

SERIES Reading Paul's Mail: Colossians
 SERMON **Jesus (Re)creates Everything (Col 1.13–23)**
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HALLOWEEN REFORMED

My dad has a strange, quick-witted, dry sense of humor. Just the other day, he said: **“Walked into Home Depot and saw Christmas trees and other decorations on full-display. And it got me really excited because I knew that means: it’s almost time for Halloween.”** So, Happy almost-Halloween to you. Or if you prefer the more church-related version: happy almost-Reformation Day. The day when Martin Luther told the Catholic Church, **“I’ve got a few items to discuss, because I’m a bit concerned over where things are going. Let’s chat.”** And we all know how that chat went.... Speaking of the church:

When talking about the church of England, the British comedian, Eddie Izzard, said (*slightly paraphrased*): Christians are a strange bunch. They used to talk of the many exciting and principled things that their faith gave them, but then it became more reserved—a kind of cheesy social club, where preaching was based on some magazine. What’s more, he says, **“There’s something phenomenally dreary about Christian singing.”** They take what are otherwise big and glorious proclamations and make it all sound so dull and lifeless. Or as he explicitly says: **“They’re the only people that can sing ‘Hallelujah’ without [any] feeling.”**¹ Ouch. And we say “ouch” because, in many ways, we know he’s absolutely right.

But here’s the thing: this critique from one “outside” of the church has been expressed before. He’s not the only one to notice this dilemma (*or sad reality*). The same critique has also come from those “inside” the church—and not just from within the church of England. It’s come from those who know God’s truth, who see the state of God’s church, and call for meaningful change in the lives of God’s people. For example: the pastor-theologian, Anthony Hoekema once said: **“It is a sad commentary on the anemic state of our Christian faith that we have so many joyless Christians—believers who seem to think that the highest mark of Christian piety is a gloomy face and a doleful voice.”**² While the mood is different, the result is the same: it’s people wearing an external mask to conceal what is truly missing within.

Imagine of what would happen in the church today if the glorious truths being sung were not only believed but also authentically embraced and even embodied by those who sing them. And I mean the Bible-based and theologically rich songs; not the Jesus-is-my-boyfriend or here’s-why-I-feel-happy-at-the-moment type songs that have little to do with anything with who God is and what He’s done for us. Imagine if there were no masks, no shows of piety, no drudgery, no mindless repetition, and no soft-spoken dolefulness, but instead there was true, from-the-depths-of-grateful-hearts truly changed by God bursting with praise—unashamed, unafraid, and unhindered. Worship that is done not only in Spirit and truth, but also in true, Spirit-given freedom. A freedom that is not a mere abstraction that we keep in our heads as a nice idea, but as the reality that changes everything about us—expressed in how we live.

¹ Both quotes from E. Izzard, “Dressed to Kill” (1999).

² A.A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Eerdmans, 1989), 45.

Late in my freshman year in College (so, *early-1997*), I was confronted with my own “ouch” moment when it came to my own worship of God—and even my devotion to Him.... We had chapel services twice a week, and the music/song selections were a good mix of lively and reverent—helpfully moving us through periods of praise and reflection, and ultimately preparing us for the message of the day. And no matter the song or its feel, each service I would see a buddy of mine, Chauncy, up front (*but off to the side*) fully submitted to and fully engrossed in worship. (*Not rolling around on the floor, barking like a dog, or anything like that. He was a guy whose worship was one of humble, grateful praise*).

One day after service, I found Chauncy by himself reading his Bible, and asked if we could talk about worship. With a smile that took over his face, he slapped the step he sat on and told me to have a seat. After I told him that I would often see him in chapel and couldn’t help but notice his unashamed, unafraid, and unhindered expression of worship: in a roundabout way, I asked him why he does that—or how he’s able to do it so freely. Not thinking it was possible: his smile got even bigger and he explained things in a clear, yet hard-hitting way. He basically said: he can worship so freely because he knows what it means to be set free. And that’s when my heart and mind said, “Ouch.” Chauncy, then, took the next 45 minutes to unpack what he meant.

