

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 26, Number 6

February 7, 2010



Who/What is Reconciled?

And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:20)

Our first challenge in studying a passage is to anchor our minds firmly in what the passage says. Our next task is to interpret it in its immediate contextual setting. Many years ago, a friend gave me a book that clearly attempted to promote/defend a doctrine that must strain to find any ground or support from Scripture. Of all things, the supposed theme of this book was Biblical interpretation, "hermeneutics," but the content dealt with the errant idea the author wished to promote. His view of context was to ignore the immediate setting of his favored verses and jump to isolated verses all over the Bible and then claim that he was interpreting the passage "contextually," when in fact he consistently ignored context.

In this context Paul has affirmed that Jesus is the Creator of "all things" that were created, whether in heaven or in earth. It is quite likely that he mentions both things in heaven and things in earth to refute the Gnostic view that the deity of Gnostic belief despised all things material. Paul's refutation affirms, "This is my Father's world," that God created the material world no less than He created the immaterial. Paul further emphasizes that God created "all things," referring to the whole of creation, both by and for Himself, and that He shall, in the end, have the preeminence over that creation.

In the record of the fall in Genesis third chapter, we see a glimpse of the reality we observe around us every day. Not only did Adam's sin prove to be a catastrophe for him and his offspring, it also proved disastrous for the material universe. The material world in which we live is quite different than it would have been had the fall never occurred.

What is the future of this material universe? When the Lord returns and ends the present world, what shall happen to the material universe? Although many Bible interpreters interpret Peter's language in Second Peter the third chapter as an allegory of things spiritual, I believe we should best view the chapter as quite literal. Peter's reference to the scoffers is certainly not allegorical. His reference to God's creation and to the flood are literal, not allegorical, so why should

we shift our interpretational view from literal to allegorical in the middle of the lesson? If we follow a literal interpretation through the full lesson, we learn that at the Second Coming the first thing to happen to this material universe is a complete meltdown. However, Peter affirms that the meltdown shall be followed by a "...new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (2 Peter 3:13) The simplest, and I believe the correct, view of this passage is that it quite literally tells us that God shall not only resurrect the bodies of all humanity, dividing them in righteous judgment between heaven and hell. It also indicates that the natural creation shall also experience its own "resurrection" or recreation in righteousness, no longer corrupted, polluted, and scarred by the ravages of human sin.

John affirms this point when he looks into heaven and sees angels and redeemed humans praising God for Jesus' redemption. Do not overlook that these people are in heaven when John sees them. They have already died and are presently in glory, singing the anthems of redemption in heaven. Part of their praise looks back at the finished work of Christ and praises Him alone for their redemption. Part of their song also looks forward, anticipating a yet-future event.

And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.
(Revelation 5:10)

Various believers in the millennial view of end times have often attempted to claim this verse as supporting their view. According to this view, the Second Coming shall introduce the family of God to an intermediate thousand years of utopian life on earth before the full reality of heaven begins. Where in this verse do they find any indication that this reign on earth is intermediate or temporary? Do they believe the redemption by Jesus' blood in the prior verse is temporary?

What is the meaning of "all things"?

...things in earth, or things in heaven. While I embrace the view of a literal restoration of the material universe, Paul in this context seems to

narrow his scope to "things *in*" earth and heaven, rather than to focus on earth and heaven in their totality. Often the short, simple words in Scripture cause people more problems than the large words. How often people see such words as "all" and put their minds to sleep rather than examining the context to see what "all" includes and, more importantly, what it does not include in that setting. I believe Paul's earlier use of "all things" in this context refers to Jesus' creation of the whole material universe. Anything that we regard as "created" should be included in this term. Yet in the same context, our study verse, Paul uses this term, but specifically states that the "all things" now considered are things "*in*" earth and heaven. If the things that Jesus reconciled to God in this setting were not something less than universal, the simple term "in" would be unnecessary. To reconcile things "in" earth and heaven directs our focus to something less than the whole of earth and heaven.

A major point in this passage is the observation that Paul does not describe potential reconciliation, probably the most common view of reconciliation in our time. Paul does not say that Jesus made reconciliation possible if man would do something, anything, to accept it or to enact it. He stated a fact in the most literal of terms. Jesus didn't merely put reconciliation within our reach; He reconciled these "all things," whatever they be, so that the only reasonable conclusion to the verse is that those things that Jesus reconciled "...in the body of his flesh through death..." were in fact wholly reconciled to God.

Another errant interpretation of this verse claims universal salvation, that all of humanity shall eventually experience Jesus' redemption and the peace of this passage. Douglas Moo refutes this idea quite directly.

Since at least the time of Origen, then, some interpreters have used this verse to argue for universal salvation: in the end, God will not (and often, it is suggested, *cannot*) allow anything to fall outside the scope of his saving love in Christ. Universal salvation is a doctrine very congenial to our age, and it is not therefore surprising that this verse, along with several others in Paul, is regularly cited to argue for this belief. This is not the place to refute this doctrine, which, we briefly note, cannot be reconciled with clear New Testament teaching about the reality and eternity of Hell. But particularly relevant to the meaning of v. 20 is Paul's teaching in 2:15 that God, "having disarmed the powers and authorities... made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The spiritual beings to which Paul refers explicitly in

v. 20 are not saved by Christ but vanquished by him (see 2:15).¹

No amount of wresting can make the Bible support the idea of universal salvation. Scripture consistently depicts hell (or in the end the "lake of fire," Revelation 20:14-15) as both a populated place and as an eternal place. The wicked whom God shall sentence to that place cannot claim that they were reconciled to God, nor shall God make such a claim.

What is our conclusion?

If Jesus' atoning death accomplished reconciliation for whatever these "all things" are, and if universal salvation is not a Biblical fact--and it is not--who/what did Jesus reconcile to God "...in the body of his flesh through death..."?

Without question Jesus' death and the peace that He purchased by His atoning death accomplished our redemption, our reconciliation, and our eternal peace with God. We should not so focus on the material side of the passage as to forget or to ignore the personal impact of His death on us and on all of God's chosen people. I believe Paul's point here is to affirm both truths. In so doing, he refutes the Gnostic error that had invaded the Colossian Church and prompted his letter. He also assures us of the **security** we enjoy in our **Surety**, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we read the New Testament conclusion of the redemption story, it fully reveals the answer to our question. For example,

Behold I and the children which God hath given me. (Hebrews 2:13b)

Or

...for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. (Revelation 5:9b)

¹ Some of the others are Rom. 5:18–19; 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:24–28.

²¹⁰ ²¹⁰ See, e.g., Douglas J. Moo, "What Does Paul Teach about Hell?" in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 92–109.

²¹¹ ²¹¹ Stettler, *Kolosserrhymnus*, 295–96.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, *The Pillar New Testament commentary*, 135 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008).

Both of these verses and many others affirm the simple point that Paul makes in our study verse. Jesus' death fully and finally accomplished reconciliation to God of a specific people, known and loved by Him from "...the days of eternity." (Micah 5:2, KJV marginal reading)

Why would Paul include "things *in* heaven" in this setting? Aren't all things in heaven redeemed? Do not be surprised by the answer. No, they are not. Jesus' death did not redeem or reconcile angels. They needed no reconciliation. But there were countless multitudes of souls in heaven who had lived and died before Jesus' death. He atoned for their sins--reconciled them to God by His blood--no less than He reconciled us.

Because of the consistent teaching of Scripture, we can sing the glorious song of redemption--reconciliation--accomplished and secured for the family of God by our Surety, the Lord Jesus Christ. What a Savior!

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor