

# *The Journey and the Destination*

Colossians 1:21-29

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If you're joining us for the first time this Sunday morning, we've been in a series called Gospel GPS, the Pathway of Spiritual Formation. What does it mean to be more deeply formed in the person of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to grow in maturity as a Christian? But by maturity, I don't merely mean growing in our understanding of doctrinal truths, while that is certainly important and valuable. It's not just that we gain a greater understanding of the word of God, and that is true. But it's also to remember that we can have our theological furniture in place, we can know a lot about scripture, but we still in many ways keep Christ at a distance. The intention is that we are more deeply formed and rooted in who Jesus is and the gospel itself that we are fundamentally changed in every way.

Over the last several weeks, we've looked at what it means to be on this pathway of spiritual formation with regard to our relationship with Jesus Christ. This week, we turn to this final sermon in the series on the journey and the destination. Perhaps you will have heard in your life that someone says the destination doesn't matter, but it's the journey that counts. Generally, when somebody tells me that, it's very abstract. It sounds good. But in truth, if you're really trying to go somewhere, the destination does matter. And a journey might be great, but if you don't end up where you intended, what was the point of the journey?

We believe that the gospel itself and what Jesus Christ intends to demonstrate to us through the gospel is that both the journey and the destination matter. If we rob the gospel of the destination, that is knowing Christ fully and being more and more like Him, then we have half a gospel. But if all we think about the destination is that Jesus will come make everything all right and we forget the importance of the journey, we also rob the gospel of its power. It's both the journey and the destination.

This morning, we turn to Colossians 1:21-29 as Paul lays out for us early on in this letter what he wants us to understand with regard to the journey and the destination of knowing Christ. Hear now God's word Colossians 1:21-29.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 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.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this passage, what I want you to see is in some ways this is a summary of where we've been, but it's sort of landing the plane. What I want you to see in these verses is that Paul clearly describes the journey, he has clearly defined the purpose of the journey, and then the destination.

First, looking at the journey itself, in verses 21 through 23, Paul clearly lays out several things which we've talked about over the last number of weeks. He reminds them of their history. Remember when we started out this series, I said it's fine for us to know where we are and where we're going, but if you don't know where you're from, you fail to understand how that shaped you as well. Paul reminds them where they were. He says, you were once alienated from God.

Now, he then describes the nature of that alienation. Alienation wasn't just an issue of space or relationship. It was because, he says, you are "hostile in mind, doing evil deeds," the reality of sin. And notice the hostility in mind is not God's hostility towards us, but it gets underneath and understands that we have a hostility towards God. In our natural selves, when we're honest and we put away all the Christian answers, we understand that fundamentally we want to be God. We want to say where we are, where we're going, and God can assist us. But we want to be God.

Paul says this is what you once were. In some sense, even though we are shaking our fist at God in essence and saying we want to be God, all the while, what we see is God was about making a journey towards us when Paul says to them, "He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." Despite our hostility, God was not thwarted. Rather, in Christ, He came to make His own those who were once His enemies. And then He takes us, and He desires to make a people completely new in who He is, changed by His grace and His mercy, and more than forgiven but made new. New hearts. New desires. New motivations. It's a completely new way of understanding life in and of itself. And then he says the purpose is that we might be presented to the Father "holy and blameless and above reproach."

On the one hand, what Paul is describing is a unique thing of which we cannot let go. It is very clear that God is the initiator and that God by His Son and Holy Spirit and word is the one who invigorates this relationship. It is God who comes to us. He draws us to Himself. He has a purpose for which He is driving us. But we also participate in the journey. We're not just backseat passengers asking, when are we going to get there? We actually have choices to make.

This is what he says. "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." I don't mean to suggest that our participation thwarts the ultimate goals of what God is doing because God will do what He will do, but He intends that we participate in this journey and growth. Therefore, we have decisions to make and choices to consider. We are enabled to make those decisions and choices to have wisdom with the Spirit and the word. But we have choices nonetheless.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote these words as he considered the reality of our participation in what God is doing when he said,

"Every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before, and taking your life as a whole with all your enumerable choices all your life long are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature, either into a creature that is in harmony with God and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is at a state of war and hatred with God and with its fellow creatures and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven. That is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."

God has drawn a people who were once His enemies and made them His children. He has placed them on a journey that the work of Christ has made possible by His body and death. The power of His resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father and from the Son has indwelt His people. And His purpose is to make us holy and blameless. But we participate in the journey.

What choices are we making? How are we making our choices? Let me ask it further in a simple way.