And that’s when I knew that I had not only been wearing a mask of worship and devotion, but also failed to know the true freedom God gives in Christ. And it was also the moment (*mixed with another not long afterward*) I realized the need to recommit myself to Christ and to His truth, and to truly know the reality of His freedom. A freedom not so that I could worship like my buddy, Chauncy—and even he said that’s not the point. Instead, it is a freedom that creates a life of worship (*in Spirit and truth*) at all times, without shame, fear, or hindrance. And that’s been my journey since *early-1997*, and I know there’s a lot more ground to cover and so much more to learn and experience when it comes to God’s freedom in Christ. And I am deeply grateful to God for putting people like Chauncy in my life, who took the time to speak truth in love and to show me the need for my love of God to be rooted in His truth.

Here's the connection.... In our “reading Paul’s mail” to the Colossians, we hear and see the call to a similar need—i.e., the need to know God’s truth and the true freedom He provides in Christ. A need that’s essential because, as we’ll cover in a couple of weeks, the Colossians are being challenged with other ideas and teachings that wear the mask of truth but are beneath them lies that not only rob God’s truth of its power and meaning but also lead people away from the light and into darkness. In fact, and to link back to Reformation Day, John Calvin, in one of the places where I can (*by free choice*) agree with him, rightly said about this part of Paul’s letter: “*For how comes it that we are carried about with so many strange doctrines, (Heb. xiii.9) but because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us? For Christ alone makes all other things suddenly vanish. Hence there is nothing that Satan so much endeavours to accomplish as to bring on mists with the view of obscuring Christ, because he knows, that by this means the way is opened up for every kind of falsehood.*”³

And that reality—along with that method of Satan—has not changed since the time Calvin penned those words. (*And he certainly knew the truth of it existed long before him—as in, the*

³ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Calvin Translations Society, 1851), 145–46—emphasis original.

Garden of Eden when it was first experienced). And we're constantly confronted with the temptations to accept something other than the truth of God's revelation—both written and incarnate. And the beautiful masks such temptations wear hide the fact that: if we have a false gospel, then we wind up with a Christ we don't need. If we have a false Christ, then we wind up with a gospel that doesn't matter. In either case (*but especially with both*), we have no assurance of salvation and eternal life. And when there is no real assurance from a false Christ and a false gospel, there is no real freedom about which one can worship and give thanks. But from the true Christ of the true gospel, there is an ongoing life of unashamed, unafraid, and unhindered worship of the One who truly sets us free.

—PRAY—

CONTINUED THANKFUL PRAISE

Our passage for this morning is Col 1.13–23. While you're finding that, let's consider the general flow of the passage and then remind ourselves of a couple of key details. In its most basic form, the passage deals with two essential themes: (1) who we are before God, and (2) who God is and what He's done for us. Now, a closer look at the passage shows Paul breaking things down into three sections so that he can “sandwich” the central focus. Thus, on the outsides, Paul divides the theme of our identity before God into two parts—or two related claims—found in vv.13–14 and vv.21–23, which reflect each other in the twin ideas of transferred and redemption (1.13, 14) and reconciliation and peace (1.20, 22).⁴

Then right in the middle of that is the central theme in vv.15–20:⁵ Christ as the God-incarnate redeeming Savior and Lord of all things. And while we ought not miss its similar two essential themes (*i.e., who Christ truly is and what He's truly done in and for the world*), we must not overlook something a bit more basic—yet equally essential. In the two “bread” sections of the passage, there is back-and-forth in references for God and believers—especially seen in the pronouns “he” or “him” (*for God*) and “we,” “us,” or “you” (*for believers*). This provides us with a picture of how we relate to God in general, but particularly when it comes to our new life in Him—with us always being the recipients, and God always being the One who acts.

But in the “meat” of the passage, no one other than God (*the Father*) and the Son (*Christ*) is to be found. And that's intentional. For there is no one else who can do what only God can do and has, in fact, done in Christ. This means: contrary to popular cultural belief and practice (*and even found among other religions—including ones that self-identify as “Christian”*), we can do nothing to bring about our own salvation. We can't earn it, buy it, steal it, sneak into it, name-it-and-claim-it, or even bargain for it. What's required for salvation to have its God-intended result is infinitely greater than the entirety of our greatest good, largest bank account, best skills and efforts, deepest ambitions, and rhetorical expertise. And because what's required is infinitely greater, only One who is infinitely capable can truly provide what's

⁴ While v.20 is technically (and obviously) a part of the central focus of vv.15–20, it serves as a transition point from who Christ is to who believers are because of what He alone has done for them.

