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WANNA KNOW A SECRET?
Colossians 1:20-29

Years ago I woke up in the middle of a summer night and gradually became aware that I was hearing an odd humming sound. I thought perhaps something was wrong with the fan we had going in our bedroom, but when I investigated the fan it seemed fine. Perhaps I was just imagining that humming noise, so I ignored it. But before going back to bed I went to the bathroom to use that facility. While there I heard that humming sound more clearly and loudly than ever. It was not my imagination. Where was it coming from? I could not identify it, but I knew that I would not be able to go to sleep if I didn't figure it out. Maybe it was something downstairs. When I left our bedroom the sound was even more pronounced. I followed it downstairs and into the kitchen. There I found that our garbage disposal was running. Why would our garbage disposal be running in the middle of the night with no one awake in the house? There was no way we would have gone to bed and not noticed it running. How it got started sometime during the night is a mystery, but I immediately turned it off. Unfortunately I was too late. I tried turning it back on but it was dead. Apparently it had seriously overheated. Who knows how long it had been running? We had to replace it. However, I considered myself lucky, because it got so hot it could have started a fire and then we would have had a dangerous situation on our hands.

I believe that all of us humans have something going on in our lives that is sort of analogous to that experience of hearing that humming sound and knowing that something was not right. We sense something is not quite right in our world and our lives. We know something is wrong but we can't identify it. We try to ignore it, but it won't go away. Unfortunately as long as we can't identify it we can't fix it, so we are left with trying to ignore it, trying to tell ourselves that everything is fine. Today we are going to find out that there is, indeed, something wrong. The good news is both the problem and its solution are identified for us in Colossians 1:20-29. Let's find out what this is all about by looking at that passage.

Look at the end of this section. In verse 29 Paul wrote that he labored and struggled with serious energy and effort to proclaim Christ. He saw this as a cause worthy of giving his life to. We will see why helping people know the mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory is so important in verses 20-29.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

ALIENATION IS PERVASIVE

In verse 21 Paul said “once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds.” He didn’t mean the problem was just in their own minds but that they were enemies of God in the way they thought. This is a bit like Romans 8:7 where Paul wrote, “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”

First consider the *scope* of this alienation problem. This is not limited to that group of first century people from Colossae. The Bible makes it clear that every human being has that exact same problem. If you have human DNA, you’re alienated from God. Romans 3:23 says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Remember what Romans 8:7 says. If you’ve sinned, if you’ve got a sinful mind, you are hostile to God and cannot submit to him. Some may object that they aren’t hostile toward God, but they actually aren’t hostile toward their version of God. When it comes to God as he really is, they may not be conscious of it but they want no part of him. That’s the natural human state. It’s true of all of us. Furthermore, God has a problem with us. He must condemn us because there is evil in all of us.

That’s bad enough, but it gets worse. This passage is about how God deals with the problem, and we will see that reconciliation is the answer. But notice what Paul says about that in verse 20. He says that through Christ God will reconcile “all things” to himself, not all people. The passage tells us God will reconcile all people, but this reconciliation is not limited to people. Paul says it is not just people that have been alienated from God and need reconciling, it is “all things.” All of creation has been alienated from him. Evil has spread into creation itself. Even the physical world has been impacted by the human alienation from God. Romans 8:20-22 says creation has been subjected to frustration and is in bondage to decay, that it is groaning in its current condition.

Second, consider the *severity* of the problem. Verse 22 says God reconciled us “to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” Holy is a religious term that is not thought of very favorably in our culture. However, it is helpful to hear Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of what verse 22 says in his paraphrase *The Message*. He writes, “Christ brought you over to God’s side and put your lives together whole and holy in his presence.” He is right in understanding that a part of the concept of holy is to be whole. To be holy is to

have our lives put together and become truly healthy, what humans were originally designed to be. To be whole requires that we be reconciled, no longer alienated, from God. Paul is saying that the fundamental thing that needs to get resolved for humans to be whole and healthy is to resolve this problem of alienation from God. Everything that is wrong in people starts with alienation from God. All of the confounding conflict, division, war, broken relationships, fear, fighting, greed, cruelty, crime, racism and prejudice flows out of our alienation from God.

