

“If Indeed You Continue”
Colossians 1:21-23
June 27, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue, this morning, in our series on Paul’s letter to the Colossians, as we come to Colossians 1:21-23.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the Colossian church:

^{1:21} And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he [that is, Christ] 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.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, how can we keep our way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word.
Help us now to seek you with our whole hearts.
Keep us from wandering from your commandments.
Let us store up your word in our hearts,
so that we might not turn from you.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:9-11]

Introduction

Our text this morning has four main elements, which we will consider together – though we will spend the overwhelming majority of our time on the fourth and final piece.

In this short paragraph the Apostle Paul looks at the Christian life, and he points out our original start, the crucial turn in the Christian life, the future finish of the Christian life, and then the current charge for all who follow Christ.

The Original Start: You Were Alienated

He begins, in verse twenty-one, with the original starting point of us all. He writes: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...”

Paul here confronts us with our spiritual starting point in life. God made humanity good. We have rebelled. And now, since our first parents’ rebellion, we begin our spiritual life alienated from God, hostile to him in mind, and in deed.

Notice that Paul covers both how we think and how we live. Our natural tendency is to live in opposition to how God calls us to live. And our natural tendency is to think thoughts that resist God’s thoughts. Though God has made us to delight in him and his ways, we, like stubborn children, refuse the truth he tells us, and the good patterns of life that he calls us to – patterns that would bring us life and flourishing.

Why do we do this? Because, through our own fault, we have become alienated from God. That is the first reality Paul lists. We are alienated from our Maker. By our sin, we doubt his love and his goodness. By our arrogance, we think we know better than he does. By our cynicism we suspect his kindness. And so we are alienated from him, hostile in our minds, and doing evil in our deeds.

This is our spiritual starting point.

The Crucial Turn: He Has Now Reconciled You

But then, for those in Christ, there is a turn. In Christ, God offers a way of escape. That’s the second thing we see here. We read of the Colossian Christians in verse twenty-two that Jesus “has now reconciled” them “in his body of flesh by his death.”

The turning point for the Christian is the cross of Christ. Christ, the Son of God, has come, and he has paid for the sins of all who place their trust in him. And with the debt of their sins paid, he offers reconciliation with God.

Remember, at the root of our problem, we said a moment earlier, is our alienation with God – alienation that we caused. But then God, in Christ, acted, to bring about reconciliation. Christ took our alienation onto himself, and he put it to death on the cross, and now he offers us reconciliation. If we have trusted in Christ, then we are reconciled with God – our alienation from him is done away with, and our relationship with him is restored.

That is the second thing we see here: the turning point of the Christian life, which we receive when we place our trust in Christ.

The Future Finish: To Be Presented Before Him

Which then brings us to Paul's third movement in this passage: the future finish of the Christian life. Having talked about the cross of Christ in the first half of verse twenty-two, Paul then jumps ahead in the second half of that verse, from the turning point of the Christian life to its intended end result.

He writes that Christ has reconciled his people to God "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him."

Earlier we said that our initial starting point began with our alienation from God, which then led to the hostility of our minds and the evil of our deeds. Now we see that our salvation begins with our reconciliation to God, which then leads to our complete restoration, in thought and in deed, to what God intended us to be – we are to become holy, blameless, and above reproach.

But in this short verse Paul notes a few key things.

First, is that this work is ultimately the work of Christ. Christ is the one who will present us in this final form before himself.

Second, this is work that Christ actively does in this life, but it is not work that is completed in this life. When this work is done – when it is finished – we will be before him ... we will stand before Christ. Whether Paul has in mind the state of our souls with Christ when we die, or the state of our full resurrected selves at Christ's second coming, this work – this future finishing point of our salvation – is accomplished by Christ, and brought to completion not in this life, but in the next one.

And that is our future hope, which we must remember. Christ will finish what he started in us. He will make us new. And we will be holy, and blameless, and above reproach before him. We will be what we were meant to be. And all will be well, as we live before God in joy for all of eternity.

So Paul reminds us where we started, he points us to the turning point in our spiritual lives, as Christ, through the cross, reconciled us to God, and then he directs our eyes to the future finishing point of our faith – when it is brought to completion and we are restored to what God originally created us to be.

The Current Charge: To Continue in the Faith

With all of that laid out, we come to our fourth – and main – point for this morning, as we come to Paul's current charge to the Colossians and to us: the charge to persevere – the charge to continue in the faith.

In verse twenty-three Paul, after outlining the future hope for Christians writes that this will be true of them, “if indeed,” he writes, “you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.”

“If indeed you continue in the faith.” That phrase will be our focus for the rest of our time this morning. And as we draw from the text, and as we meditate on the theme of perseverance in the Scriptures more broadly, we will note five aspects of persevering – of continuing – in the faith.