⁵ Some argue that Col 1.15–20 is not the central focus of the passage, but merely supports the claims about believers now being counted as (and assured to be) heirs in God's kingdom because they've been rescued and forgiven—see e.g., J. Sumney, *Colossians* (John Knox, 2008), 55–56. This is an argument that prioritizes the result over the cause. Sure, it's Paul intention to encourage the believers that such things about who they now are in Christ are real and true. But those things cannot be real and true unless Christ is who He truly is. Thus, if vv.15–20 are not central to his argument, then everything else in the chapter is an empty motivational speech, and the rest of the letter is built without a foundation.

needed for salvation and everlasting life. And that one God-given provision is Christ alone. It is Him alone who brings about our salvation; we are the recipients of that gracious work.

That leads us to the two reminders about this part of the letter to the Colossians. First, v.13 continues Paul and Timothy’s prayer for God-given and God-sustained growth among those who belong to Christ. A prayer that began back in v.9, and one that followed Paul and Timothy’s prayer of thanksgiving in vv.3–8 for the new life the Colossians have because of Christ. And second, the whole of vv.9–23 represents a single prayer—delivered as a single sentence. That means our passage for this morning is a continuation of and conclusion for the much larger prayer for what only God can do. Especially as it relates to the true gospel’s declaration of salvation and new life in Christ alone.

JESUS (RE)CREATES EVERYTHING

Or how it is only Christ—our true God-incarnate redeeming Savior and Lord—who (re)creates everything. In particular: He (re)creates our identity, our nature, and our status before God. And to help us see that connection and focus, let’s step back to v.12, which captures how the believers are to respond to God’s ongoing blessings, and it prepares the way for responding to how God makes such blessing possible and real. So, after listing off the three blessings of bearing fruit, growing in knowledge, and being strengthened, Paul and Timothy call upon the Colossian believers to be ones who, on an ongoing basis, are “joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light, He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1.12–14).

Here we see: not only the call (*and the need*) for continuous, joy-filled thanksgiving to God, but also the stress given to the specific focus of that joyful prayer. A focus that has three parts: personal health, wealth, and happiness—oh wait, wrong theology. My apologies. The threefold focus is: the believers’ new identity, new nature (*or state-of-being*), and new status before God. And once again, notice how none of it is done because of anything any person has done or could ever do. All of it is done by God—and the language itself bears that out clearly. (*And the same will be true for the rest of the prayer*). First, as we see here: it is God “the Father who has qualified you.”⁶ This kind of phrase, and especially the term for “qualified” (*ἱκανόω* [*hikanōō*]), often means an assignment of worth or value—either to an object or even a person. The thing or individual meets a set of standards of goodness.

Now, for clarity: in the other instances where Paul uses this term, it’s negative—in the sense that: he knows that neither he nor any other person is inherently qualified or worthy before God (*according to His standards of goodness*), and nothing Paul or they could ever do on their own would ever change that. And they certainly cannot attempt to replace God’s standards with their own, because they think God is being unfair and they can do better. That only proves or illustrates just how unqualified they truly are. And that applies to a larger sampling of people. As Paul says in Rom 3: we’re all unqualified, because we’re all sinners before a holy and righteous God (*and “all” means “all;” no one can self-identify their way out*

⁶ Just for clarity, the phrase, *εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ πατρὶ τῷ ἱκανώσαντι ὑμᾶς* (*eucharistountes tō patri tō hikanōsanti humas*), shows “the Father” (*τῷ πατρὶ*) to be the recipient of the thanksgiving as well as “the one who has qualified” (*τῷ ἱκανώσαντι*—a singular verb) the believers (i.e., “you” [*ὑμᾶς*], plural). If Paul desired to show any sort of human involvement in the qualification, it would not have been spoken/written in this way.

of that). And in Eph 2 he says: there is no amount of good works we could ever do to change that unqualified status before God, and none of it will ever be the way we can save ourselves. The only way we can be qualified before God and obtain salvation is if He does both.

