

# THE BIG 'IF'

## Colossians 1v23

I recall talking to a fellow church leader who at the time was going through a particularly tough patch. He told me of a dream he'd had of a dazzling light and a figure he immediately recognised as Jesus. But he noticed that there was no shadow being cast by Jesus. This caused him to ask why this was and the reply came that there was no shadow because Jesus is of the same dazzling radiance of light. And then the voice added "And I see no shadow from you, because you are in Christ."

Colossians 1v15-22 affirms the truth of this man's dream. Jesus is the glorious image of the invisible God, and now that we are in Him God views us so differently. **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** Truths like this bathe us in a warm glow. But what about this next verse? Paul seems to introduce a condition. I am calling it 'The Big If'. **If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.** Texts like this can unsettle us and pose some uncomfortable questions: Is it possible, after all, to lose my salvation? Can I ever be sure that I have been born again? What if I backslide and turn away from Christ?

We shouldn't side-step these questions. As a pastor I have preached through Colossians in different churches but looking back at my notes I see to my shame that I sometimes *did* avoided them. I remember someone in Brighton approaching me after teaching on these verses and drawing my attention to the "if" and asking me about it. I waffled and ended the conversation as quickly as I could. But it is important to face up to this issue for these reasons.

First, we need to feel the weight of this text. There are too many casual Christians. There is a lack of seriousness, a readiness to flirt with sin, a neglect of spiritual disciplines. Some even have become blasé because of the doctrines of grace saying to themselves: "I'm OK because once-saved-always saved!" So we need to feel the weight of this text. There is a warning here to set about your Christian life with the utmost seriousness.

Second, it is vital that we grapple with big theological questions. But be wary of slick answers. Make sure you approach these questions with humility. Issues like this have taxed Christians for generations.

So let's find out what the text actually says and then test its application on four pastoral situations.

## What does the text actually say?

**If you continue in your faith** i.e. provided you persevere. Tom Wright translates it: 'This assumes, of course, that you keep firmly on in the faith.' Believers must take responsibility for their own growth to maturity in faith. But there is another possible translation here. In the text the definite article is present so it can read: **If you continue in the faith** i.e. the truth. This would then be the condition of remaining true to the apostolic gospel.

**Established and firm.** This is first century builder's terminology. The word **established** was to do with the foundations and **firm** was used of the structure of the building. Paul is saying: be like a well built house. Make every effort to build well on the solid foundation of faith in Jesus Christ. There is an echo here of Jesus' words about the two men who built houses – one on sand and the other on solid rock. You soon discover how well built your house is when a mighty storm strikes.

**Not moved from the hope held out in the gospel:** i.e. not continually shifting and taking your eyes off Jesus. Paul says don't be lured by other attractions. One of his colleagues did just that. Demas fell in love with the world and deserted.

## How does this apply to real situations?

Let's test this on four circumstances. Each of these scenarios raises the issue of our eternal security over against personal responsibility. But please remember I am preaching not lecturing. Preaching is bringing a message from God. God wants to speak to you this morning. Allow Him to get under your skin – to provoke you to be the best that you can be. We need to be men and women who are not just a little bit different from others but radically different.

First scenario:

Someone professes faith, is full of enthusiasm and gets baptised, then quickly falls away. The hymn, 'O Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end' was sung as they were baptised - but where are they now? What are we to make of this?

The sad reality is that not everyone who professes faith with their lips also submits their life to Christ. Becoming a Christian is more than ticking a box. There needs to be evidence of repentance – a change of heart and mind, a new direction to your life. There must be some desire to know Jesus and to live a better life. Yes, progress may be slow and gradual but if you have been spiritually reborn you cannot stay the same. Where there is no change there is no evidence that you belong to Jesus. A true believer *will not immediately fall away* – check out Jesus' parable of the Sower in Mark 4. Continuing is a sign that you are truly born again.

As a believer you are **holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation** - ***if* you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved**

**from the hope held out in the gospel.** God doesn't want anyone to be deluded. If someone recognizes themselves in this description – they need to act. And we shouldn't reassure them. Instead we should urge them to seek God in repentance and faith - yes, even if they have already been baptized as a believer.

### Second scenario:

Someone shows every evidence of being truly born- again but they fall away after some personal tragedy.

Here is a true story. A young man was behind enemy lines in Europe during the Second World War. His life was in the balance as he opened his army New Testament and prayed, giving his life to God. He survived the war and returned a transformed man. He became a children's evangelist and then a missionary in the Far East. He married and had one son, but circumstances brought the family back to the UK. One evening this man climbed the stairs to say good night to his twelve year old boy and to his horror found him hanging limply from a rope in his bedroom. Half an hour earlier the boy had been happy, making plans for the next day. Now he was dead. There was no note, no explanation. For the next 20 years this man was a shadow of his former self. His wife continued in her faith surrounded by Christian friends, but he no longer had any appetite for God or church or the Bible or prayer.

