

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son...

—Colossians 1:13, NRSV

### LEARNING GOALS

1. To highlight the themes of rescue, redemption and reconciliation in God's mission.
2. To reiterate the centrality of Christ in God's mission.
3. To discuss the Colossian church's participation—and ours—in God's rescue mission.

### REFLECTION

#### Three R's of God's Mission

In the first chapter of Colossians, three key theological terms are used to signify God's presence and work in the world. The first two words, "rescued" and "redemption," appear in 1:13–14. Paul writes that God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The word for "rescue" in 1:13 is the same Greek word used in the Greek translation of Exodus 12:27 (God "rescued" Israel from the plague of the firstborn) and Exodus 14:30 (God "rescued" Israel from Egyptian soldiers at the shores of the sea). The word can be variously translated as saved, rescued, or delivered. The Exodus was a rescue mission from Egyptian powers. Likewise, in our text, Paul speaks of a divine rescue mission from the cosmic powers of darkness. These powers were created through and for Christ (1:16), but now seem to be in rebellion against God and

hostile to humans (Talbert, 186). "Through Christ," writes Marianne Meye Thompson, "God has rescued people by overcoming the powers, not with a visible display of strength and destruction, but through the cross" (Thompson, 27). The comment on the powers of darkness by Lesslie Newbiggin is worth quoting in full:

The principalities and powers are real. They are invisible and we cannot locate them in space. They do not exist as disembodied entities floating above this world, or lurking within it. They meet us as embodied in visible and tangible realities—people, nations, and institutions. And they are powerful. What is Christ's relation to them? To recapitulate briefly: they are created in Christ and for Christ; their true end is to serve him. ... They become powers for evil when they attempt to usurp the place which belongs to Christ alone. In his death Christ has disarmed them; he has put them under his feet; they must now serve him; and the Church is the agency through which his victory over them is made manifest and is effected as the Church puts on the whole armor of God to meet and master them. The language is pictorial, mythological if you like, because we have no other language. But the things described are real and are contemporary. They are at the heart of our business as Christians. (Newbiggin, 207–8)

The second theological term is similar to the first. The word "redemption" in Paul's letters refers to "liberation from imprisonment and bondage," and in Colossians 1:14 it signifies that "in Christ God has brought people out of the captivity and out from under the authority of sin, into freedom and the authority of Christ's reign" (Thompson, 26). When rescued and redeemed, the saved are "transferred ... into the kingdom of God's beloved Son" (1:14). They are now under Christ's reign. No longer do the "thrones or dominions or rulers or powers" created in, through and for Christ (1:16) serve as the supreme authority for Christ-followers. Jesus is Lord.

The third theological term, "reconcile," appears twice in 1:19–22: "For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death." The language of

reconciliation comes from political discourse (Thompson, 33). "Parties engaged in hostile conflict have been reconciled to each other" (Thompson, 33). In Colossians 1:20, the reconciliation effected through Christ's death on the cross appears to be cosmic in scope (Talbert, 190). "Paul envisions a cosmic conflict," writes Thompson, "in which 'principalities and powers' are arrayed against God. Moreover, human beings are estranged from and hostile toward both God and each other (Col 1:20–21). Through the death of Jesus, God has made peace, overcoming the alienation, and bringing an end to hostility" (Thompson, 33). Thompson rightly notes that while "Paul anticipates a time when the 'very structures of reality themselves will be made right,'" the full restitution of all things is still in the future (Thompson, 34).

### **Christ: The Integrating Center of God's Mission**

The so-called "Christ hymn" in 1:15–20 was briefly discussed in Lesson One. However, it is worth noting again the significance of this text. Jesus is the integrating center of all reality. He is the beginning, middle, and end of creation and new creation. He is the instrument of creation, including all of the "powers" that exist (1:16); all creation exists for him (1:16); he is the bond that holds all of creation together (1:17); and the reconciliation of all creation is effected through him (1:19–20). As Paul will say later, "Christ is all and in all!" (3:11). This reminder is especially needed in the Colossian church as they are tempted to rely on teachings ("philosophy", 2:8) that suggest the insufficiency and inferiority of Christ (2:8, 16–23). Jesus is not only enough to accomplish their rescue, redemption, and reconciliation; Jesus is more than enough. He is their only hope.

### **Participating in God's Rescue Mission**

So far, we have looked at some weighty theological concepts. What does all of this mean? What does participation in the divine rescue look like? The Colossians were liberated from dark powers and transferred into the reign of Christ ("the kingdom of God's beloved Son," 1:13). How did this play out in daily life?