And that's what Paul and Timothy declare has happened for the Colossian believers: “the Father...has qualified you.” So joyfully give thanks to Him alone.... But the point doesn't stop with simply being qualified, and this brings us to another meaning and use of the term, **ἱκανόω**. It can also refer to the giving of a title. In this case, an inheritor in God's kingdom. Look at the rest of the verse: it is God the Father **who has qualified you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light**. The Greek here is emphatic: God **has qualified you for the share in the saints' inheritance**,⁷ which stresses a central point (or purpose) for the qualifying. And it makes it abundantly clear that without this qualifying, there is no share in the inheritance. And that necessarily means (*once more*): there can be no way to receive God's blessing apart from how He intends it to be received. And that intention is for it be a gracious gift (*revealed in His personal saving work*), and not an earned reward (*because of our attempted good works*).

It is God alone who qualifies us, and it is God alone who makes it possible for us to have His eternal blessing. This means: without Him, we would remain separated from Him and devoid of His blessing, and would forever be unable to change any of that. But because of Him, and what He alone has done, we're no longer separated and we're no longer empty of gratitude, joy, hope, and life. He has rescued us and given us a new existence. And that's where Paul and Timothy go next with the summons for continual joy-filled thanksgiving: “**He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son He loves**” (1.13). This is the focus on the new nature (or state-of-being). And once again: notice that it's God alone who accomplishes what must be done. And not only does the language bear this out, but the entire claim provides a deeper meaning to a familiar event in human history.

It's often pointed out that this verse is an allusion to Israel's exodus from Egypt—seen by the picture of God delivering His people (*via Moses*) from captivity and leading them to a new land. In fact, that's a familiar theme in the NT when describing how God is bringing about His promised new covenant kingdom. So, it doesn't take much to realize that Paul and Timothy are moving things to a deeper level—one that goes beyond Egyptian captivity. Not because they're trying to be clever or trendy, or to offer some idiosyncratic opinion about how to be a life-coach. They do this because they know the depths of the new covenant reality that exists because of who God is and what He's done. The One who is infinitely greater than Moses, and provides an exodus infinitely greater than simply being freed from physical captivity. An exodus that involves freedom from a different kind of tyrannical reign and oppression.

Look again at the passage: “**He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son He loves**” (1.13). The phrase, “**the power of darkness**” (**τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκοτίου** [*tēs exousias tou skotous*]), can also mean “**authority of**” or, more specifically, “**dominion of darkness.**” Anyone want to wager a guess on what (or whom) that refers to? This is the realm of sin and evil, ruled by the epitome of sin and evil himself: Satan. Thus, it's not only a reference to that which is absolutely separate from God and utterly opposed to God, and never the twain shall meet. And they'll certainly never tolerate each other. This is

⁷ τῷ ἱκανώσαντι ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου τῶν ἁγίων (*tō hikanōsanti humas eis tēn merida tou klērou tōn hagiōn*).

also a description of the captivity we all shared because, like Adam and Eve, we all shared in the rebellion against God and His standard of goodness, holiness, and perfection. (*This is Paul's point in Rom 5.12, where he says: our sinfulness exposes us to be more like the image-bearers of Adam rather the ones designed to be the image-bearers of God*). And like the Hebrews in Egypt (*but infinitely worse off*), there was nothing we could do to release ourselves from that self-induced prison.

We needed someone worthy and powerful enough to conquer the dominion of evil and set us free from our imprisoning chains. And that's exactly what the gospel declares God doing for us. And the language of v.13 beautifully and descriptively portrays all of that. The term for "delivered" is **ῥύομαι** (*ruomai*), which also means: "draw to one's self." Please don't miss that. We do not have a god who merely sets us free from the realm of sin and evil, but that freedom does not lead us anywhere or do anything about the separation between us and him. Instead, we have the God who sets us free from the realm of sin and evil and draws us to Himself—to be with Him forever in unseparated communion. Not because we deserve it or because we've made ourselves worthy, but because of His gracious love—proven by Him personally rescuing our undeserving and unworthy selves and making us His own worthy people.

And that complete, liberating deliverance (*and being drawn to Him*) for the purpose of being with God forever is further revealed with the image of being "transferred" from **the power of darkness** and into **the kingdom of the Son He loves**. The term for "transferred" is **μεθίστημι** (*methistēmi*). While this does refer to moving from one place to another, it was often used to describe what happens to conquered people. They would be moved from their original land (*or kingdom*) to the land (*or kingdom*) of the victorious king. And since the overall focus is something greater than a deliverance from Egypt and a transfer to a small strip of promised land; we know that the point here is to declare a deliverance from the dominion of sin and darkness and transfer to the promised new creation kingdom of God (cf. Rom 4.13; 8.17–25).

