

Redeemed Reconciled And Cleansed

(An Exegetical Study Of Colossians 1:13-23)

By Julian G. Anderson

13 “It is God the Father Who has rescued us from the realm of darkness and has transferred us into the Kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 through Whom we have our redemption—the forgiveness of our sins. 15 It is the Son Who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, 16 because through Him everything has been created. All things in the heavens and all things on earth, all visible things and all invisible things, thrones, dominions, principalities and authorities—everything exists through Him and for Him.

17 To sum up, then, it is He Who is before all things, and all things hold together through Him. 18 And furthermore, it is He Who is the Head of the Body (that is to say, the Church). He is the Number One. He was made the first-born from the dead, so that He might become the One Who holds first place in all respects, 19 because the whole fullness of God resolved to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, making peace through His blood which He shed on the cross. Yes, the Son has reconciled to God all things on earth and all things in the heavens, 21 including you, who at one time were in a hostile state of mind and excluded from any fellowship with God by your wicked deeds.

22 But now things are different. Christ has reconciled you by means of His own body—His body of flesh and blood (that is, through His death), so that He might present you before God’s throne holy and without blemish and above all creation, 23 And He will do so if you continue in your faith, solidly grounded and firm and not to be moved away from the hope of the Gospel which you have heard the same Gospel which has been preached in the whole creation under heaven. This is the Gospel of which I have become a servant.” (Our own translation.)

The story is told about a prominent Christian layman who was asked what his business was. “My business is being a Christian!” he replied; “and I support myself and my family by running a general store.”

This is what Luther meant when he wrote in his explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed that “Christ has redeemed me that I might be His own” He meant simply that we all *belong* to the Lord Jesus Christ by reason of His redeeming death on the cross—like slaves. And if this is true, our only real business in this world is carrying out whatever task our Lord and Master has laid upon us. His desire is our command. Naturally, we must all supply ourselves and our families with the physical necessities of life while we carry out our Lord’s orders; and to this end we all have some other secondary, occupation. But let us begin with this simple thought—that we are all slaves of Christ, bought with a price; and that we are all, therefore, engaged somehow in the service of Christ, our Master; and that this must be our main interest in life! Our main business is being Christians!

But now suppose someone were to ask us, “But just what kind of a business is this that you are engaged in? Are you manufacturing something, selling something, or giving some kind of service? To such a question we should have to reply that we are engaged in the field of public relations, the advertising business. We would have to explain that our product is eternal salvation; and that our specific task is telling people about this eternal salvation what it is, how they can have it, why they should have it, and urging them to avail themselves of it. After all, this IS our business—spreading the Good News of the salvation Christ has won for all men—proclaiming atonement for all! But then someone might ask us, “How did you ever get into such a business?”

“Have you ever asked yourself this question? If not, you should. “How did we ever get into this business?” Really, the answer is quite simple; and it is here that we begin our study of that portion of the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians which forms our text—verses 13-23. The opening verse of our text (verse 13) states that “It is God the Father Who has rescued us from the realm of darkness and has transferred us into the Kingdom of His beloved Son.” This introduces us to the great Scriptural doctrine of salvation by grace, which means that our membership in the Kingdom of Heaven is due to the grace of God alone. We did not apply for such membership; we did nothing to deserve it or to qualify ourselves for it; and we made no efforts to obtain such membership. This is all the work of God!

We are reminded that “God...rescued us from the realm of darkness.” This introduces us to the next great Scriptural truth—the doctrine of original sin, which states that when a person is born, he comes into this world in a completely depraved and sinful state. The Bible gives us a very complete description of man in his natural state. It states that he is spiritually blind (II Cor. 4:I Cor. 2:1); spiritually dead, or separated from God and His Kingdom (Eph. 2:1); an enemy of God (Rom. :7); a slave of Satan and sin (Rom.6:16-17); in a state of filth and uncleanness (I Pet. 3:21); and subject to the wrath of God and eternal damnation (Eph. 2:3).

