

Good morning, everyone! I want to extend a special welcome to our guests. There have been quite a few new people here at church the last few months, and if that is you, we not only want to say, “Welcome, we are so glad you are here,” but we’d also appreciate the chance to connect with you at our **Welcome to the Creek** lunch today at 12:15 in the chapel. If you’ve been here for a few months and you want to learn more about this place, or if this is your first week and you’d like to be able to connect more with us, we would love to have you stay for lunch. We know this is a large church, but we want to keep things around here as small, as relational, and as personal as we can, so sitting down at a table together, eating a meal, exchanging stories, and hearing some of the vision of the church is a great place to start. My family and I will be there. We would love to have you.

As we kick things off today, I want to share the most common and often the most effective way a believer can share about Jesus and the impact of the Christian faith with a nonbeliever. The most dynamic, life-impacting faith conversations are usually not based on debating the age of the earth, or the inerrancy of Scripture, or the historical reliability of miracles. Each of those things matters and the discussions are very important, but time and time again, what I have seen help open the door in someone’s life to accepting Jesus is when someone who is already a follower of Jesus shares their personal testimony. A testimony isn’t a long sermon or a defense of important doctrines; it’s simply a person sharing, “Here is what my life was like before knowing Jesus, here is what Jesus has done for me, and this is how my life is different because of him.” Who was I before, what has Jesus done, and how is my life different today? As we continue our series in the book of Colossians, we are going to see Paul follow the exact same line of discussion as he reminds the Colossians about all that God has done for them through Jesus. If you have your Bible, turn with me to Colossians 1:21-24. We are going to see Paul talk about our former situation without Jesus, our present reality in Jesus, and our ongoing need for Jesus.

### **Our former situation without Jesus**

Paul lays out our former situation very clearly in Colossians 1:21: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Many of you have known the great frustration that comes from having something wrong with your body and going to doctor after doctor, expert after expert, medical facility after medical facility, and never getting an accurate diagnosis. I know several people in this church who have gone to Mayo Clinic or the Cleveland Clinic and spent a week there for tests and exams as a last ditch effort to have someone accurately identify what is wrong in their body, with the hope that once the problem has been discovered, a treatment can begin.

Everyone who gives even a passing reflection of the state of the human condition is painfully aware that we are in a state of crisis. Every few years a new wave of politicians rises to prominence, promising to be uniquely capable of being able to fix it, but even the best politicians fall woefully short. Teachers can’t educate us out of it. Influencers can’t entertain us out of it. Entrepreneurs can’t invest us out of it. There is a problem that lies deep in the human heart, that is a core part of the human condition, and most of the people in the world lack both the diagnostic tools as well as the language to call it for what it is. But in this passage, Paul puts all of humanity in an MRI machine and says, “I can tell you exactly what is wrong with you. I know the source of the problem. I know why you don’t have peace within yourself or peace in your family or peace with the world around you. It’s because you don’t have peace with God. You are alienated from God!”

Listen to Isaiah 59:1-2: “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that

he will not hear.” Isaiah says the problem is not that there is no God, or that God is unable to redeem us from the situation we are in. The problem is that we have rejected God. Our sin, our pride, our stubborn refusal to look to God and insistence on doing life our own way has resulted in alienation, and that alienation has resulted in a profound, encompassing disorientation. One hundred years ago, atheists believed that “the death of God,” the wide scale rejection of God’s presence, authority, and morality in society, would bring about a new level of moral freedom. Although in some ways it has, a more modern atheist named Albert Camus has observed that what the rejection of God has really brought to society is a profound sense of abandonment and purposelessness. David Foster Wallace said that the rejection of God has left us with a stomach-level sadness that simply will not go away.