Perseverance as Crucial

The first is that perseverance is crucial. And that really is Paul’s point here in this verse. One commentator writes: “While it might seem at first sight, [...] [that this] verse is a bit of an afterthought, it is, in fact, a very important indication of where the argument of [this] letter is going to go. The verse takes the form of a long and complex conditional clause. [...] [And] the condition is a real one, and it is very important not to rob the words of their intended rhetorical function. [...] Paul would clearly want his words here to be taken with great seriousness. He wants to confront the Colossians with the reality that their eventual salvation depends on their remaining faithful to Christ and to the true gospel. Only by continuing in their faith can they hope to find a favorable verdict from God on the day of judgment. We have in this verse, then, a real warning.” [Moo, 143-144]

Paul is warning the Colossians. They cannot presume that they will make it to the future finish of the Christian life if they do not persevere – if they do not continue in the faith.

And neither can we. Our confidence cannot rest in some past experience. It cannot rest in our spiritual heritage, or the church we are a part of, or the knowledge we have accrued, or a special experience we have had, or the past good we have done. Paul’s conditional clause – his warning – remains. If we want to see the great completion of what Christ has promised us in the gospel, we must continue in the faith.

And this statement is not unique to this verse. It comes up again and again in the Bible.

As Reformed theologian John Murray points out, Christ himself repeated these sorts of conditional statements. In John 8 he said, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” [John 8:31-32 NASB] Similarly in Matthew ten he said, “the one who endures to the end will be saved.” [Matthew 10:22] And in John fifteen he says, “If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up” [John 15:6 NASB] Which is why, Murray writes “The crucial test of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his word.” [Murray, 151-152]

Perseverance is crucial. That’s the first thing we see.

Perseverance as a Mystery

The second thing we must recognize is that perseverance is a mystery. Perseverance is both something *we do* and something *God gives*. How both of those things are true is something we

cannot fully wrap our heads around, and yet both truths must be confessed and embraced by us. Again and again, the Bible both tells us that it is God who preserves us in the faith, *and* that we are called to do the difficult work of persevering. And if verse twenty-two of our text emphasized the role of Jesus's work, then verse twenty-three emphasizes the role of our work.

As Pastor Rayburn has repeatedly pointed out with such statements, the idea is not that Jesus does 50% of the work and we do 50% the work, or, for that matter, that there's any other division of labor. But instead, our salvation is completely the work of God, and also something we are fully called to take responsibility for.

And in that, it is similar to how we must think about our faith. Faith, the Bible tells us, is a gift from God. Yet *we* are the ones who do the believing. God gives us faith, but he doesn't believe for us. We believe. In the same way, perseverance is a gift from God. But *we* are the ones who do the persevering. We are the ones who must continue and endure. Both things are true. God is the true source of faith and perseverance, but again and again the Bible calls on us to believe, and then to persevere.

So first, perseverance is crucial. Second, perseverance is something of a mystery, as it is both a gift *and* a task we are called to.

Perseverance as Assurance

But third, and because of what we have just said, perseverance is also a source of assurance.

As we heard just a moment ago, John Murray writes: "The crucial test of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his word." [152]

Now ... as our Larger Catechism points out, the Bible does tell us that we can have such assurance of our salvation, that we know we will persevere to the end. [WLC #80] Our assurance can give us confidence that we will persevere. That is true.

But what we can neglect in that is that our perseverance can also give us confidence in our assurance. It is as we persevere in the faith, through challenges, through difficulties, in ways that we know we could not have done on our own, that we can grow in our confidence that Christ really is at work in us in saving ways by his Spirit. And so, while the challenge of perseverance can sometimes lead Christians to concern over their sense of assurance, the experience of persevering in the faith over days, and months, and years, should be a source of assurance for us.

We can sometimes focus on things the other way around, and worry about our sense of assurance as a guide to whether or not we will persevere. But it is striking how often the Bible calls us simply to continue, and remain, and persevere, which will then lead us to greater assurance.

So with those first three elements, we learn something of what perseverance is: it is crucial, it is a mystery, it is a source of assurance.

But with that in mind, how are we to actually pursue perseverance? How are we to do the work of continuing in the faith?

For that, we see two more things.

Perseverance as Trajectory

And the first is that perseverance has a trajectory.

That is made clear because Paul tells the Colossians that key to their perseverance is “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” And that hope is the final destination that we considered just a few minutes ago. That is the trajectory of our perseverance: that day when Christ will present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him, as we read in verse twenty-two.

In other words, while in one sense perseverance is about stability and steadfastness, in another sense perseverance is not about staying still, but moving forward. It is aimed at something. It is aimed at the kind of person Jesus will make us to be at the resurrection. That is the trajectory we are to set our aim for, now. Our perseverance is perseverance in a pilgrimage – in a journey – towards the kind of people Jesus would make us to be. Without that trajectory, we can lose our sense of direction. We can forget the goal for which we have been saved. And so we must set that trajectory before us.