To sum it all up, when a person is born, he is in an absolutely dreadful state and condition! He is a citizen of the devils kingdom of Hell, a kingdom in which all of its members are in a state of complete slavery to the devil. We notice next that this kingdom is described in verse 13 as “the realm of darkness” because all its members live in sin, and in spiritual ignorance and darkness. In Scripture “darkness” is symbolic of sin, even as “light” is symbolic of holiness, or the absence of sin. To say that we live in “the realm of darkness,” therefore, is the same thing as saying that we live in sin, in a state of sin which is precisely what the doctrine of original sin says. To say that we live in darkness, however, also pictures most clearly that in our natural state all men are utterly lost and helpless and unable to find their way out of this sad state, for the darkness of sin is total darkness, which means that those who live therein can see nothing!

This, then, is the kingdom, the realm, the dominion, from which we Christians have been rescued by the grace and efforts of God! And every one of the three Persons of the Godhead has had a hand in this rescue. God the Father is pictured here as the One Who originally laid the plans for our salvation in eternity. God the Son, of course, is pictured as the One Who actually effected our deliverance. And God the Holy Spirit is the One Who actually brought us all to faith, and thus actually made us members of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is He Who also keeps us in the true faith. This outlines, in a very broad and brief way, just how it has come about that God has rescued us from the realm of darkness and made us members of Christ’s Kingdom; how He put us into the business in which we are now engaged.

But now we must look more closely at the work of God the Son, for this is the central theme of the Christian faith. It is also the heart of our study. As we have seen, Scripture describes our sinful state in many ways. We are under the dominion of the devil, under the power of sin and death and darkness. We are in a state of slavery, a state of enmity so far as God is concerned, a state of uncleanness and blindness, and, so far as all spiritual things are concerned, we are completely dead.

And so it is that Scripture also describes the saving work of our Lord Jesus in many ways. For example, it is called the work of redemption, the work of reconciliation, and the work of atonement, And therefore it is said that Jesus has redeemed us, that He has reconciled us, and that He has cleansed us. And now we shall look at each of these terms more closely; and we shall find that this kind of study is most profitable.

The word the Scriptures use most commonly to describe our Lord's work is the word "redemption." This is the word used in verse 14 of our text, which states that "it is through Him (Jesus) that we have our redemption—the forgiveness of our sins. For the Christian this is one of the most beautiful words in Scripture.

To understand it, however, we must go back to one of the pictures of man in his natural state—to the picture of slavery. Man by nature is a slave of Satan because our first parents willingly sold themselves into this state of slavery in the Garden of Eden. We are all held in this state of slavery by the powers of sin and the Law. One way of looking at man's problem, then, is to ask, "How can he be set free from his slavery to Satan?"

The answer is the story of redemption, for the word "redeem" means "to set free." To get the whole story, however, we must go back into the ancient world in which slavery was a very common thing. Perhaps one-half, or more, of all the people of the world then were slaves, owned body and soul by somebody else! But there was a way in which a slave in those days could be set free. If he could somehow save up, or accumulate, the price which his master had paid for him, which was called his "ransom price," or if he could get someone else, like his family or friends, to pay this ransom price, he could literally buy back his freedom. This is how the idea of a "ransom" originated; and there were thousands of slaves who obtained their freedom in this way. There were even charitable societies, made up of noble-minded people, who raised money to help deserving slaves buy back their freedom. And more to the point, many of the early Christian congregations raised money for just this purpose—to buy back the freedom of some of their members who were slaves. The word "redeem," therefore, might better be translated as "ransom," and the thought is that to redeem, or ransom, someone, one must pay the ransom price to his owner.

This, then, is one way of looking at, or interpreting, the death of Christ—to say that He ransomed, or redeemed us. And the ransom price He paid was His own blood (Acts 20:28, Eph. 1:7 and 14, I Pet, 1:19, Rev. 5:9). This is one thing which we must never forget—that we have been bought with a price (I Cor. 6:20); and that each one of us is now "the Lord's freedman" (I Cor. 7:23). This was what such former slaves were called in the ancient world—freedmen—slaves who had been ransomed, bought back and set free. And this is exactly what the Lord Jesus has done for us. He has bought us and set us free!