None of us here would sit in judgement on him. He had not given way to cynicism or some superficial attraction. He had suffered terribly; he was a shattered man. Who knows how we would handle such terrible tragedy? So, can we imagine God casting one of His children aside in such circumstances? If the grace of God means anything He can hold on to you when you are unable to hold on to Him. The one piece of Latin I know comes from my Spurgeons College motto, "Teneo et Teneor" – "holding and being held". Imagine a mighty storm and a four year old clinging to her daddy's hand, thinking "I mustn't let go or I will get blown away". But is it really all about her holding on? Or is it about her father holding her?

Yet our text still has an edge to it, even in the toughest of circumstances. When church leader David Watson was struggling with cancer someone asked him "Do you feel bitter towards God?" He replied that he had quite enough to carry as it was without adding bitterness to his load. In the midst of his suffering *he needed God more than ever*. This was exactly the time for him to **continue in the faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.**

### Third scenario:

Someone commits their life to Christ and for a prolonged period lives as a fruitful Christian; but now they are half-hearted or switched off. They want little to do with the church and may even point to some hurt or disappointment to explain why. Many such people are genuine Christians who have lost their way. But what are the implications of this text? It says a believer is **holy in his sight, without blemish**

**and free from accusation - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.** What can we say to such people – assuming that they were truly born again all those years ago?

First, in your present state God looks on you with sorrow not joy. He still looks on you with the love of a Father, but through tears. You may be His child but you are weak, not healthy and strong. You were made to know Him intimately but it is a long time since you spent time with Him or delighted in Him with wonder, love and praise. You were made for His glory with a specific purpose and mission to fulfil during your life, but you have lost your way and are living for yourself. Come back to Him and **continue in your faith.**

Second, you are living in no man's land – neither enjoying the full riches of life in Christ nor able to live an unrestrained life without Him. This is why it is difficult for you to find any real peace of heart and mind. Come back to God and **continue in your faith.**

Third, you are not storing up any treasure in heaven. The Scriptures have a surprising amount to say about our heavenly inheritance. Sometimes it is talked about in terms of a crown of righteousness, other times as treasure. But some Christians will find very little treasure waiting for them. They will be saved "as by fire". In this life everything you give yourself to that is self-centred is like wood, hay and stubble – it will be burned up. So much that we acquire in this world decays or is snatched away in a moment. Everything that we hoard has to be left behind. But everything you do for God's glory is like gold, silver and precious stones – it has the stamp of eternity on it. Make sure you are giving yourself to something that will last forever. So, come back to God and **continue in your faith.**

Fourth scenario:

A Christian of many years falls into serious sin, bringing public shame upon Christ. Over the years I have known some who have led large churches, even movements of churches, who have fallen like this. So, have these people been "sealed for day of salvation", or will Jesus say to them "Depart from me, I never knew you"? Well, I'm not God. I'm not omniscient. But I believe there is a crucial sign which can point us in the right direction. It is this: do these people have any anxiety about their condition?

Christians have the Spirit of God living within. When they sin, the Holy Spirit is grieved – and they will feel His grief. It is a bad sign when there is no disquiet, only indifference. If their assurance goes and they are plagued with anxiety and guilt this is a healthy sign. It shows that the Spirit within is giving them grief.

In south east London one of our church members was a lovely lady whose husband was never with her. She explained that he had been a fine Christian but had fallen away from Christ. On his overseas business travels he had met another woman and for years had carried on a relationship with her – even after his wife found out. He

turned away from their former church and resisted every attempt of the pastor to reach out to him. Then one day this lady rang me and said her husband wanted to see me. He was very sick. Terminal cancer had been diagnosed. He realized he had to get right with God and with his wife. When I visited he told me that, over all those years, his conscience had never been clear. He knew he was in the wrong. Now he was full of remorse and desperate. We sat and talked and then he prayed such an earnest prayer of repentance. He asked his wife's forgiveness and even bought a new wedding ring. He contacted his former pastor and sought his forgiveness.

He had very little time left but nevertheless he was able to **continue in the faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.** He died a few weeks later, but there was joy in his wife's heart. They had found each other again and she knew he had made his peace with God.

I know of another man, like this, who went through twenty years of serious backsliding before returning to Christ later in life. It was so good that he had come back but on doing so he said this: "*Oh, the waste of those years!*" Yes, but the Bible says God can restore the years the locusts have eaten. Such is God's grace that, once you have been restored, He can multiply your fruitfulness and give your life an impact that will astound you.

## **Finally**

While God knew those who were His in Colosse, Paul didn't. He hadn't planted this church; he didn't know the people personally. So here he is at pains to challenge them. He is saying: *the best way to have assurance that you are saved is to keep on trusting in Christ*; keep on believing the truth of the gospel; be faithful.