This is a claim many people will not accept. I cannot prove that it is true, yet the Bible boldly makes the claim. There is most certainly something amiss with the human race as we will see, and there is good reason to believe the Bible's diagnosis of the problem is correct. Obviously if this is the Word of God it would make sense that the One who created us would know what we need and how to address our problems. Also consider that you can provide the things that people suggest as the necessary solutions to the human condition and find that people still have that sense that something is wrong or missing. This is because no matter what you do for people if they are alienated from God, things will be off in life.

Consider that God is the all good, all loving Creator of everything and everyone. Think of what the Bible tells us about him. Acts 3:15 says God is the author of life. Where does a book come from? Barnes and Noble, Amazon or the library, right? No, before that. A book comes from an author. No author, no book. Where does life come from? It comes from the author of life. If you are cut off from the author what happens? No life! We've just celebrated the coming of the son promised in Isaiah 9:6. He would be "wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." He is the ruler of peace. Romans 15:33 says God is the "God of peace." Where does peace come from? Ultimately real peace comes from the Prince of Peace. No Prince, no peace. 1 John 4:8 says that God is love. Love comes from God. Again if you are cut off from God you are cut off from the source of real love. Do you see what this all means? If you are alienated from God, disconnected and cut off from him, you are cut off from peace, love and true life. Why is there so little real unconditional, self-sacrificing love in this world? It is because we are alienated, cut off from the source of it. Why are people restless, longing for peace? It is because we are alienated from the source of peace.

There is a long standing source of frustration in the Myatt family. My mother owns the mineral rights to some land in Oklahoma. We know that there is oil and gas deep under that land. That stuff is worth a lot of money. That money could do a lot of good things for our family. It would be a big help for my mother if she had some more money. Money from wells would certainly brighten the prospects for

retirement some day for her sons. It could also help a lot with a certain grandson's medical school expenses, which feel big enough to me that they could make Bill Gates gag. So we're really enjoying having that money, right? Uh, no. Well why not? Because there is no connection to that petroleum. The stuff is down there deep underground, but no pipe goes down to it to let it flow up to the surface and let the money flow into our bank accounts. Until there is a connection we won't get the benefits. God has something for us that no money can buy. He has love, peace and life, but if we are not connected to him, if there's no pipe to him, if we are alienated from him, it doesn't flow into us.

Are all people really alienated from God? Is creation itself subjected to futility and frustration because it is impacted by this alienation? Think first about creation. When our kids were young one day we took them to the Birch Aquarium. It proved to be educational in a way I didn't intend. Just after we got there we were looking at one tank and we saw an aquarium staff member put an octopus in the tank. The fish in the tank immediately attacked it and tore it to shreds. They were feeding the fish in that tank because they liked to eat octopus. But it was horrifying to watch. We all love the beauty of nature, but we don't like to reflect much on the fact that nature is downright brutal and violent much of the time.

Michael and Carissa enjoyed seeing some birds build a nest by their house. The nest of course was to be the home for the new babies in the bird family. It was heartwarming to watch, right up until the bird parents decided there wasn't enough room in the nest for all the babies so they pushed the weakest one out so it fell to the ground where it died. That could possibly be a lesson for some parents today, but once again it is a reminder of how pitiless and harsh nature is.

This world has some beautiful places, but it has many more that are harsh, barren and deadly. As nice as this world can be it is most definitely violent and dangerous. There are hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis and earthquakes. An average of more than 13,000 people die annually from earthquakes. Then there are lurking viruses and other scary diseases like prion diseases. Perhaps you saw the article that revealed that as scary as ebola is, many more people are dying from malaria than will die from ebola. Why is the world like this? Why isn't it more consistently beautiful and plentiful? Why isn't it congenial and kind? The Bible says it is because it has been impacted by our alienation from God. God's initial design for the world didn't include this harsh brutality, but now it is there as a reminder for us of the effect of that alienation.