Here, I want to borrow from a writer who recently wrote as he was considering one of the questions that Dietrich Bonhoeffer considered while he was in jail in Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this. "What is bothering me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is for us today." And this writer responded by looking at our present moment and says,

"My question, leaning on Bonhoeffer's lead, are we really for Christ today? Are we really for him? Or do we really just want him to be for us?" He says, "Both questions cause to seriously consider our lives and to honestly assess the current state of things. And when we're honest, we find oftentimes the state of our own souls and even of our witness is not very encouraging. We find ourselves in a world increasingly shaped by dangerous rhythms, hostility, emotional immaturity, flippant sexuality, political idolatry, and individualistic consumerism to name a few of the powers wreaking havoc on our lives and our communities."

And that's what we've been talking about. In this journey, as we try to participate, we're going to encounter these obstacles. There are obstacles that come from outside and all the sound and fury of the world that is broken looking for answers but only providing false security. And there are obstacles in our own hearts which are endless search engines looking for something more because we're not satisfied. It comes from without and from within.

When we're honest, we get discouraged. But I think that's the place to really begin asking the question, are we for Christ? Or do we just want Him to be for us and what we want?

This writer asked just a couple of questions for us to consider as we think about where we are on this journey. He says, "How can it be that those who call themselves Christians live at such a destructive pace that eliminates any semblance of abiding in prayer with Jesus?" By which I think he means why is resting and trusting and being still so hard for us? Why is it that for many of us, resting and being still feels like laziness? Maybe someday when Christ returns or we go to be with Him, maybe we will be allowed to understand why such things like this pandemic have been allowed to happen. But I do wonder if one lesson might be it has forced us to stop. It has forced us to stop all of our hurriedness, all the stuff we thought was really important, but when it comes down to it, it really is a lot of sound and fury and not of much substance.

How tempting it is even for the church that during a time like this, it's not enough. We feel like we need to do more, more, more. But maybe when things feel like they're turned upside down, we need to be reminded of what God said to Israel. "Be still and know that I am God."

Do you recall when God freed His people from Egypt, they came out with more than they ever had. They saw what God did in changing the hearts of those who once enslaved them. They saw the defeat of the enemy. And yet there they sat on the banks of the Red Sea fearing that Egypt would catch them again. Essentially, they're saying, God, why aren't you doing more? We need to be doing something. But what does He show them again and again and again? He's got this. And if we can trust and be still, go to Him with our anxieties, go to Him with our worries, go to Him with our addiction to a destructive pace as Americans, and say, Lord, take this. Where do we need to be still? Where do you need to be still?

Another question. How is it that so many who identify themselves as followers of Christ hold such deeply wrong and injurious views of other people they barely know? Why do those even who claim the name of Christ rejoice in the downfall of their enemies, calling them names and using social media and even our faith as some kind of shield? Lord, why is this? How is it that we consider ourselves as disciples of Jesus, but we live lives characterized by so much relational dysfunction, and we allow division and lack

of reconciliation? We're afraid to have hard conversations, and so we go around others. Instead of having the hard conversation we need to have, we go to talk to somebody else about that person.

Why do we do this? Why do we oftentimes live with such emotional detachment? We scarcely know what is actually feeding our motivations and our actions. And here I don't mean some introspective me, myself, and I experience. But if we scarcely know what is actually motivating us, it's hard to allow the word of God to come in and really change us.

How can it be then that so many who believe that God became man and made His dwelling among us lack such serious integration of how we live in the body and our faith in Christ? Why is there a lack of integration between how we understand our human bodies and our faith, and yet we celebrate the incarnation? Final question. How can it be that those who are called to be the very presence of Jesus in the world live indistinguishable from the world?

This is a pastor asking these questions. And as I read them, I was like, those are really good questions, but I need to look in the mirror first. It's an opportunity as we consider this journey to consider what are the choices that we are making to participate in what God is doing in making us holy and blameless to prepare us? Holding to the faith, having deep roots in the faith, having deep roots in Jesus means we're allowing Him to go to the ground level of our motivations, our desires, to say Lord, have your way with me. Here I am. And it's going to mean difficult things. It's going to be a journey. It's going to be hard. But we do so knowing what Paul says here to us, "If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast," meaning what feeds a stable steadfast journey is a faith that it is Jesus and His word that feeds us. It is the food of the word and the power of the Spirit that enables the people of God to be faithful, stable, and steadfast in the journey because if we don't, we're going to bonk.

Now, bonking may not mean a whole lot to you, but as an endurance athlete and after years of riding my bike and racing, bonking is something you fear because you respect it. I don't know if you've ever been on a long journey that required endurance and muscles and everything, but here's what bonking is in the cycling world. It is when you reach a point, and you know it's coming. The period of time when you've realized it's happening and you're in the full throws of it literally is a matter of seconds. It's like your muscles seize up into cramps, and no amount of anything you have in your back pockets or in your bottle is going to solve the problem of what's happening to you in that moment.