So, let our text ring in your ears and settle in your heart today – whether you are running well at this time, or not. This is God's word to you. **Continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.**

**John Wilthew. April 2009.**

## SUMMARY OF MESSAGE

### THE BIG 'IF': Colossians 1v23

Colossians 1v22 says: **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** Truths like this bathe us in a warm glow. But what about the next verse? Paul seems to introduce a condition. **If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.** Texts like this can unsettle us and pose some uncomfortable questions: Is it possible, after all, to lose my salvation? Can I ever be sure that I have been born again? What if I backslide and turn away from Christ? It is important to face up to this issue: (i) We need to feel the weight of this text. There are too many casual Christians. (ii) It is vital that we grapple with big theological questions.

#### 1. What does the text actually say?

**If you continue in your faith** i.e. provided you persevere. **Established and firm.** This is first century builder's terminology. Paul is saying: be like a well built house. Make every effort to build well on the solid foundation of faith in Jesus Christ. **Not moved from the hope held out in the gospel:** i.e. not continually shifting and taking your eyes off Jesus.

#### 2. How does this apply to real situations? Let's test this on four circumstances.

**First scenario:** Someone professes faith, is full of enthusiasm, gets baptised, then quickly falls away. What are we to make of this? The sad reality is that not everyone who professes faith also submits their life to Christ. There must be some desire to know Jesus and to live a better life. Yes, progress may be slow and gradual but if you have been spiritually reborn you cannot stay the same. Where there is no change there is no evidence that you belong to Jesus. A true believer *will not immediately fall away*. God doesn't want anyone to be deluded. If someone recognizes themselves in this description – they need to act.

**Second scenario:** Someone shows evidence of being truly born again but they fall away after some personal tragedy. Can we imagine God casting one of His children aside in such circumstances? If the grace of God means anything He can hold on to you when you are unable to hold on to Him. Yet our text still has an edge to it, even in the toughest of circumstances. When church leader David Watson was struggling with cancer someone asked him "Do you feel bitter towards God?" He replied that he had quite enough to carry as it was without adding bitterness to his load. In the midst of his suffering *he needed God more than ever*. This was exactly the time for him to **continue in the faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.**

**Third scenario:** Someone commits their life to Christ and for a prolonged period lives as a fruitful Christian; but now they are switched off. They want little to do with the church and may even point to some hurt to explain why. Many such people are genuine Christians who have lost their way. What can we say to them in the light of this text? First, in your present state God looks on you with sorrow not joy. You may be His child but you are sickly and weak, not healthy and strong. Second, you are living in no man's land – neither enjoying the full riches of life in Christ nor able to live an unrestrained life without Him. Third, you are not storing up any treasure in heaven. The Scriptures have a surprising amount to say about our

heavenly inheritance. Sometimes it is talked about in terms of a crown of righteousness, other times as treasure. Some Christians will find very little treasure waiting for them. They will be saved “as by fire”.

**Fourth scenario:** A Christian of many years falls into serious sin bringing public shame upon Christ. Have these people been “sealed for day of salvation” or will Jesus say to them “Depart from me, I never knew you”? There is a crucial sign which can point us in the right direction. It is this: do these people have any anxiety about their condition? Christians have the Spirit of God living within. When they sin, the Holy Spirit is grieved – and they will feel His grief. It is a bad sign when there is no disquiet, only indifference. If their assurance goes and they are plagued with anxiety and guilt this is a healthy sign. It shows that the Spirit within is giving them grief. John told a story of such a man returning to God when he was very sick. The Bible says God can “restore the years the locusts have eaten”.

**Finally:** While God knew those who were His in Colosse, Paul didn't. He hadn't planted this church; he didn't know the people personally. So here he is at pains to challenge them. He is saying: *the best way to have assurance that you are saved is to keep on trusting in Christ; keep on believing the truth of the gospel; be faithful. Continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Are you ever troubled by the question of whether you can lose your salvation? What has helped you to have peace and assurance?**

**What do you think John meant when he said we need to feel the weight of Colossians 1v23?**

**Read Jesus words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7v24-27. In what way is this relevant as we think about our text in Colossians?**

*John offered 4 scenarios to test the application of our text; here is a question on each.*

*Scenario 1. Someone professes faith but quickly falls away: **What struggles or challenging issues did you face in the early stages of your Christian life?** (Jesus summarises some of these in the parable of the seed and the soil. Mark 4v1-20)*

*Scenario 2: After years as a believer someone falls away after personal tragedy. **What “hope held out in the gospel” can be a strength to us when we face serious personal issues?***

*Scenario 3: Someone who was running well is now switched off. **Most of know such people. Given some indication that they are open to talking about this – what might you say to them to help them get back on track?***

*Scenario 4: A Christian of many years falls into serious sin bringing public shame on Christ. **What can we learn from such situations which might help us keep on course?***