A reality and new status that's described in v.21 and elsewhere: "And you were at one time **strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds**," which means you were once alienated and "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and [being] without God in the world" (Eph 2.12); but now, God has "He has reconciled you" (Col 1.21) to Himself, He came and declared "peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, so that through Him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2.17–18) and in doing so, all who believe and submit to His saving lordship can become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household" (Eph 2.12, 17–18, 19). And not just fellow citizens and members, but also His adopted children—fellow-heirs of His eternal promises and blessings (cf. Gal 3.29; Rom 8.17). All of this is what all of us lacked when we were held captive to the dominion of darkness.

All before we knew the truth of the gospel. The God-given declaration that says: we've been rescued from the darkness of Satan and brought into the light of God; and because of that, along with the knowledge of what we now possess, we lay aside (*or better: reject*) all of the desires, temptations, passions, allurements, and deeds of darkness—because we know they are sinful and do not reflect God's standard of goodness, holiness, and perfection. And after laying them aside (*and rejecting them*), we allow God to transform everything about us—to make us worthy before Him, to change our hearts and minds so that we pursue His desires,

His will, and His works, and to be conformed to the image He designed us to have. An image, as Paul says in Eph 4.24, that's made "in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth."

This helps explain the strong caution throughout the NT against nominal-belief, or attempting to live a life where one claims to be saved by God but freely and willful continues to engage in sinful pursuits and lifestyles. Either option is not only contrary to what God expects but also condemned, and those who live by them will not inherit the God's eternal kingdom. Jesus clearly says so about nominal-belief (Mt 7.21–22), and Paul clearly says so about duplicitous living (1 Cor 6.9–10). The true gospel declares: inheritance belongs to those who have been made worthy by God and have been delivered from the power of darkness and transferred to His kingdom. The old is gone, the new has come. A being-made-worthy, deliverance, and transfer made possible by God alone in a graciously personal, costly, and sacrificial way. As Paul and Timothy reveal: that way is God's Son: the One "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1.14). And it's here we begin to see the larger reality of our new identity, nature, and status—all necessarily tied to our rescue and our adoption into God's household.

Once more, we see God as the One who does what is necessary, which is now defined as "redemption," which gets clarified as being, "the forgiveness of sins." We have to hold both of those ideas together in order to understand their true significance. Let's come at this in reverse. The idea of "forgiveness" has been a bit watered down (*if not trivialized*) in recent generations. In most cases, it's been reduced to merely accepting someone's apology for a wrong they committed. In other cases, it's been elevated to simply an act of kindness one does for someone else—unfortunately, often done for the sake of looking good before others, so that the one who's done the wrong looks bad. And of course, there are times when the word of forgiveness amounts to just an expected thing to say, thus not really doing anything meaningful for anyone involved. Or at worst: forgiveness is taken by the recipient to mean permission to carry on doing whatever they want; knowing that all they have to do is come back and say, "I'm sorry again, please forgive me." Anyone experience any of these options?

However, the biblical picture of forgiveness—especially in the NT—is much deeper and more involved than any of that. The term is ἄφεσις (*aphesis*), whose primary meaning is: release from bondage or imprisonment, and even pardon. (*That changes things, doesn't it?*). Now, in most cases, that notion of forgiveness is tied to freeing someone from a debt they owe another person—either because of a loan, compensation for damages done, or paying a fine. Along with this (*mixed with our own understanding through personal experience*), we know that the carrying of such debts is necessarily weighed down all the more because of the sense of guilt that goes with the wrong done and/or the individual's struggle to square the books. And the larger the debt, the heavier the guilt.⁸ So, when Scripture speaks about forgiveness, it's not merely about accepting an apology or saying the right thing to be polite (*or appear polite*). Instead, forgiveness is about freedom—not only from the debt owed, but also from the guilt one carries with them because they struggle or are unable to pay.