Another word which the Scriptures use to describe the Lord's saving work is the word "reconciliation." This thought is also set forth in our text. In verse 20 Paul writes that God resolved "to reconcile all things to Himself" through Christ. And in verse 22 it is said that "Christ has reconciled you by means of His own body—His body of flesh and blood (that is, through His death)" Here we are looking at our Lord's saving work from a different angle, so to speak, or in a different way. To understand what it means to "be reconciled," we must start with a different picture of ourselves in our natural state. Now we must view ourselves not as slaves who need to be ransomed and set free, but as enemies who need to be restored to friendship. For this is the meaning of the word "reconcile"—to make friends of those who have been enemies. While slavery is something with which we are not familiar, reconciliation is something we are familiar with. When capital and labor get at loggerheads with each other there is a conciliation board, or labor conciliator, to reconcile their differences—that is, to make peace between them. When two persons get into some bitter dispute, there is a conciliation court, whose function it is to reconcile their differences—make peace between them again. When a husband and wife get into a violent argument they often may have to seek professional help to be reconciled.

This, then, is another way the Scriptures interpret the death of Christ—by saying that He reconciled us to God, meaning that He removed the enmity that existed between us and God. And

what was the cause of this enmity? Why, it was our sins, which are brought about by our willful determination to do what the devil wants us to do, and our refusal to do what God wants. The enmity does not lie, of course, in the heart of God, for God loves us. (John 3:16). The enmity lies in our hearts and minds; (Rom. 8:7); but it is real. And the sins we commit, which separate us from God, are real!

Now, the Scriptures tell us that when Jesus died, he paid in full the penalty the broken Law demanded from all of us—the penalty of death. In so doing He settled our accounts with God. He removed the cause of our estrangement, or enmity. And Scripture goes even farther by saying that He actually removed our sins, meaning, of course, the guilt of our sins. And in so doing He did something else. He showed us in the most forceful way that God is not angry with us. He showed us that God is not our enemy. He showed us that God loves us with a love so infinite that we cannot begin to comprehend it! What our Lord is really saying to the world is this:—“God is not angry with you! God has forgiven all your sins! So now if you will just be reconciled with Him, everything will be just the way God intended at the beginning!” This is exactly what God is saying through the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 18-20—“Now all these things are from God, Who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is to say, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them; and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God!” (the New A.S.V.)

This passage brings our one thought in particular—that reconciliation involves two people. God has already been reconciled; but sinful man must also lay aside his enmity. What Jesus did was to “make peace” between God and man, as Paul says (Eph. 2:15); or, to put it more exactly, He established the necessary conditions upon which such peace could be concluded by removing our sins, the cause of the enmity. And He did so, as our text points out, “through His blood which He shed on the cross.”

One other thought of the greatest importance is brought out here—that this reconciliation which Christ effected is truly universal. As Paul says (verses 20-21) “He has reconciled to God all things on earth and all things in the heavens”—that is, all men and women; and all the angels as well! And then, Paul goes on to point out, this reconciliation includes you, who at one time were in a hostile state of mind and excluded from any fellowship with God by your wicked deeds!”

This is really the greatest of all the great truths of the Gospel—that Christ has reconciled all men and women to God—without exception! (II Cor.5:19); that He has redeemed, or ransomed, all men and women!(Matt. 20:2). This is the doctrine of universal redemption, or universal reconciliation. And alongside it stands an equally great, or even greater, truth—that of universal justification, which is founded on the fact of universal reconciliation—namely that God has actually declared all sins forgiven! This IS the Christian Gospel—the Good News that we Christians have to tell others about! There is no enmity in the heart of God towards any men! There is no sin that God has not declared forgiven! And therefore there is no sinner who cannot have forgiveness and eternal life and salvation if here really wants to have it!

There is still a third word, however, which the Scriptures use to describe our Lord’s saving work on our behalf—the word which appears in the theme of our convention—the word “atonement.” Actually, “atonement” is something like a synonym of the word “reconciliation,” which we have just studied. The Greek word which is used in the New Testament, and which is translated as “atonement” in English, means literally, “to appease the wrath of someone,” which is essentially the idea of reconciliation, which is the process of removing the enmity which exists

between two people. In fact, it has been suggested that the word ‘atonement’ is really a hyphenated three-word phrase—“at-one-ment.” This is exactly what one does when he “atones” or “appeases” the wrath of someone who is angry with him. He brings the two people into a state of at-one-ment—togetherness.