But what about people? Are they really alienated from God? All I really need to do is tell you to take a look at human history. Look at current events. So much crime, greed, prejudice. So many hurting people, so many broken families and relationships. So many people looking for something, longing for peace. That should tell us something. It should tell us that something is wrong with us.

John Sisti sent me a chilling *New York Times* article about something called ransomware. This is a malware program that thieves manage to plant in your computer via the Internet. Once there it encrypts all your files. It then informs you that you must pay its creator \$500 or more for the decryption key. If you do not do so in the specified time all of your files will be permanently destroyed. The people behind these devious programs are raking in millions of dollars and there is currently no defense against them. Something is wrong with humans.

Have you ever been alienated from someone? For most of us being alienated from anyone feels bad. I recall one time when we were at a restaurant and just as we were dealing with our bill some people we knew showed up. We visited briefly with them as I was finishing up so I was distracted. It was only as we were driving home that I focused in on something that was nagging at me. The tip that I had left for some reason didn't seem right. I mentally reviewed the bill and only then realized that in my distraction I had miscalculated the tip amount and had left at best half of what I should have. I felt bad for the server because I didn't want him to think I felt he did a bad job. I also didn't want him to think I'm a coldhearted, selfish, penny pinching cheapskate. What if I see that person again? What if he waits on us again? I don't like that awkward sense of alienation.

That is a very minor example, but what happens if there is a person who is more significant in your life from whom you are alienated? Have you ever had to deal with alienation say from a member of your family? It feels terrible and nags at you. There is this sense of ickiness in the background. It tends to create a sense of guilt all on its own even if you haven't done anything wrong. But it also causes you to justify yourself and eventually it causes you to grow somewhat resentful of that person. These are the things that happen to us when we are alienated from God. He is the one we most need connection to. Cut off from him we sense something wrong. We feel guilt. We justify ourselves, we can even kind of resent him.

One thing that happens that we've already seen is that when you are cut off from someone you don't know what they are thinking. I had a recent kind of interesting experience of this. You all know that Laurie and I have some good friends in Mike and Dee Riley. Mike has been the head football coach at Oregon State. We are not

alienated from them, but over the last year due to a lot that is going on in their lives we have had very little contact with them. We have been disconnected. One day back in December I got a text from John Duewel informing me that Mike was leaving Oregon State to go to Nebraska. My first reaction was, “well that’s not true.” I was sure that this was a rumor that would prove to be false. Mike had consistently told us he had no desire to ever go anywhere else and he wanted Oregon State to be his last job as a head coach. I knew that in the past he had been contacted by USC and had flatly turned them down because he had no interest in leaving. So I knew this rumor would prove to be wrong. Mike is now the coach at Nebraska. Laurie and I were both stunned. Obviously something has changed. In public statements Mike has graciously insisted that at this point in his life he thought this would be his last chance at something new and that’s why he’s done it. I don’t buy it. I think something else is going on, but I don’t know what because we haven’t been able to talk to Mike or Dee. Disconnected from them we can only guess, and we could easily guess wrong. If we are disconnected from God we can’t know what he thinks. We can only guess and will likely guess wrong because our minds have been distorted by evil. This is why the mind of sinful man cannot obey God. It can’t understand him.

These are the signs that we are all alienated from God. This alienation is what causes that background hum, that sense that something isn’t quite right and that we need to be fixed in some way. It is why we lack peace and why people are so consistently looking for something.

RECONCILIATION IS GOD’S SOLUTION

What is needed when there is alienation? It is always the same thing.

Reconciliation is always the answer for alienation. I’ve said before one of my favorite movies is *Field of Dreams*. It is a quirky story that in the end is about a man who was alienated from his now deceased dad and longed for reconciliation. Reconciliation is always the solution for alienation. This passage says twice, in verse 20 and in verse 22, that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ’s death on the cross. We will discuss that process later in chapter 2, but for now, understand that Christ’s death was necessary for us to be reconciled to God.