But we also know from Scripture, that the freedom-giving forgiveness that all people need is not about money, property, or any other material thing. Instead, what all people need is the freedom-giving forgiveness of sin. Our sin. Our wickedness. Our hard-heartedness. Our

⁸ Jesus operates on this same principle in Lk 7.36–50 (esp. vv. 40–47).

rejection of and rebellion against God. Everything that separates us from Him and imprisons us in the dominion of darkness, without any hope of release—either by our own doing or the efforts of a fellow human being who self-identifies as “a good person.” And because of the very nature, power, and effect of sin, it amounts to an infinite debt that we could never pay, which lays upon our shoulders a mountain of guilt that we could never lift. This is how truly serious sin is in the Bible, and we cheapen and trivialize it by turning into or redefining it as “simple mistakes,” or “character flaws,” or even “moral slip-ups” that God will overlook—He has to because He’s loving and kind like that.

But Scripture makes it quite clear that sin is what God hates—it is an abomination in His sight, and He does not allow for any redefinition, watering down, or brushing off of its true nature. And it precisely this infinite debt and weight of sin that keep us separated from God, and that separation will remain unless the full debt can be paid and full weight removed. That’s our infinite problem. However, if we recall from earlier: that infinite problem requires a solution infinitely greater than anything we could ever imagine—let alone offer on our own. Thus, to be truly set free (*i.e.*, *truly forgiven*), we need One who is infinitely capable to do what’s necessary to settle infinite debt and remove the infinite burden upon us. And that’s what the gospel declares as having happened through God’s personal, gracious, and costly rescue, as carried out in the Son: Jesus Christ. The One who is our “[redemption](#).”

Now, this is a word (*and idea*) often lost on many people today, but it would not have been the case for those in the time of the NT. Here’s what that means.... In the days of the Roman Empire, any time a Roman general (*or even a Caesar*) defeated another nation or people group, they would hold a massive celebration in the capital. One that included a triumphal entry with all of his soldiers, machines of war, spoils of conquest, and the captives taken—many of whom were already slaves in their native land. Not long afterward, the spoils and the captives would be turned into a profit for the victorious leader. Specifically, the captives (*and especially the slaves*) would be paraded out—one at a time—into a market where the elites of society would come and purchase the ones they liked best. Decisions made largely on subjective and superficial standards of worth or value.

And to complete the transaction, the buyers would pay the ἀπολύτρωσις (*apolutrōsis*), which effectively means “[purchase money](#)” or “[ransom money](#).” It buys the person’s freedom. However, this freedom did not release the individual to a life of full-blown citizenship in the Empire. Rather, it simply transferred and reclassified the individual. They move from being a spoil of war in the victorious leader’s triumphal entry to a life of indentured servitude in the house of a wealthy landowner. Thus, the ἀπολύτρωσις allowed the person to be set free only to be enslaved all over again. When we look at the bigger picture, we begin to see: the price paid only helped the ones who received it, and the freedom granted to the one bought was only an illusion.... Now, what does this have to do with our passage? In a word: everything.

Paul and Timothy reveal the truth and core of the gospel when they declare with joy-filled praise: God not only delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to His kingdom, but He also declared us worthy to share in the full inheritance of His kingdom; and He made all of this possible not only by defeating the reign of evil but especially by fully settling the infinite debt and completely lifting the infinite guilt of our sin. And He did all of this in Christ. As the text says: the One who is our ἀπολύτρωσις. Our ransom. Our true freedom-

giver. And the freedom He gives is real and absolute. As Paul says in Gal 5.1: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free” (NASB). And as truly freed people, we are no longer slaves in the dominion of darkness and sin, so we ought not desire the old sinful passions and lifestyle—things that will only bind us “again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5.1b, NASB).

Instead: because of Christ alone, and His victorious saving redemption, we have not only become freed citizens but especially adopted and beloved children in the glorious household of God. Through Christ alone, we have been recreated in our identity, our nature, and our status before God—all in accordance with His standard of righteousness and holiness of the truth. And because of Christ alone, we are able to live freely as His people in this life and to have the assurance of sharing in the eternal inheritance of His kingdom of goodness, holiness, and perfection. Or to borrow again from what Paul and Timothy say in Col 1.21–22: “And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds,⁹ but now He has reconciled you¹⁰ by His physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before Him.”