But it's more than just physical. It's physiological. Your body is screaming out for sugar. And suddenly, you find when you're riding with your friends, as has happened to me many times, they're just continuing up the road, and it's like you have literally nothing. And your mind starts playing games with you. It's like, why did you do this? Where did you mess up? Couldn't you have thought about this earlier? What did you eat yesterday? And then you start saying, I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't finish. I just want to stop.

That happens not because you failed to have food on board. It's what happened to you the days before. Years and years of this, you realize, I need to pay attention to what I'm eating the night before more than I do with what's in my pockets in the back of my jersey. If I don't, I will bonk. No matter how much I've trained, if I don't have enough food, I won't make it.

The faith is the word of God and the power of the Spirit at work in His people. If we fail to feed upon those things, we bonk. We lose hope. We become distracted, and we look for easier paths. This is the intention of which Paul says, you're on the journey. This is what He has done.

But then if you've ever been on a journey, you ask why are we going to begin with? What's our purpose? The purpose of the journey as Paul says is, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake." He talks about how his purpose is to give of himself to the service of the church for this one purpose. He says,

"I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for

ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

And therein lies the why. The why is that God's purpose was to make a people His own, the church, the bride of Christ so that, therefore, because God set before Him the purpose of redeeming for Himself a people, our purpose for this journey is to know Him and to be like Him. Christ in you, the hope of glory. Christ in you is the work of the Spirit. Christ in you is the word of God made alive. Christ in you is realizing what now defines you, what now identifies you first before everything else is that if you are a Christian, you are a child of the God most high before everything else.

It is this purpose. And this purpose then, if Christ in you is the hope of glory, the hope is that what God has begun, He will bring it to completion that we might experience His grace so fully that every square inch of our lives is reshaped by the power of Christ and the truth of His gospel. We are not just forgiven. We are transformed with new hearts, new minds, new desires.

In this purpose, we understand even a greater reality. To experience the riches of His glory is to understand our two-part vision as a church. It is to experience and extend the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to Columbia, the region, and the world. You cannot extend a grace you do not know, and you cannot experience a grace unless you know you have been invited to receive the gift of the grace of Christ which now says of you that He comes to you as one who is in relationship with you and not with a list of do's or don'ts. He comes first with a list of who He is and who you are, and He invites you to Himself.

That identifying mark of being a son or daughter of the God most high changes everything about the journey. When you're on the journey, even though you might understand the purpose, you're going to get distracted. You get mad at yourself, and you begin to shame yourself, and you try to make it all work. But the reality is it's remembering the purpose is the hope of glory, Christ in you. And if Christ is in us, we are new. We've sung this already this morning. I heard it from your lips and am deeply encouraged by the worship this morning.

Here's what we all sung earlier, the song "Christ is Risen." "Let no one caught in sin remain inside the lie of inward shame but fix our eyes upon the cross and run to him to showed great love and bled for us. Freely, you've bled for us." As I heard those words sung, I had picked a different hymn to illustrate, but they fit together. One of my favorite hymns says this, "He left his Father's throne above, so free, so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race. 'Tis mercy all, immense and free for, O my God, it found out me. Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God should die for me."

And here's where the purpose and the journey come into connection. If in the journey as I ask these questions I see the deeper parts of me that have yet to be touched by the gospel of grace, and in those places I hide my shame and guilt and all of my work to be a better person, and I allow God to come in and say that I'm not going to allow my shame or my sin or any of that to define me, what defines me now is I've been made new in Christ, and your love has found out me. And that changes everything. That becomes the food. That becomes the energy source. That becomes our purpose.

What is your why? Not the church answer. What is your why in being in relationship with Christ? Paul wants us to be reset and renewed that it is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

But Paul does not end with merely talking about the purpose. He also talks about the destination. Verses 28 and 29, he says, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." Paul's desire is that those He's called to serve will reach the destination that is maturity in Christ.

Now, we're always going to be in this journey experiencing what has already taken place, what Christ has done for us, how Christ is victorious over sin and death in the resurrection. We enjoy the

beauty and power of the Holy Spirit and the renewing of all things. Our strength is renewed. We're forgiven. We're restored. And yet there's plenty of not yet. We have a hope that transcends whatever it is we're experiencing now, and that is the destination, that everyone may be present and presented as mature in Christ. This is the hope.

What's being described there, this maturity in Christ, is being prepared. That is we're being prepared for when Christ will finally be revealed or when we go to be with Him, and we see Him with unveiled faces. We are being presented to God as holy and blameless.