I had a friend who was a pastor who served admirably in a church for more than ten years. Then he got a rude shock. The elders of his church, led by a guy who had been troublesome all along for this pastor friend of mine, informed him that they wanted to go in another direction. They were asking for his resignation. It was, as you can imagine, a very painful experience for him. Their stated reasons were flimsy at best, and mostly trumped up. He was a quality man and he took it with

grace, but there was some alienation between him and some of those men. Several years later this friend of mine received a call from one of those men. The man had been feeling guilty about the way he had treated this godly man and the guilt was eating him up. He called to tell him that he felt they had wronged him. He apologized and asked if there was any chance he could forgive him. That man felt his guilt and the alienation from his brother in Christ and he wanted reconciliation. The problem for him was that was not something he could accomplish on his own. He could not make what he had done disappear. He could not fix it. He could not *make* my friend forgive him. All he could do was humble himself, admit his wrong, and throw himself on the mercy of the man he had offended. It was up to my friend whether he would extend grace and reconcile with the man. He did so and they were reconciled.

That is not an exact parallel to our situation with God, for we did not take the first step to approach God. God has been the initiator of reconciliation from beginning to end. But the story illustrates for us an important point. We cannot create reconciliation with God. We can humble ourselves and admit our wrong, we can ask to be forgiven, but in the end that alienation we have from God can only be healed if God chooses to reconcile us back to himself. And that is exactly what he did in Christ.

Have you ever wondered why the world is as it is? Why is much of it desolate? Why is nature so brutal and violent? Why are there so many natural disasters? Why are there those parts of creation that seem to blunt the wonder of it, things like mosquitoes, jelly fish, sharks, snakes, poison ivy and poison oak, and all the rest? Well you said because creation was affected when humans rebelled against God. Yes, that is true, but why would God choose to subject creation to frustration? There are several reasons. God uses it to depict what evil does, what happens when we rebel against him. God also uses the harshness of this world to turn us to him. Similarly God uses it to remind us that we were created for another world and not be too tied to this one. But there is one other important lesson from it. Can you fix all these things that are “wrong” in the world? Can we make nature be gentler and kinder? Can we do away with earthquakes, tornadoes, jelly fish, snakes and all of the other things that threaten us here? These are the results of alienation, and they are far beyond human ability to eradicate. Just as it is impossible for us to fix those things so it is impossible for us to fix the effects of our alienation from God. God will someday fix all those hard parts of this world. He says it will be restored, made new where all those threats will be removed. But only he can do that. He will restore us too, and only he can do that. Even now he is in that process of restoring

us. He has connected us back to him so his love, his peace and his life can flow into us.

A major theme of this section of Scripture is that at one time Paul thought he was good with God, only to discover that he was actually alienated from him. But through Christ God had miraculously reconciled Paul to himself, and his life, his love and peace had flowed into his life. It was so powerful, so life altering, so profound that he wanted other people to experience it. So he dedicated himself to do whatever was necessary to spread the word. In verse 24 he said, "I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions."

Wait, I thought you said God could only reconcile us and that this was his work. In other words, Christ's suffering for us was complete. So what does Paul mean when he talks about what is still lacking in that regard?

It is important to note that Paul uses the word "afflictions" here, a different word than he normally uses to refer to Christ's suffering and dying for our sin. He's not talking about what Christ did on the cross. We can add nothing to that. Hebrews 10:14 says, "By one sacrifice he (Christ) has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." In verse 18 the writer said, "where these have been forgiven sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary." There is nothing that can be added to the sacrifice Christ made. It is total and complete.

What does Paul mean then? Think of this as the afflictions that come from serving Christ. The early apostles thanked God that they were counted worthy to suffer on behalf of Christ. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, "everyone who wants to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Jesus said if we want to follow him we must take up our cross to do so. In case you weren't sure, let me clarify, the cross is not a symbol of fun and happy. It means struggle and pain and loss. Jesus was saying in a world under Satan's influence if you choose to follow Jesus you are going to be opposed. It will be hard. People will oppose you and events that Satan orchestrates will conspire against you.

So what Paul is saying here is that he gets that following Jesus and bringing his good news to the world is not going to be a bed of roses. It will entail serious affliction. He said he is eager to do his share. He is doing whatever he has to do because this is such a great thing, and that means he is willing to make his contribution of affliction. He was happy to do it because being reconciled is the best thing ever!

CHRIST IN US IS THE KEY

Paul says in verse 26 that the cool thing is he gets to tell people about “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages.” What is he talking about? The Greek word Paul used is *musterion*, from which we get the word mystery. But the ancient concept of mystery is a bit different from our idea of mystery. We mostly think of a mystery as something hidden that we have to uncover. Go to the bookstore and they will have an entire section of mystery books. In those the detective or investigator always tries to solve a mystery and discover the truth.

The Greek concept was a little bit closer to a secret. Recently Laurie and I were remembering January 2, 2013. That evening we took Michael and Carissa out for dinner. Michael was a couple of months from deploying to Afghanistan. We had hoped that he might give Carissa what she really wanted for Christmas, which was a marriage proposal, but that didn’t happen. Was he reluctant to ask her to marry him because he was about to go off to war? We didn’t know. That evening we picked up the two of them at Carissa’s apartment. At first they didn’t let on that they had a secret. But once in our car they couldn’t contain themselves. They announced, “We have something to tell you. We’re engaged!” Michael recently said he thought Laurie was going to jump into the back seat with them because she was so excited. Michael popped the question on New Years Eve, but they had kept the news from us until they could tell us in person. They had a secret, and the only way we could know it was for them to tell us.

God had a secret. He gave enough hints that people could know he was going to do something, but using purely human reason they could never have known exactly what it was. Do you see why Paul was excited about his calling? If someone tells you a really juicy secret how do you feel? Privileged, excited. You know something no one else knows. How cool is it when that person says, “Go ahead and tell them.” You get to tell people the secret. That was why Paul was eager to “fill up what was lacking” in terms of affliction. God had not only told him the secret, but said, “You can tell others now, Paul.”

So what’s the secret? It is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul proclaimed that truth, that secret, and labored strenuously to do it. All right, but what does that mean? Start with where Paul, a former Pharisee, was coming from. As we can see in verse 27 the point of all this is “the hope of glory.” Glory has a number of different uses in the New Testament, but Paul is using it here to refer to experiencing the glory of God’s eternal kingdom. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (vol. II, p. 735) says, “the future of the Christian may be

considered as the restoration of the (glory) lost at the Fall.” The idea is that humans, created in the image of God, were radiant, glorious beings. They lived in the presence of the glory of God and in a perfect or glorious environment with no flaws. Remember that God’s plan throughout the ages has been to restore creation to its glory and human beings to their glory.

So the question before Paul, a former Jewish Pharisee, was how would uncircumcised, Sabbath-ignoring, bacon-eating Gentiles who had never heard of Moses and could not care less about his Law, ever have any hope at all of gaining the blessing of living in that glory? For a devout Jewish man like Paul it was all about first being a child of Abraham, meaning a member of God’s chosen people, then diligently and scrupulously adhering to the Law of Moses. Pharisees often believed that many of God’s chosen people would not enter into that glory because their keeping of the Law was dismal and half hearted. And Gentiles didn’t even make it to the starting line.

Paul says here is the secret God had kept hidden for ages and now had told him. Gentiles, as well as Jews, could have Christ in them, and that gave them the hope of glory. It is not being Jewish or keeping all the rules that qualifies one for glory. In fact, all anyone’s efforts to keep the rules will do is *disqualify* him or her for glory, because our best efforts will inevitably fall far short of the real meaning of the rules. In other words, no Jewish person who relies on his membership in that ethnic group and/or on his attempts to obey every law down to the minutest detail, has the hope of glory. But anyone, whether Jewish or Gentile, who has Christ inside him is reconciled to God and will enjoy that glory.

