



## Colossians 1:23

23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. 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.

### Reflection

But. I think the word 'but' must be the most

powerful word in the English language. It's small, but it has the power to sweep away everything that has gone before it. When it comes after bad news, it has the power to lift the eyes and restore hope. More than any other word that can be spoken by a human tongue, it has the ability to change everything. For example,

The plane went down. But no one was hurt. You have cancer. But is easily treatable. Your son was in a car crash. But he's fine.

Sadly however, sometimes the 'but' doesn't come. Sometimes the sentence simply stops. Yet these moments only magnify for us the times when the 'but' does come. And these moments are glorious.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (9Marks series; Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 59–60.

Take for instance the ‘but’ in today’s passage, Colossians 1:21–23, listen out for it as I read it for us now.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. 22 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 – 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. 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.

Did you catch the 'but' in those verses? In many ways, that word is the most important element of the gospel message that Paul has shared so succinctly with us in verses 21 and 22. Without feeling the weight of that 'but' we lose the impact of the gospel. On the one side of the 'but' is depth and depravity of our sin. Verse 21,

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.

It's fashionable today to reweight the gospel away from human sinfulness. We might hear of a gospel that takes away person guilt, or opens up meaning and purpose in life, or enables us to lead our best life now. But Jesus didn't die to save us from

negative thoughts about ourselves, or to renew the world with an emphasis on the environment – Jesus Christ died for our sins, as this verse states so plainly.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.

Outside of faith in Jesus Christ we are alienated from God; enemies with him in your minds, and doers of evil. You see, sin is the breaking of a relationship, the rejection of God himself. Sin is a repudiation of God's rule, God's care, God's authority and God's right to command those to whom he gave life. In short, it is the rebellion of the creature against their Creator. And sin is deadly serious because God is holy and righteous which means he must

punish evil. Listen to Psalm 89:14,

14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.

Or Habakkuk 1:13,

13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;  
you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.

And so before the gospel of Jesus Christ is 'good news' we must understand very clearly the 'bad news'. We are sinful to our very core, utterly unable to save ourselves through moral effort or good deeds, and we will be judged and found wanting by a perfectly holy and just God who will leave no sin unpunished. Along these lines Ro-

mans 3:19 must be one of the most terrifying verses in the Bible,

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

Can you even imagine what that will mean? To stand before God and to have no explanation, no plea, no excuse, and no case? Sinful to our core, utterly unable to save ourselves through moral effort or good deeds, and 100% certain of being judged by our perfectly righteous and just Creator against whom these sins have been committed at the end of days. This is the bad news. But...

22 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 –

But ... now the good news. Once we've received the bad news and realise just how dire our situation is we can truly appropriate the good news of Jesus Christ. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, there is no-one righteous, no, not one – except Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, who was sent by God to die a substitutionary death in our place. When we trust Jesus to save us, we become united to him, and a magnificent exchange takes place. All our sin, rebellion, and wickedness is imputed (or credited) to Jesus, it's charged to his account, and he



dies because of it. And at the same time, the perfect life Jesus lived is imputed to us, and we are declared righteous. God looks at us, and instead of seeing our sin, he sees Jesus' righteousness. This is the good news of the gospel, the only hope and only way through the reality of human sinfulness and the pending judgment that hangs over us all.

After this wonderful two verse gospel summary, Paul concludes this thought with a warning in verse 23,

23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. 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.

God is sovereign but we are also responsible. Through the gospel God works to preserve people by his grace and through his Spirit so that we will be vindicated on the day of judgment but at the same time God's people are responsible to persevere in their faith. In Scripture divine sovereignty always sits in tension with human responsibility. Kent Hughes expresses this well, he says,

The gospel does not work like magic. The mind, the heart, and the will must be involved. Our minds must feed on Christ and his Word. Our hearts must focus on him in love. Our wills are to take their practice and pattern from

him. Present faith leads to present results; present drinking is for present thirst. We must fill our lives every day with him.

## **Think & Pray**

With that thought spend some time today meditating over the gospel of Jesus Christ. Contrast the depths of sin and the heights of forgiveness and what that will mean eternally and then confess your sins to God in prayer. Perhaps also think forward to that day when every mouth will be silenced and the whole world held to account. Greg Gilbert sees it this way,

When you stand before God at judgment, I wonder what you plan to do or

say in order to convince him to count you righteous and admit you to all the blessings of his kingdom? What good deed or godly attitude will you pull out of your pocket to impress him? Will you pull out your church attendance? Your family life? Your spotless thought life? The fact you haven't done anything really heinous in your own eyes? I wonder what you'll hold up before him while saying, 'God, on account of this, justify me!'

I'll tell you what every Christian whose faith is in Christ alone will do, by God's grace. They will simply and quietly point to Jesus. And this will be their plea: 'O God, do not look for any righteousness in my own life. Look at your Son. Count me righteous not because of anything

I've done or anything I am, but because of him. He lived the life I should have lived. He died the death that I deserve. I have renounced all other trusts, and my plea is in him alone. Justify me, O God, because of Jesus.