When one turns to the Old Testament, however, one finds that the underlying thought of atonement is “to cleanse”—specifically, to remove the uncleanness brought about by our sins, which bring down upon us the wrath of God. This brings to mind another facet of the doctrine of original sin—that when we are born into this world we are in a state of utter filth and uncleanness, caused by our sins. And thus the Old Testament people of God saw that what was necessary was an “atonement”—a process whereby the filth and uncleanness of our sins might be purged away, and in this way God’s wrath could be appeased, or propitiated. Thus, the words “atonement” and “propitiation” are really synonyms.

Our next question is, “How, then, can such atonement be effected?” And since this is an Old Testament concept, we turn to the Old Testament for our answer. When we do so, we find that among the Hebrews, as among many other religions, this atonement or propitiation, was effected by the system of sacrifices, or as the letter to the Hebrews says, by the “shedding of blood.” (Heb.9:22). In fact, this whole concept of atonement, among the Hebrews, was brought to a grand climax each year on what they called the “Day of Atonement” (Yom Kippur), which was beyond doubt the greatest and most dramatic of all the ritual sacrifices.

On this Day of Atonement, which fell usually sometime in October, the people assembled before the great altar outside the Temple, while the High Priest took two goats, which were to be without blemish. He then killed the first of the goats in the usual manner, and drained some of the blood into a bowl. Then he took the bowl inside the Temple, and went into the Holy of Holies, the mysterious inner room in which the ark of the Covenant was kept, and into which not a solitary soul was allowed to enter except the High Priest, and he only once a year on this very Day of Atonement. Once inside, he proceeded to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice over the top of what was called the “mercy seat.”

The mercy seat was the cover on the ark of the Covenant. But here we must digress enough to describe in somewhat greater detail what the ark of the Covenant was, or what it looked like. As the name suggested in Hebrew, the “ark” was simply a box, about the size of an orange crate. On the front side was a door, and inside the box was kept the two stone tablets which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments; and a pot of manna; and Aaron’s rod, which had budded in a miraculous way. The most important part of the contents, of course, were the tablets of the Law. Over the top of the box was set a special “cover,” as it was called—a sheet of pure gold, which was called the “mercy seat.” At each end of the cover, or mercy seat, were the figures of two angels, or cherubim, with wings outspread, as if in prayer.

The action of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement was symbolical. He sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice over the mercy seat to cover the Law inside, which the people had broken by their many sins that year. That is to say, he was “hiding” or “covering” the broken Law from God’s sight. Theologically, the idea was that God is perfectly holy. He cannot abide even the sight of any sin, which is essentially spiritual uncleanness, or filth. For this reason it is men’s sins which separate them from God and which call down the wrath, or anger of God upon the sinner.

But by covering over the Law, which would remind God of men’s sins, the suppliant sinner could thus approach God by the blood of the sacrifice and implore His mercy and forgiveness (whence the name “mercy seat”); and, if the sacrifice was sufficient and successful, the sinner

could appease, or propitiate, God's wrath. This, then, was "atonement" in the Hebrew system of sacrifices.

Underlying this whole system of sacrifices, of course, was the fact that God had commanded the people to bring such sacrifices, with the promise that if they did so, He would forgive their sins—all their sins committed during that whole year! And this was then illustrated in the clearest possible way by the second goat,

After coming out of the Temple, the High Priest was to take the second goat, called the "scapegoat," and bring it out before the assembled congregation. There he was to place his hands on the head of the scapegoat and recite over it all the sins of the entire nation committed during the preceding year. In doing so, he figuratively placed all the sins of the whole nation upon that scapegoat. When this was done, the goat was led outside the city and out into the wilderness, where it was turned loose, left to die. For under such conditions a goat could never find its way back; and it would soon be attacked and killed by the wild beasts of the desert. This whole procedure was in reality an acted-out parable, a dramatic picture of God's forgiveness. In the first place, we must keep in mind the fact that the Greek word which is translated as forgiveness means literally "a sending away." And this, you see, was exactly what happened on the Day of Atonement each year. The sins the people—all their sins for that whole year—were placed on the head of that scapegoat, and then he was sent away to die. After all, he had assumed the full guilt for all those sins, and therefore, he must pay the punishment prescribed by the Law, which was death.