That’s the first aspect of how we are to persevere.

Perseverance as a Day-by-Day Task

But the second aspect of how we are to persevere, is that once we see that trajectory – once we focus our eyes on the final destination of the Christian life, we then must move our eyes from that eternal goal to the immediate task of our spiritual walk before us.

Because perseverance needs to be tackled on a day-by-day basis.

David Foster Wallace, in one of his novels which I wouldn’t recommend to general audiences, but which has helped me in how I think about some things, addresses this issue of how we think of the task of perseverance.

In the novel, Wallace isn’t dealing with perseverance in the faith, but with perseverance in general. Even so, a lot of what he says also applies to how we persevere in our Christian walk.

Deep into the novel, Wallace sets two contrasting approaches to perseverance side-by-side. One approach, which doesn’t work, is captured in the thoughts of an adolescent tennis prodigy who is having something of a mental breakdown at the tennis academy where he lives, as he thinks about his future, and what it will take for him to keep going and to persevere in his tennis career.

And as he does, he starts to think of all his past efforts and all the future efforts he will need to make, in a cumulative way – all summed up together.

And so he begins to think of all the past practices ... of all the times he has gone out for practice, and then all the times he has made the walk up the same stairwell to go from practice to his dorm room ... in the door, up the stairs, down the hall, all just to go back out and practice again. He reflects on, he says, “the number of times I would have to repeat the same process, day after day, in all kinds of light, until I graduated and moved away and then began the same exhausting process of exit and return in some dormitory at some tennis-power university somewhere.”

He goes on thinking about his life in this cumulative way and he says: “Maybe the worst part of the cognitions involved the incredible volume of food I was going to have to consume over the rest of my life. Meal after meal, plus snacks. Day after day after day. Experiencing this food in toto. Just the thought of the meat alone. One megagram? Two megagrams? I experienced, vividly, the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years. The number of fowl [slaughtered and butchered] for a lifetime’s meat.” [Wallace, 896-897]

Of course all that is just a couple aspects the student could consider. He could go on to all the drills he’ll need to run, all the tennis serves he’ll need to make, all the serves he’d need to return, and so on.

To really imagine them in total – all together, in a pile, all at once – is overwhelming.

And the same is true for us in many areas, including our faith.

If we think of the trajectory of where we are to be aimed at in order to persevere, and then we think of all the distance we need to travel, all at once, we can be easily overwhelmed with the temptation to despair.

Maybe it’s hard to see that when we think of the Christian life as a whole. But I think we can see it more clearly when we think of persevering in the individual callings of the Christian life.

Christians are called to be patient. Think of the patience you have now. And think of the patience you know you should have. You grow in patience by enduring discomfort while resisting the temptation to anger or despair. Patience is not an easy thing to grow in. And if you think about all the waiting, all the frustration, all the struggle and suffering you will need to endure, the countless times you’ll need to resist lashing out in anger, all of those incidents necessary over the rest of your life in order to make you more patient – if you think of those all at once, then the task of persevering in patience seems like too much to handle. And we are tempted to give up.

And that is true of any Christian virtue we are called to persevere in. And not just any Christian virtue, but any basic task of the Christian life.

If you think of all the effort it will take to become more disciplined at prayer ... all the focused reading it will take to become more fluent in the Scriptures ... all the fleeing and resisting temptation it will take to die to that particular sin that you keep struggling with ... all the work it will take to raise your children in the faith, to cultivate a long Christian marriage, to stay faithful

in a long career in a work environment hostile to your faith – if you think of all that is required to persevere in those callings over the course of your life, it will tempt you to despair.

And yet, this is what we often do. We think of it all together – all at once.

Another character in Wallace’s book, when considering the task of persevering in sobriety, puts it like this. She talks about how she used to think of her sobriety in a cumulative way – much like the tennis player. Talking to another recovering addict, she says: “Did you ever hear of this fellow Evel Knievel? The motorcycle-jumper?” For those who don’t know, Evel Knievel was a stunt performer known for jumping over long rows of cars on his motorcycle.

