



## Assurance and Hope in Colossians 1:21-23

<sup>21</sup> *And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled* <sup>22</sup> *in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight—* <sup>23</sup> *if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard . . .*

The misuse of this passage has too often undermined the believer's assurance. Incorrect interpretations usually start with the assumption that the phrase "to present you holy, blameless, and irreproachable in His sight" means entrance into heaven. The typical Arminian interpretation sees this presentation-salvation as dependent on the believer's faithfulness in conduct and to the gospel. In other words, salvation can be lost. The common Reformed interpretation views this passage through the lens of perseverance. They see the conditional "if you continue" referring back to the reconciliation of verse 21 and/or the presentation of verse 22, which they take as entrance into heaven. If a supposed Christian does not persevere (continue) in faithful conduct and faith in the gospel, it will prove that this person was never really a Christian (or reconciled) to begin with.

Two interpretations avoid these theological pitfalls and make better use of the text and context. The first interpretation assumes that the "if" has in view the reconciliation and/or the presentation, but also assumes that the presentation is referring to final salvation. Those who hold this view explain that the Greek construction of the conditional "if" expresses confidence, not uncertainty. In other words, the apostle is saying "If . . . and I'm sure you will . . ." Thus the conditional sounding "if" really means "since." However, such certainty can not always be assumed for this form of the Greek conditional statement.

The better interpretation takes the presentation of verse 22 as the subject of "if." Furthermore, the presentation does not refer to salvation or entrance into heaven, but the prospect of one's evaluation at the judgment seat of Christ, the bema. In this view, the apostle is declaring that faithfulness in conduct and a sure hope in the promise of the gospel will yield a holy, blameless and irreproachable life at the bema. This view is commendable for many reasons:

1. It correctly and consistently assumes the saved status of the Colossian readers. Paul is not writing to pretend Christians, but "saints and faithful brethren in Christ" (1:2) who have a reputation for faith and love (1:3), who have been delivered from the power of Satan into the kingdom of Christ (1:13), and who are redeemed (1:14) and reconciled (1:21). How inconsistent and confusing it would be for Paul to tell them they are reconciled to God in verse 21 then make it uncertain or conditional in verse 23! Besides, unbelievers do not have a faith in which to continue!

2. It does not make salvation dependent upon the believer's performance, but is consistent with the gospel of free grace which Paul emphasizes in 1:5-6 and reminds them of in verse 23.

3. It reinforces the already expressed concept found in 1:3-5 that the fruit of hope is sanctification. There the Colossians are commended for their "faith in Jesus Christ" and their "love for all the saints." This faith and love is "because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven." Hope (as an expression of



desire plus expectation and very close to faith in meaning) stimulates a life of faith toward Christ and love toward others.

4. It is consistent with the non-absolute sense of spiritual maturity expressed as the apostle's goal of ministry in 1:28: "that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." The presentation is not to qualify one as saved, but to qualify one as complete or mature.

5. The concept of being acceptably presented to the Lord is found elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Cor. 4:14; 11:2; Eph. 5:27; 1 Thes. 5:23; Jude 24). Romans 14:10 uses the same verb (*paristēmi*) to indicate the believer's appearance before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ.

6. "In His sight" (which can also be translated "before Him") reminds of the believer's accounting before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ where each believer will be evaluated and rewarded according to his deeds (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:10).

7. The qualitative terms, "holy, and blameless, and irreproachable" are not used absolutely or forensically, but denote a relative sanctification which is the goal of ministry (1:28). They are used in the same way as the terms for qualifications of imperfect elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-10; Titus 1:5-9).

The achievement of this goal, to be presented "holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight," depends on their not being moved away from their hope, which they heard and believed in the gospel. We note that they had in fact heard and accepted this hope in the gospel. Thus the warning is not to shift away from the position of confidence in their future which they presently enjoyed. Hope was their anchor for spirituality. The passage reminds of Hebrews 6:18-19 where hope is called an "anchor of the soul," that which brings us into the presence of God, the safest place possible. The Colossians will reach their spiritual goal only if they remain in this safe harbor firmly anchored to Christ Himself.

### **Conclusion**

This passage does not speak of eternal salvation dependent on the believer's perseverance in the faith. Such an interpretation makes assurance of eternal salvation impossible. Rather, it expresses the believer's assurance in terms of a sure hope that God will keep His promise in the gospel. To lose hope is to lose assurance. To lose hope and assurance is to lose the stimulus for the two indispensables of sanctification—a living faith in Christ and love for others which obtain a good presentation at the judgment seat of Christ. The message of this passage is clear: Stay grounded in the grace and hope of the gospel.