What is God doing? Do you know what God is doing? God is preparing for a massive wedding feast. And that wedding feast is when the church, the bride of Christ individually and corporately will be prepared to come and at that day celebrate the final consummation and wedding of the church and Christ in a new heaven and a new earth.

Thanks be to God that this year despite COVID I've been able to participate in four weddings. They were smaller, but four weddings. To me, that's a victory. It's always a victory. One of the things you see as a couple prepares for their wedding day, all the months, conversations, and decisions that have to happen is the journey to their wedding day. But their wedding day is not the end goal. It's just the beginning for all eternity, for all the rest of their lives. They are preparing for that day. Do you know that the heaven above, that the Lord in all of His wisdom and mystery tells us in His word that He is preparing a feast? There is going to be a celebration when the bride of Christ, the church, you if you are a believer meet your savior in all glory and perfection. The destination absolutely matters. And what that helps us to see is this.

As one person said this week, "We've become so articulate in describing our present despair." It feels that it's everywhere. The world is upside down. "We've become so articulate at describing our present despair." Here's a question. In light of what Paul says here, how can we become more articulate in describing our hope? And what Paul gives us here is language for describing and articulating our hope which enables us to say come rain, come challenge and trial, come the sound and fury of nations warring against nations, disease, hurt, and sin, and yet the end of the story is not despair but hope.

This is the story. This is what God is doing. And we can begin to rearticulate our hope in Christ whose love has found us out, who finds us weary. And I'm weary. Aren't you weary? I'm weary. I have decision fatigue. Don't you?

I mentioned this in the early service. I appreciate that everybody's trying to give us advice about what to do for Thanksgiving and the holidays and how to gather with each other electronically. Frankly, I'm just tired. And there's only so long that we can stay at this high stress level and being in warning. We need the warnings, but I will tell you I need more articulation of hope. How about you? And I believe the articulation must come from the hope which transcends into our very difficult place. And that is the glory of Christ.

One of the things that I've done this year as my own little enjoyment is watching how this has radically changed the landscape of all sports. If you're a football fan, I get all that. But as a cyclist, it really undid the entire cycling season. But all these cyclists needed to still train. They went on these massive journeys. Some went from the eastern part of Iceland all the way through the center to the western edge all by bicycle without any support except what they could bring on their bikes.

But there was this one 19-year-old Scottish kid who decided that what he would do is ride from Edenborough all the way up to the northern coast of Scotland right through the Scottish Highlands. He's riding over a hundred miles a day. He's super fit. He's doing great. He reaches his stopping point, and he sits down in the middle of nowhere in Highland Scotland. He's next to this little hut which is closed because of COVID, and he's just eating some snacks. And this hiker just came out of nowhere, and the cyclist said, hey, I'm headed up this way. What do you think? Look at this mountain. I was planning on going right, but I'm thinking about going left. What do you think? The hiker says, well, if you go to the

right, it's a really hard climb. But if you go to the left, it's more of a valley. But you're going to end up in the same place. The cyclist was tired, so he decided to take the easier path, or so he thought.

Right in the middle of that valley, he gets off his bike, and he looks at his video camera and is videoing himself. He said, "They said this was the easier way." Now, the clouds have set in, and it's starting to rain. He's cold. He says, "I'm close to the finish." But he said, in actuality, "If I'd gone the other route or this, it really doesn't matter because my father is waiting for me at the end. And that's the only thing getting me there."

Each of us are going to have different paths. Your story is your story. And what God is doing is what God is doing in your life. But pay attention to what He is doing in your life to form you more and more into the image of Christ, to invite you into a deeper experience of His grace. But know this, the despair can be very strong. The darkness can sometimes be very dark. The valley of the shadow of death is very, very real. The word tells us to fear no evil for He is with us. He is with us in the valley, and He is with us at the destination. The Lord has you. And He invites you to renew your strength in the grace of Christ in this journey.

Now, if you're not a Christian, much of what I've just said here probably doesn't make any sense. Maybe you've rolled your eyes. I know I would have. But I invite you to talk with me more. Let's start a conversation, ask the hard questions. I want to tell you more about Jesus.

But if you are a Christian, know that God has you, and He has a purpose to present you holy and blameless to himself through the matchless work of Christ in every area of our lives. He has us. He's with us in the journey, and He's with us to the destination. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word. I pray that you would strengthen and encourage your people. I pray, Father, that you would give them the hope of glory, Christ in them and in us, that your Holy Spirit and word would become the food and the sustenance for their journey, but that you would show them over and over again that you are with us and that we need not fear or despair. We pray that our hope can be renewed because you are the Lord, the Father of hope, and the hope of glory is Christ. Do this, we pray. In Jesus's name. Amen.