I’ve had the chance to visit the Vatican museums in Rome a few times. You go through building after building, looking at priceless pieces of art, but everyone is waiting for the grand finale, where you shuffle into the Sistine Chapel, packing in like sardines with a few thousand other tourists. If you stand in the center of the chapel and look up, you see the iconic image of the finger of God touching the finger of man. The divine spark of life. God reaching out to man, man reaching back. Divinity and humanity in unity. Everyone loves this image. People try to break the rules and sneak out their phones to take a photo of this scene. When you finally leave the museum and exit through the gift shop, there are countless opportunities to buy t-shirts and coffee mugs with reproductions of this scene.

Everyone focuses on this scene. But the artwork in the chapel visually tells the story of the entire Bible, from beginning to end. Next to this iconic scene is a scene that no one focuses on: the banishment from the garden. Given our human nature, everyone focuses on the first image, God and man united. No one likes to focus on the banishment, on alienation. I have been there five times. I have never seen anyone sneak their phone out to get a photo of that; I haven’t seen it on t-shirts or coffee mugs. Yet that is the reality for all of humanity without Jesus—alienation from God!

Paul says that this alienation from God is the result of being enemies in our minds because of our evil behavior. He wrote an entire treatise on this in Romans 1. Paul says it way better than I ever could, so I’ll read Romans 1:28-32 for you. Listen to Paul diagnose the state of humanity before Jesus.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

If in our minds we refuse to acknowledge that God exists and that God is sovereign, we cannot live the life God designed us for. If you run a car engine without oil long enough, sooner or later there is going to be a breakdown. You can put a thousand different words or expressions to it, but that is our reality without Christ: life is not working the way it is supposed to.

### **Our present reality in Jesus**

Though in the past we were alienated from God and enemies in our minds, Paul says, “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:22). This is the change that Jesus makes. We go from alienation to reconciliation. We talked about this word last week. In the ancient world it was used primarily to refer

to nations that were at war who have come to terms of peace, or to a married couple that was planning to divorce who have abandoned those plans and decided to come together again. Where there were once divisions and separation, animosity and disdain, there is now unity and love. That is what Jesus has done for all of humanity on a cosmic level.

Paul intentionally highlights that this reconciliation came through Jesus' physical body. In order to redeem us, Jesus became like us. Jesus entered into the totality of the human experience. He was born as a baby. He learned to walk and talk. He had imperfect parents and challenging siblings. He got sick and hungry and tired. He worked with his hands. He grieved the loss of loved ones. He was tempted by greed, pride, and selfishness on numerous occasions. The one true living God took on flesh; he descended into our experience to trailblaze a way out of it. Hebrews 2:14-18 describes this:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

He shared in our humanity, in our flesh and blood; he was made like us in every way. The fullness of his incarnation allows him to be a merciful and faithful high priest. Jesus knows what it is like to struggle so he can help us in our struggles.

Most of you know my mom passed away three months ago. Yesterday would have been her 64th birthday. So many people in this church have loved and supported me during this season of loss. I am so grateful. Every card, every hug, every prayer has been so meaningful. But there is something unmistakable about the way I have been cared for by people who have lost a parent, or recently had to say goodbye to someone they loved dearly. There is a compassion and tenderness in their eyes that speaks more than words can say: they are able to meet me in my pain because they know that pain. That's what Jesus is able to do for us. In all our pain. In all our weaknesses. In all the challenges that come from the complexities and difficulties of life in this world, Jesus endured it all, and because of that, when he looks us in the eyes, it's obvious: he knows, he understands, and he is truly able to save.

