

Q. Has God reconciled all things to Himself or is He still wrathful? John 3:36 says that the wrath of God remains on the disobedient, but Colossians 1:20 says that God has reconciled all things to Himself by Christ, "having made peace through the blood of his cross." Can you explain this seeming contradiction?

A. This seeming contradiction has caused no end of controversy. How can God be wrathful toward the disobedient if He has reconciled the entire world to Himself through Christ's atonement? Colossians 1:20 sounds like a universal atonement, but John 3:36 seems to name the disobedient as an exception to it. On top of that, the exception sounds like it is based on works—disobedience or obedience. Does this mean that obedience (works) saves people from God's wrath and reconciles them?

John 3:36 says, "One who believes in the Son has eternal life, but one who disobeys the Son won't see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). Clearly, this verse teaches that believers have eternal life. The verse also says that the disobedient don't have eternal life, but, instead, the wrath of God remains on them. God does not remove His wrath from the disobedient. But John 3:36 brings up this question: Why does John 3:36 contrast believing with disobeying rather than contrasting believing with disbelieving?

Now, before answering that question, let's look at Colossians 1:19-20. The subject of these verses as well as their context is the preeminent Christ (see verses 15-18), and how "all the fullness [of God's grace] was pleased to dwell in him; and through him to reconcile all things to himself, by him, whether things on the earth, or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross" (verses 19-20). This certainly sounds like it is saying that, through Christ, God has reconciled all things to Himself. And surely, "all things" would include

the disobedient, wouldn't it? But first impressions can be deceiving. We need to examine the passage more closely.

Colossians 1:20 uses the term "all things." Can this really mean that God has reconciled all things to Himself? That is, what does "all things" in this verse mean? Does "all things" always mean absolutely everything? "All things" is based on the Greek word *pas*. Lexicons define *pas* as "all" or "the whole." It is often translated as "all things" if the translators think that "things" is implied. Now let's use the Bible to interpret itself and establish the matter with three witnesses: Mark, John, and Paul.

In Mark 1:5, we read, "And all the Judean country and those of Jerusalem went out to him, and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (*LITV*). "All" is found in two places in this verse, and in both places, as in Colossians 1:20, "all" is from *pas*. It should be obvious that not every man, woman, and child in Judea and Jerusalem went out to John the Baptist and were baptized. Mark expected that we would understand that by "all," he meant many.

John's witness: "Now very early in the morning, he came again into the temple, and all the people came to him. He sat down, and taught them" (John 8:2). "All" is from *pas*. Did the population of the entire planet come to Jesus in the Temple? Of course not. Did even everyone of the nation of Israel come to the Temple? No.

One last witness: In Philippians 4:13, Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." Does Paul mean that he can leap from the Earth to Jupiter? Is he saying that he can pick up a boulder and crush it in his bare hands? Of course not. The context shows that "all things" really refers to a specific set of things. Paul tells us what they are in verse 12: "I know how to be humbled, and I know also how to abound. In everything and in all things I have learnt the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in need." Paul is saying that, through Christ, he can live either with abundance or he can live with poverty. Christ strengthens him through it all. That's what he means by "all things." Paul expects us to understand that he is using *pas* to mean all things of a certain category.

Let's go back to Colossians 1:20. Did Paul use "all things" in a limited way here? To answer that, we must first address the terms "things on earth" and "things in the heavens." Literally, the Greek for the last part of verse 20 says, "whether the upon the earth, whether the in the

heavens." The word "things" is not in the Greek, but something must be inserted, and "things" serves the purpose.

The context should help us understand what Paul means by "all things," "things on earth" and "things in the heavens." Let's look at verses 15-18. It is speaking of Jesus Christ,

who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in the heavens and on the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things are held together. He is the head of the body, the assembly, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Clearly, "all things" here refers to all creation, both in the heavens and on the Earth. Because he is stressing Christ's preeminence, Paul emphasizes seats of authority (thrones, dominions, etc.) as also part of the creation. He also lays stress on the fact that Christ is the Head of the Body, Head of the assembly (*ekklēsia*). Thus, because Christ created all things in heaven and on Earth, including powers, and because He is the Head of the assembly, and because He is the firstborn from the dead, Christ has the preeminence over all things. Surely, this "all things" is what Paul is referring back to from verse 20.

