel passages from the Book of Romans will help us here:

In [Romans] 7:4 Paul writes ‘you died to the law through the body of Christ’, and in [Romans] 8:3 he says that God, ‘sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin-offering, condemned sin in the flesh’ (RSV). The context of both passages within Romans 5-8 as a whole, coupled with the reference in Colossians 1:18 to Christ as ‘the head of the body’, suggests the following train of thought:

- (a) Jesus, as Messiah, represents, and is fully identified with, his people. He shares their ‘fleshly’ existence, so that, though himself without sin, he takes sin’s consequences on himself, becoming subject to death.
- (b) Jesus is also fully identified with God (1:19; this identification is further described in 2:9 as *somatikos*, bodily).
- (c) In Jesus, therefore, God identified himself with the sins of humanity. The cross is simply the outworking of this explosive meeting between the holy God and human sin.
- (d) Those who are members of Jesus’ ‘body’ thus find their sin already condemned in him, and themselves reconciled to God. Jesus has risen from the dead, as the first of a large family whose sins, having done their worst in producing his death, are left behind in his life beyond death (1:18; see Rom. 6:7-11; 8:29).<sup>4</sup>

We sing about this. We sing about how our every evil thought and every evil deed crowned his blood-stained brow. This is the power of the cross. Christ became sin for us. He took the blame. He bore the wrath and we stand forgiven at the cross. That’s how we’re reconciled to God. It’s not about our ability to continue in faith. We can’t do that on our own either, which is why we also sing, “When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast. When the tempter would prevail, he will hold me fast. I could never keep my hold through life’s fearful path for my love is often cold; he must hold me fast.”

And he will. He is the one who will enable us to continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that we have heard. And I say that with confidence because of what Paul says about the future in our text. Look again at verse 22: “he has now reconciled [us] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present [us] holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 82.

## **Jesus reconciled us to God in order to one day present us holy and blameless before him.**

And, if this was Christ's design in reconciling us to God, in his body of flesh by his death, then we need to be confident and rest in the fact that he will make sure his designs are accomplished. Not only is Christ the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth who can actually ensure that his ends are accomplish, it is his character as a loving, faithful, trustworthy Savior to actually save those he promises to save. It's not a salvation if it's here today and gone tomorrow.

So, what do we do, then, with the "if" that we find in our text? To answer this question, we need to do something of a deep dive into Greek vocabulary. In the Greek language, there are four different ways to frame an "if ... then" statement. Grammarians will speak of first-class conditions, second-class conditions, third-class conditions, and fourth-class conditions. What we're looking at here is a first-class condition which William Mounce tells us is also called the "condition of fact." According to his *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, "Sometimes the apodosis [the 'then' part of an 'if ... then' statement] is clearly true and you can translate 'Since such and such, then such and such.'"<sup>5</sup> With all of the attention that we paid to the past tense verbs used in verses 21 and 22, I want you to walk away with a firm conviction that the apodosis is true. We have been reconciled to God. Yes, we were alienated; we were hostile in mind, doing evil things, but now we have been reconciled to God, so we're going to continue in the faith.

This is why Margaret Thrall paraphrases verse 23 to read, "At any rate if you stand firm in the faith—and I am sure that you will," comparing what we read in our text to what comes later in Colossians chapter 2 and verse 5, where the Apostle Paul speaks of "rejoicing to see [the Colossians'] good order and the firmness [or stability] of [their] faith in Christ," an observation that Peter O'Brien reproduces in his commentary before going on to say that "If it is true that the saints will persevere to the end, then it is equally true that the saints must persevere to the end. And one of the means which the apostle uses

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5 William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 330

to insure that his readers within the various congregations of his apostolic mission do not fall into a state of false security is to stir them up with warnings such as [the one that we find in our text].”<sup>6</sup>

And, brothers and sisters, this is why John Piper spoke as he did to the women that were cheating on their husbands. As he puts it, “Stories like [theirs] make me not pay too much attention to those who say, ‘Oh, you can’t use bad news. You can’t use warnings. You can’t use threats to help people.’”<sup>7</sup> You can use threats to help people. The Bible uses threats all over the place. “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) “if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Colossians 1:23). Just be gracious in how you go about warning and threatening one another with the doctrine of perseverance.

Those reconciled to God do, in fact, persevere in faith. So, continue, 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 Paul was a minister. Amen? Amen.

Let’s pray.

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6 Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon in the Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 69.