And he can make atonement for our sins. As a human, his sacrifice, the real blood shed from his fully human body, was sufficient, was strong enough to break the power of sin and begin the process of leading us out of the darkness we were living in. Colossians says that when we are reconciled, we are without blemish. 1 John 1:7 puts it this way: "The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin." Colossians says that Jesus' death makes us free from accusation. The Bible says that we have a spiritual enemy whose name is Satan. Satan literally means "the accuser." Like a maniacal prosecuting attorney, he levels charge after charge against us, exposing our errors, highlighting our mistakes, and calling for our punishment. That is the work of Satan, but listen to what Revelation 12:10-11 tells us happened in the heavenly realms once Jesus died on the cross and rose again: "The accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb." Before Christ, we were riddled with accusations. Because of Christ, the accuser is cast out of the heavenly courtroom and is left silent because of the blood of the lamb. Justification is not that God treats us just as if we'd never sinned. Justification is that God treats us just as if we had already received the punishment for our sin. If a creditor comes knocking on your door, you don't have to pretend that you never owed a debt; that wouldn't make any sense at all. What you need to do is produce a receipt that says your debt has been paid in full. Because you have no deficit remaining, the creditor walks away in silence. That is our reality in Christ.

This is such good news. Because every one of us who has ever lived has made mistakes that we are deeply ashamed of. Even once we choose Christ, we continue to make mistakes we deeply regret. But because Jesus wore our flesh and sacrificed his physical body on the cross, then we are reconciled. We are free from blemish and accusation. There is no condemnation. We live free from guilt and shame. There is no way to properly express the freedom this brings. As a pastor, I have talked to so many people who basically want to know: Can I be forgiven? Can I know for sure God accepts me? Like an oncologist has the joy of telling a patient, “Your cancer is entirely gone; you are 100% cancer free—ring that bell,” it is such a joy to look someone in the eye and say, “Not because of anything you have done, but because of Jesus, yes! With absolute certainty, you are forgiven. You are a new creation. You are accepted by God. That is your present reality in Jesus.”

### **Our ongoing need for Jesus**

We not only rely upon Jesus completely on the day of our salvation to be brought into the family of God, but we also continue to rely upon Jesus every single day in order to live our lives for the glory of God: “—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:23). Becoming a Christian is not a one-time decision; it is a lifelong decision. We have to continue in the faith. Paul says we have to be “established.” Most of the times that word was used in the ancient language, it was used to refer to a house being built on a foundation. Think about the difference between living in an RV, which can move from one campsite to the next and from one state to the next with ease, and living in a traditional home that, barring a natural disaster, will never move. Paul says our relationship with Jesus cannot be like that of RV owners: sometimes focusing on Christ, in his word, in prayer, in church, serving, growing, worshiping, and other times checking out, doing our own thing. We have to be permanently fastened to Christ, established and firm.

Think about a marriage relationship. It is incredible when the marriage kicks off with a bang. You have the ceremony, the bride walks down the aisle, you exchange vows, you exchange rings, you kiss, the two become one, a new covenant is established. It’s wonderful, but any good marriage requires ongoing pursuit, ongoing commitment, ongoing communication and sacrifice and investment. The same is true for our walk with God. We don’t get to come up out of the water and get on with our life. We come up out of the water and live every day of the rest of our lives firmly committed to Jesus.

This is the difference between being a convert and a disciple. A convert is someone who makes a profession with their mouth: Jesus is Lord. That is important! But a disciple is someone who desires to follow Jesus every day of their life and desires to see every aspect of their world, their personality, their relationships, their sexuality, their finances—everything—joyfully brought under his sovereign wisdom and reign.

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3-8)

That's the life we are being called to. A life of ongoing dependence on Christ, of maturity in Christ, a life that is fruitful and productive for Christ's kingdom.

Who I was before Jesus, what happened when I met Jesus, the life I now live because of Jesus. In terms of application, I encourage you to consider how you can progress along that spectrum. Some here haven't made a decision for Jesus yet. You are experiencing that sense of alienation from God, and today is the day to accept him. Some have accepted Jesus, but that's as far as you have gone in your faith—it's been a conversion, but not discipleship. Others of you have embraced Jesus and grown in your faith; you are established, and now it's time to grow in sharing your faith! Paul concludes this paragraph by saying: "This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant" (Colossians 1:24). Maybe today God is calling you to be a servant of the gospel and to do whatever it takes to help others know him.