Now let's look at the context going ahead from verse 20. In verses 21-22, Paul specifically refers to the people to whom he is writing: "You, being in past times alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish and blameless before him" (Colossians 1:21-22). So, in verse 20, Paul begins with the idea of the entire universe somehow being reconciled to God (we'll get to how this is done), and then he focuses on his real aim—people. After all, in its most direct application, Jesus Christ's atonement didn't reconcile the Crab Nebula to God; it didn't even reconcile the angels to God (Hebrews 2:14-18). It reconciled people. But what people? Is Paul writing to every man, woman, and child on Earth and saying that God has reconciled them through the body of Christ through His death? No. Paul is writing to the *ekklēsia*, the Christian assembly, in Colossae. He is saying that God has reconciled them.

But Paul goes further in his limiting of whom he is saying God has reconciled. In verse 23, he qualifies whom he means: "if it is so that you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the Good News which you heard, which is being proclaimed in all creation under heaven; of which I, Paul, was made a servant." Through the body of Christ, God has reconciled them *if they continue in the faith*. Elsewhere in the Bible, an abundance of Scriptures tell us that through Christ God has reconciled not just the Colossians, but He has reconciled people of all nations (see, for example, Ephesians 2:11-16). But the Bible *never* tells us that God has reconciled anyone but believers, those whom He has called out of the general population (Acts 10:43; Romans 1:16; Acts 15:14).

So, the "all things" whom God has reconciled to himself through the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ does not refer to all people on Earth. It refers only to believers. In fact, believers are the specific focus of the reconciliation; they are the direct recipients of it. As we will see, the rest of the "all things" benefit only as a result of the reconciliation of the believers.

This narrowing of Paul's focus to a particular atonement and reconciliation plainly agrees with John 3:36, which says, "One who believes in the Son has eternal life, but one who disobeys the Son won't see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Yet, we can't ignore that in Colossians 1:15-20, Paul was talking about a reconciliation of the entire Creation. I'm concerned that some teachers have glossed over this because it sounds frighteningly like universalism. They needn't fear. Paul is not teaching universalism.

In Romans 8:19-23, we read,

For the creation waits with eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of decay into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. Not only so, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for adoption, the redemption of our body.

Christ's death on the Cross was directly for, and only for, His elect. He did not die for rocks, nebulae, and angels. That is, He did not die for what did not sin, and He did not die for the sinning angels because they are not redeemable. Nor did he die for the non-elect, also called the reprobate. Nevertheless, as the passage above explains, there is a way in which the full glorification of the elect will bring about the deliverance from decay and into glory of the entire universe. In this way, then, Paul is correct to say in Colossians 1:20 that God has reconciled the entire universe to Himself through the blood of Christ's Cross. It is a way of saying that the universe will be under God's rule and at peace with Him.

Will the reprobate be reconciled? What does the Bible say will happen to them? They will be cast into what is variously called the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15), the second death (Revelation 21:8), and outer darkness or the blackness of darkness (Matthew 25:30; Jude 1:13). These refer, in turn, to the reprobate's torment, their existence without spiritual life, and their separation from God. This outer darkness state places them outside the universe that will be reconciled and glorified. The devil and, we assume, his demons will also be cast into the lake of fire. The universe will be at peace and perfectly under God's rule because the rebels will be gone.

Now to answer the question John 3:36 raises about disobedience. Are these rebels—the reprobate—disbelievers or are they disobedient? They are both. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). John 3:18 further says, "He who believes in him is not judged. He who doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God." Because they do not believe, they cannot receive God's grace. Being without grace, they are, Revelation 20:12-13 tells us, judged "according to their works."

Works condemn but grace through faith saves, and an aspect of salvation is reconciliation. We are all disobedient sinners, but when we exercise the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, God imputes Jesus Christ's righteousness to us so that we appear to Him as obedient. The reprobate do not believe, God does not impute Christ's righteousness to them, and He justly condemns them as disobedient.

John 3:36 and Colossians 1:20 do not contradict. Taken together, they harmoniously teach limited, particular, gracious salvation and reconciliation accomplished by the blood of the Cross and received

through belief. Those who will not believe are condemned by their works and removed to outer darkness so that the remaining universe can be spoken of as reconciled. I want to add that it is important that we do not misunderstand Colossians 1:20 as teaching a universal reconciliation of all people. I have seen this teaching creeping into the New Covenant theology taught by some who seem not to see that it is entirely incompatible with the fact that God makes His New Covenant only with believers. Unbelievers are outside the New Covenant and will be judged and condemned by their works.

Suggested reading: The booklet, *Limited Atonement* available on this page (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/printable-booklets/>).

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