But the full truth about God's forgiveness centered about the fact that the scapegoat never returned. And so it is when God forgives our sins, remembering now that the word "forgive" means to send away. God removes our sins completely. He sends them away so completely they can never return, they can never be brought back, by placing them on Jesus, our Scapegoat (Isaiah 53:6) This is what John the Baptist had in mind when he saw Jesus coming to him and said to the people, "Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away-the sins of the world" (John 1:29, our translation). And this is also what the Psalmist had in mind when he wrote, "As far as the east is from the west (which is infinity), so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12)

Now, it must be noticed first that in the ceremonies that were celebrated on every Day of Atonement, the ideas of atonement and forgiveness were most closely connected. The first goat provided atonement or reconciliation, when he was killed and his blood sprinkled on the mercy seat. The second goat provided forgiveness, or removal, of all sins, when he was sent out into the wilderness to die, never to return. And it is the heart and center of the theology of the Old Testament that both these goats were types, or symbols, of Jesus, the Messiah or promised Savior, Who provided the perfect atonement and the complete forgiveness for all sins when He poured out His own blood on the cross.

Secondly, we should note that all of these thoughts and ideas that we have been discussing are brought together, or woven together, in our text, plus the additional thought of redemption, or ransoming. In verse 22 we read that "Christ has reconciled you by means of His own body—His body of flesh and blood (that is, through His death);" and in verse 1 we read that it is "through Christ that we have our redemption—the forgiveness of our sins." And thus we see that our Savior's work on our behalf is described in many different ways in Scripture. He has secured our redemption, or ransomed (redeemed) us—that is, He has freed us from our slavery to sin, death and the devil. He has provided us with reconciliation, or atonement—that is, He has made peace again between us and God by removing the cause of the enmity—our sins, and giving us a clean record. And by doing so, He has won forgiveness for us—the complete removal of all our sins, together

with all the guilt of our sins. And in every case Scripture tells us that He did all this by His death, by His blood, which was shed on the cross.

And now we must ask, “Why did He do all this?” Verse 22 of our text answers that Jesus did all this “so that He might present you before God’s throne holy and without blemish and above all accusation.” That is to say, this was the end result that our Lord had in mind. This brings us back again to the thought of the atonement, and particularly to the Old Testament meaning of the atonement, which, as we pointed out, is the thought of cleansing.

It is all summed up so beautifully by the apostle John in his first letter, where he writes, “the blood of Jesus, His Son, washes us clean from every sin!” (I John 1:7, Beck). This is exactly what Paul meant when he wrote that Jesus reconciled us “so that He might present us before God’s throne holy, and without blemish, above all accusation” The underlying thought of all those terms is that of cleanness, purity. This is what the word “holy” means—clean, pure, without sin. This is what the word “without blemish” means—without the spot or stain of a single sin. This is what the word “above all accusation” means—being so perfect that no one can accuse us of a single sin! That is real cleanliness, spiritually speaking! And this is the kind of perfect cleanliness, or holiness, that all of us poor sinners can have because of the atoning death and blood of Christ! His blood “washes us clean from every sin!”

The truth is that Scripture says that all men are actually blameless before God right now—above all accusation! Because all sins have been atoned for; and God has declared all sins forgiven. And to say that all sins have been declared forgiven, or are forgiven, means that they have all been taken away! And thus all men actually are clean and holy and without blemish in God’s sight—because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, His Son.