While only Christ can rescue, redeem, and reconcile the world, we are not inactive observers. We are invited to receive the gift and to participate in the grace. We get a

glimpse of the Colossian church's participation in 1:3–8, and Paul prays for and encourages their continued participation in 1:9–12, 23.

In 1:3–8, Paul gives thanks for their present participation. Their participation is represented by their "faith in Christ Jesus" and their love "for all the saints" (1:4). Paul indicates that their faith and love are related to the hope "laid up for you in heaven" (1:5). Faith, love and hope are evidence that the gospel is "bearing fruit" among them (1:6).

The concept of participation must be stressed here. The "fruit" of the gospel—including their faith and love—was the effect of grace. "The Christian virtues of 'faith' and 'love' are not only responses to but also effects of the grace and power of the gospel of Christ" (Thompson, 19). Notice that Paul did not say that the Colossians were bearing fruit. He said the gospel was bearing fruit among them. The gospel is not simply a story of a past event. Rather, the gospel is a past event, a present experience, and a future expectation of the complete reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth in, through, and for Christ by the power of the Spirit (1:15–20). We receive the grace. We respond to the gift. We participate in the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. And we acknowledge that even our response and participation in the gospel is empowered by grace.

In 1:9–12 and 1:23, Paul prays for and encourages the church's continued participation. In his prayers, Paul asks God to fill them "with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9) so that they may "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him," as they "bear fruit in every good work" and as they "grow in the knowledge of God" (1:10). He also prays that they may be "made strong" by God's power and that they may be "prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father" (1:11–12). Finally, in 1:23, Paul encourages them to "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel."

Paul prays. Don't gloss over this too quickly. Paul understood that they were not only saved ("rescued") by grace, but their new way of life was also now dependent on grace. Knowledge of God's will? Grace. Leading lives worthy of the Lord? Grace.

Bearing fruit in every good work? Grace. Growing in the [relational] knowledge of God? Grace. Paul prayed because everything depends on God. Everything.

Can you see how prayer and action belong together? Participation in God's mission is God's answer to prayer. Even prayer, which is at the heart of our participation in God's life and mission, is also a gift. It is a gift rising up in response to the being of God who lives and moves within us. Such intimacy is beyond comprehension.

## LESSON PLAN

### 1. Engage

- a. What images or word associations come to mind when you hear the word:
  - i. Rescue?
  - ii. Redemption?
  - iii. Reconciliation?
- b. When was the last time you were in a situation that you felt you needed rescued, redeemed, or reconciled?

### 2. Involve

- a. Invite the class to read Colossians 1:1–23. The reading can be divided between verses 1–14 and 15–23.
- b. Discuss the meaning of the words “rescued” (1:13), “redemption” (1:14), and “reconcile(d)” (1:20, 22) in their context. See notes above for commentary.
  - i. What are we rescued (saved) and redeemed (liberated) from?
    1. What is “the power of darkness” (1:13)? Note that “all” powers were created in, through, and for Christ (1:16).
    2. If we are rescued **from** “the power of darkness,” what are we rescued **for** (1:13)? What does it mean to live in “the kingdom of God’s beloved Son”?
    3. Read and discuss Lesslie Newbigin’s quote in the Reflection section above.

- a. It might be helpful to print a copy for each member of the class.
- b. What do you think he means when he suggests that “the church is the agency through which [Jesus’s] victory over [the powers and principalities] is made manifest and is effected as the Church puts on the whole armor of God to meet and master them. ... They are at the heart of our business as Christians”?
- ii. Discuss the significance of the word “reconcile(d)” in 1:20, 22.
  - 1. What do you think Paul meant when he said that “through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (1:20)?
  - 2. Some people view salvation in terms of an escape from creation. How might this text contradict this popular view?

### 3. Challenge

- a. Lesslie Newbigin writes, “The principalities and powers are real. They are invisible and we cannot locate them in space. They do not exist as disembodied entities floating above this world, or lurking within it. They meet us as embodied in visible and tangible realities—people, nations, and institutions. And they are powerful.”
  - i. How do you experience the powers and principalities in daily life?
  - ii. How do you discern whether these powers are constructive or destructive?
  - iii. What habits and practices are most helpful for you in strengthening your ability to confront the destructive powers at work in your life?
- b. Name the virtues that Paul prays for in 1:9–12. These are marks of spiritual maturity.
  - i. Which virtue do you most desire to grow in right now?
  - ii. As a class spend time praying for one another. Consider doing this in pairs. Encourage individuals to share with one another their desires, and to pray for one another that they might grow in the virtues they named.

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