The woman continues: “What I used to do, I’d throw away [my drugs and paraphernalia] and shake my fist at the sky and say *As God is my [...] witness NEVER AGAIN, as of this minute right here I QUIT FOR ALL TIME.* [...] And I’d bunker up all white-knuckled and stay straight. And [I’d] count the days. I was proud of each day I stayed off. Each day seemed evidence of something, and I counted them. I’d add them up. Line them up end to end. You know? [...] And soon it would get ... improbable. As if each day was a car Knievel had to clear. One car, two cars. By the time I’d get up to say like maybe about 14 cars, it would begin to seem like this staggering number. Jump over 14 cars. And the rest of the year, looking ahead, hundreds and hundreds of cars, me in the air trying to clear them. [...] Who could do it? How did I ever think anyone could do it that way?” [Wallace, 859]

Instead, she reflects on a different approach. The approach her counselor told her she needed to take – to take it just “One Day at a Time.” And that when she begins to feel overwhelmed, she needs to “Keep It in the Day.” [858]

The man she is talking with reflects on his own experience going through withdrawal on the floor of a jail cell, and how in such moments even a day can feel like too much. In his most difficult moments, he had to focus on taking it just one second at a time. Even the idea of a pile of 60 seconds felt overwhelming, and so in order to endure – in order to persevere – he had to focus on the challenge of each second – “the space” he says, “between two heartbeats.” “No one single instant of it was unendurable.” he says. “What was unendurable [...] was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering.” [859-860]

That’s an extreme example maybe ... but it makes the point well.

When we think of what it looks like to, as Paul says “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast” we can begin to think of it in a cumulative way, and it becomes too much to bear.

Now, we need the trajectory. We need to be intentional about the vision for our final spiritual destination. But then, once we have that, we don’t need to focus on the entire distance between where we are and where we are going, as much as we need to focus on today’s step forward.

After all, the tasks Paul lists in verse twenty-three are basic, daily tasks. He doesn’t call for great leaps forward or heroic accomplishments in a moment. He calls them to be stable in their faith.

He calls them to be steadfast in their faith. He calls them not to let go of the hope of the gospel that they have heard. These are basic things that need to be done one day at a time.

Which means that continuing in the faith is not about wrapping your arms around your whole prayer life right now – it is about actually praying *today*.

Continuing in the faith is not about grasping at mastery of the Bible all at once – it’s about reading the Bible *today*.

Continuing in the faith is not about mustering up enough strength right now to resist the temptation to that sin you struggle with for the next 50 years – it’s about resisting that temptation *this particular day* ... or this particular hour ... or maybe just this particular minute.

Raising children to be faithful Christians and functional human beings, building your marriage to be sturdy and joyful over the next fifty years, completing a career in a place where people are hostile to your faith – these tasks of discipleship are not about mastering the process from start to finish right now – that is not what perseverance looks like. It’s about what do you need to do *today* to care for and disciple your children, to nurture your marriage, to remain faithful in your workplace.

Perseverance as disciples of Christ happens one day at a time. God doesn’t tend to give you all the strength, or all the wisdom, or all the endurance you’ll need for the rest of your life all at once. That’s not the pattern we see in the Bible or in our own Christian experience. God gives us the grace for today. And that is what we need to seek from him, each day, if we really want to persevere.

And so we must resist the temptation to be anxious about tomorrow – “for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” [Matthew 5:34]

Where do you most struggle with that? In what area of your Christian life? Where do you especially see your spiritual instability? Where do you especially see yourself shifting from the hope of the gospel and the trajectory it calls you to?

And how are you pursuing perseverance in that area? How are you looking at it?

Are you trying to take it all at once, like the room of chicken fillets, and then as you look at it all, you become overwhelmed, and just give up?

Do you get started, but count the days, lining them up until the whole thing feels improbable – an endless stream of cars you could never jump over?

And what would it look like for you to actually take that struggle, take that call to persevere, one day at a time? What would it look like for you to take that area of your spiritual life seriously today? *Not* that you’re going to “solve” it today ... but that you will seek to be stable and steadfast in it today.

Can you take that issue seriously today – I mean literally, this day specifically?

And then, if you do that, when you get to tomorrow, when you get to Monday, can you put what you did today – what you did Sunday – aside, and can you keep yourself from worrying about Tuesday, and can you again, on Monday just focus on continuing in faith in that area of life, being stable and steadfast in it *that* day? Can you approach perseverance that way?

Maybe the window needs to be smaller. Maybe, if you are struggling with anger, or lust, or covetousness, or discontentedness, or a critical spirit, or something else, maybe you need to focus just on resisting that temptation one hour or one minute at a time. Consider what it would look like for you to turn to Christ for the grace to do that, minute by minute, or hour by hour.

And as you do turn to him for help, do not doubt that Christ will meet you where you are ... and that he will help you.

He has not, after all, left you alone. He wants you to depend on him. And as you do, minute by minute, day by day, he will preserve you for himself.

For he has reconciled you in his body of flesh by his death on the cross. And he has done all that so that he could present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. So continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

For it is that gospel that will strengthen you as you walk ... one day at a time.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.

Murray, John. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1996. [An important disclaimer: While I have drawn from this work in this sermon, I would not recommend this book for most readers. It contains disturbing content that many would find troubling, and caution and wisdom must be exercised by Christians in knowing what would be profitable for them to read and what they should personally avoid.]

Wright, N. T. *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1986.