But not all men have received this reconciliation and cleansing and forgiveness; for this is something that can be done only by faith. Men must believe that all this is so, that God has actually done all this. But the sad and unfortunate truth is that all men do not believe this Good News when they hear it. Perhaps we could say that the enmity in their hearts is so deep-seated that they cannot, or will not, believe it. To put it in another way, we can say that whereas all men have been rescued from the realm of darkness, they have not all been transferred into the Kingdom of Christ. That is to say, they have not all accepted the citizenship which Christ offers them.

But for the present we are not thinking so much about what others have done about this message of salvation, or how or why they have rejected it and not believed it. We are thinking about ourselves, and the great privilege and responsibility which is ours. We know that WE have been rescued from the realm of darkness; and we know that WE have been transferred into the Kingdom of Christ. We know that “WE are citizens of heaven,” as Paul says (Phil. 3:30, TEV). This is a privilege we enjoy now, not something we are waiting to receive; and we must get to the point where we think of ourselves in this way— as citizens of heaven every hour and every minute of every day! Yes, the thought must never leave us that our Savior has redeemed us so that we might be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness!

It is a self-evident fact that, as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, we must serve our King in any and every way we can. This is a universal truth, applicable to all citizens, in whatsoever country they live. It is the duty of all citizens to obey the laws of their country, to work for the welfare of their country, to carry out the directives and orders laid down by their congress, or governor or king. And as citizens of heaven, the same principles apply to us.

And what are the orders which Jesus, our King, has laid down for us to follow? Briefly, He has told us that first of all we must love Him above all things—with our entire heart and soul and

mind. Secondly, that we must love all other men as ourselves. Thirdly, that we must live the kind of lives that will bring honor and glory to Him as our King, and to our Kingdom. That is to say, we must live and act in such a way that it will be evident to all who see us that we truly are children of God; that we must let our light shine before men so that they will see our good works and glorify our Father Who is in heaven(Matt 5:16), And lastly, He has told us that we must “go into all the world and preach the Good News to every creature” (Mark 16:15, our translation) And now, then, we have come back to the thought with which we began—that it is our business to advertise, to spread, to make known the Good News. And to be sure that we all understand exactly what is involved here, we must ask one final question—“exactly what is the Good News (the Gospel) that we are to proclaim?” Why, it is simply the story of the salvation which Christ, our Lord, has won for us and for all men. We can call it the story of our redemption how He freed us from slavery; or the story of our reconciliation—how He made peace between us and God; or the story of our atonement—how He cleansed us from our sins and appeased the wrath of God for us; or the story of our forgiveness—how He has taken away all our sins, to use the words we have discussed in this paper. .But in the end it is simply the story of our salvation—how the Lord Jesus rescued us, or saved us, from the realm of darkness; how He has brought us out of the darkness of sin into His marvelous light! Yes, that is “the same Gospel “ says Paul, the same Good News, “which has been preached in the whole creation under heaven. It is the Gospel of which I have become a servant.” (verse 23).

Today what Paul wrote is even truer than when he first wrote it. Today this Gospel—this story of the atonement—has been literally “preached in the whole creation under heaven! And we of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have been, and are, privileged to have a part in this world-wide evangelism program.

Put very simply, this is our business, our principle business—preaching the Good News to all men, proclaiming atonement for all to all! And the part we have in this great work could be a much larger part, and the effectiveness of our work could be greatly increased, if every one of our Wisconsin Synod members, young and old, could be brought to the point where he could say, with Paul, “This is the Gospel of which I have become a servant!” For when the Lord wrote those words, He was writing to YOU—to every Christian!

It seems to this writer that the growth of wickedness and lawlessness around us points with increasing clarity to the fact that we are living in the last days. And this being the case, the urgency of our task and the pressing nature of our business becomes all the more apparent. We must not be lulled into thinking that the work of the Church is going as well as it can go, and that the preaching of the Gospel is a task and responsibility given only to the clergy. The fact is that this is the business of every Christian; and every Christian, therefore, has some part that he can play in this overall task. To that end, let us pray, “Lord, grant to us of the Wisconsin Synod a new spirit of Pentecost, that Thy Spirit and power may be poured out upon all Thy sons and daughters, to the end that we may truly serve Thee by proclaiming atonement for all to all” Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

* File from WELSNET (Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod) BBS: (414)475-7514