1 Corinthians 1:30 says that Christ Jesus “has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” We have Christ’s righteousness to offer God. In Philippians 3:9 Paul said he now chose to “be found in him (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

Let’s imagine that there is a test for being reconciled to God and entering into glory, and that test is emitting a certain amount of light. Imagine that my problem is that on my best day, exerting every ounce of energy I have, I can only produce the amount of light given off by a Christmas tree bulb, which is measured as 3 or 4 lumens. This is a problem given that the required amount of light is 25 million lumens such as a powerful spotlight would produce. But suddenly I have Christ’s light in me, and he produces the blinding light of the sun. My tiny 3 or 4 lumen

light is irrelevant either way. And Christ's brilliant light more than meets the demand of 25 million lumens.

There are prophecies in both Joel 2 and Ezekiel 36 in which God said he would put his Spirit within people, so that idea wasn't entirely new to Paul. What was new was that God would put the Spirit of Christ in people regardless of their heritage or their obedience to the Law. The point is we can either try to shine our light and hope it's bright enough, which it won't be, or we can have Christ's light by faith. His light will be enough.

Yes, but how can Christ be "in you"? How can the Spirit of Jesus actually live in another person? Ah, go back to the fact that God is Spirit and as such is not limited to location. In a way that is a mystery to us, God's Spirit can live in us. This means that we can actually have the life of Christ, the love of Christ and the peace of Christ alive inside of us.

CONCLUSION

REMEMBER THE IMPACT OF ALIENATION

Its effect on the world we live in means it will always hold pain and disappointment because it is not what we long for. We need to accept the limitations of this world. We want to have face to face connection to God now, but that must wait. We want to be totally free of sin and its horrifying effects now, but we will not ever experience that in this life. We must see this world and this life as it is and not keep trying to make it what it can never be.

I am all for doing everything we can to improve the quality of life in our world and helping people all we can. But we must never forget that the fundamental cause of all the suffering in this world is alienation from God. There is no career, no amount of money, no fame, no legislation, no economic stimulus or system, that can ever fix that problem.

Perhaps most important is we must remember the effect of alienation from God on us. Inevitably it is sap life, love and peace from us. God has reconciled us to himself, but we can block that pipeline he has established through Christ by our own willfulness.

LET THE LIFE OF JESUS FLOW

Do you realize that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is in you if you are a believer in Jesus? This life he has for us is not ultimately a set of doctrines nor a moral code. It is not about being better than other people. Only Jesus, the person of Jesus in us,

can give us the hope of glory and reconcile us to the Father. God looks at us and sees the righteousness of Jesus, his life, glowing from us.

Jesus is in you. Don't you love Jesus? Read his life story. He is so wise, so good, so strong, so courageous, so funny. He has so much compassion for people who were flailing and failing. He was totally at peace with who he was and was never fearful or threatened by powerful people. This Jesus is in you. So live each day in fellowship with him, and let him let his life, his peace and his love just flow from you into others.

REJOICE IN THE HOPE OF GLORY

Here's the great news. I am destined for glory. This is not because I have earned it or deserve it, but because Jesus deserves it. He rightfully lives in glory, and because he is in me I rightfully live there.

At Christmas Laurie surprised me. I'm at a place in life where it's hard to buy fun gifts for me. I don't play hockey or baseball or football anymore and I don't need any toys, so what can someone get me? It usually means I get clothes, which are fine, but I've never gotten over getting socks at Christmas when I was a kid. I still wish for something fun. This year Laurie shocked me by getting me a bass guitar. I had taken up playing bass, but have been borrowing one. She gave me my own bass, and I did not see it coming. It was a fun gift and I really enjoy it. But God has given us a far, far more precious gift. He has given the gift of reconciliation. He has fixed our alienation problem, put the Spirit of Jesus in us, and given us the gift of glory. Rejoice, for nothing could be better. God has fixed the fundamental problem that is at the core of the human condition. Let's rest and rejoice in what he has done for us.