Everything that needed to be done so that we could be freed, saved, forgiven, and made worthy before a holy and righteous God was done for us by God Himself. And He did this not by remaining aloof and settling our debt from an infinite distance, but by personally coming to us—as one of us, yet in perfection—and self-sacrificially paying the price we could never afford and removing the burden we could never lift. This is the one true, redeeming savior that Paul and Timothy exalt in the core of our passage: Col 1.15–20 (*and we’ll do this one as a running commentary*):

“He is the image of the invisible God, [not only declaring Christ to be the eternally existing God, but also revealing the reality of His incarnation: fully God, fully human] the firstborn over all creation,¹¹ [πρωτότοκος (prōtotokos) also means, “one who is pre-eminent,” which stresses rank and not (necessarily) chronology] for all things in heaven and on earth were created in Him [Christ is the necessary agent of creation; cf. Jn 1.1–4]—all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers [all of this is another way of describing angelic beings; and because they are created by Christ, they are necessarily less than Christ and cannot be treated otherwise]—all things were created through Him and for Him. [everything belongs to Christ and is subject to Him] He Himself is before all things, [again stressing His eternal existence] and all things are held together in Him. [without Christ,

⁹ This phrase refers to our sinfulness of mind produced sinful deeds and lifestyles. All of that made us enemies of God—not people upon whom God said, “I love you just the way you are, there’s no need to change or repent of anything.” That’s a false gospel, and a false gospel cannot lead one to salvation. But the true gospel can.

¹⁰ There is a quasi-minor textual variant at this point. Some manuscripts read, νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατήλλαξεν (*nuni de apokatēllaxen*—“but now He reconciled [you]...”), while others read, νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατηλλάγητε (*nuni de apokatēllagēte*—“but now you have been reconciled”). The difference is primarily one of emphasis—in the former, God is explicitly identified as the active agent in reconciliation, whereas the former stresses the believer as the passive recipient of the work of reconciliation. In either case, the meaning the same—i.e., it is God alone who makes reconciliation a reality.

¹¹ Jehovah’s Witnesses not only take this phrase to mean that Christ is a created being—specifically, the first one God creates (and who was originally Michael, the archangel, before He came to earth as Jesus)—but they also use that meaning as the way for interpreting and understanding the rest of the passage. In this case, that means: how they justify changing the language of the text to suit their existing theological views of Christ (as **not** the eternally existing God, but merely a lesser God-like being). Thus, in their version of the Bible, Col 1.16–17 reads: “because by means of him all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All [other] things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all [other] things and by means of him all [other] things were made to exist” (*New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*)—with the bracketed, “[other]” being their addition. The Greek text **does not** include—let alone allow for—such a term.

everything falls apart—not just in creation but also human life; cf. Heb 1.1–3] He is the head of the body, the church, [the church is His (it's His bride); it does not belong to or answer to anyone else—cf. Eph 5.25–27; Rev 19.7–9; 21.1–2] as well as the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself may become first in all things. [the one who can defeat death is the first and only name on the list of infinite awesomeness] For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in the Son and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself [only Christ, who is fully God and fully human can make complete atonement for sin and reconciliation] by making peace through the blood of His cross [not only a reference to a historical event, but a declaration of a spiritual reality: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was the ἀπολύτρωσις for the forgiveness of sins]—through Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” [as alluded to in Rom 8: the redeeming and reconciling work of Christ is not just about restoring the broken relationship between humanity and God because of sin; it's also about restoring the brokenness of creation, which exists in slavery to decay—longing to be set free and reunited with heaven, as it was originally designed. A reality that Rev 21 says will be fulfilled when Christ returns as the rightful, victorious, and eternal king over all things, and where all who have been recreated by Him will live in unseparated and worshipful communion with Him for everlasting life]

Let me close this morning by asking: in the light of all of this glorious truth, are we truly surprised, to hear Paul and Timothy tell the Colossian believers to remain in joy-filled thanksgivings for all of who God is and all that He's done for them in Christ? And in the light of all of this glorious truth: what's stopping us from constantly living and declaring our joy-filled thanksgiving for all of who God is and all that He's done for us in Christ? He has not changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And because He's not changed (*and will not change*), we, too, can know Him as our true deliverer, redeemer, savior, forgiver, and new-life-giver. We, too, can know His forgiveness of our eternal debt and guilt because of sin, and enter into the eternal freedom that only He provides and fulfills. There is truly no greater cause for our celebration and thanksgivings. We've been set free; the chains are gone and there is nothing hindering us from a life of ongoing worship and devotion to our mighty, powerful, gracious, compassionate, and self-giving Savior, Lord, and King.