

PREFACE

Let's take a moment to get our bearings—to step back and see the overall structure of this passage. In Chapter One, vs13-14 and v20 are the bread portion of a **redemption** “sandwich”—or, put another way, it is Paul using the *circle method* of narrative: of introducing a thesis then returning to it in conclusion. Vs13-14 are about redemption.

Read vs13-14.

And v20 returns to redemption.

Read v20.

In between these two verses are the *hows* and the *whys* for this redemption: the qualifications of “His beloved Son,” and the rationale behind His work on our behalf. Note the structure suggested by the prepositions:

vs13-14: **redemption**—God rescued us by His Son (in whom...).

And who is the Son?

v15: He is...

v16: For by Him...

v17: He is... in Him...

v18: He is... He is... so that...

v19: in Him...

v20: **redemption**—through Him...

And taken as a whole this represents an eloquent opening salvo by Paul against the heretical teachings occurring in Colossae. So let's dig into the conclusion of this passage—and, again, note the prepositions.

Read Colossians 1:19-20. (not ESV)**v19: IN HIM**

The first thing we need to determine in v19 is the subject of the verb—that is, just who or what was “pleased.” It is not explicit in the Greek text, so translators and commentators have been left to thrash it out. Most modern translations conclude that “the Father” or “God” was the one pleased “for all the fullness to dwell in [the Son].” But listen to v19 in the ESV:

Read Colossians 1:19. (ESV)

(For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...)

That translation makes the fullness itself the one pleased. This is one of those delicious, other-worldly moments in which we realize *it doesn't really matter!* Question: Was it God, was it the Father, or was it the fullness of God who was pleased?

Answer: Yes.

all the fullness

Now, what is this “fullness”?

With our understandable ignorance of Gnosticism we don't see it right off, but Paul is addressing head-on in v19 one of the Gnostic teachings the Colossians had been hearing—especially when he writes, with apparent redundancy, “*all fullness.*”

Sidebar: Remember that 1) we can only make educated guesses about the heresies being taught in Colossae, based on what Paul addresses in his letter; and 2) in the first century Gnosticism was in its infancy. With that in mind...

Part of Gnosticism was the existence of what was called *æons*—*spirit-beings* not unlike angels that served as intermediaries between man and God. Remember, under Gnosticism the material world (including all flesh) was corrupt, evil. To bridge between the purity of deity and the evil of man, supernatural *powers*—*æons*—were envisioned, of which, the Gnostics believed, Jesus was one (among many).

The Greek *pleroma*, translated “fullness” in our text, was a technical term used by Gnostics to refer to the hierarchy of these supernatural beings dwelling between God and the world (Vaughan). These *æons*, “emanations from God,” influenced and controlled men's lives; in a manner of speaking (Gnosticism is rather mystical and strange) these *æons* comprised “the fullness.” That is, taken as a whole, the *æons* represented, even *possessed*, the fullness of God.

So Paul's intentional use of the same Greek word *pleroma* is telling—especially that he precedes it with “all.” He is saying to the Colossians, *You've been hearing that these mystical intermediaries are the fullness of God, but in fact in only one person has God the Father made all His fullness to dwell: the God/Man Jesus Christ.*

Thus, whenever you hear or read someone utter nonsense such as, “Jesus was just a regular guy who thought himself the son of God,” or “Jesus was just a good teacher,” or “Jesus was just a first-century prophet who said we should love each other”—to any of these and more you can reply, “No, God's word declares that Jesus was no less than fully and completely everything of God.”

Nor was this a temporary condition. Jesus the Christ was not given the fullness of God simply for the duration of His ministry. The word translated “dwell” is “a verb that suggests permanent residence as opposed to temporary sojourn” (Vaughan). Jesus was, is, fully, completely, eternally the fullness of God.

v20: THROUGH HIM

Being not unfamiliar with the vast panoply of gods and goddesses worshiped over the millennia in which man has dwelt on this earth, I come to something like this passage and I marvel at the personality of the one true God. If any god had the means and the right to be a tyrant to his people, certainly it would be the one true God and creator of the universe. But the truth is that out of all the thousands of gods man has worshiped only one—only *one*—ever sacrificed *Himself* so that there would be peace between Him and man. That is truly astounding.

Read vs19-20.

Let's step back a moment and see how this passage is organized. These two verses comprise one sentence, one statement—not just grammatically, but thematically. Both “in Him” (v19) and “through Him” (v20) are dependent on the verb *eudokesen*—translated (was) “pleased” or (was the Father’s) “good pleasure.” We might break it down this way:

Who did it?	God, or the Father, or the “fullness”
What was the motivation?	good pleasure, pleased
What was accomplished?	the fullness of God to dwell in Christ; peace between God and man by the shedding of Christ’s blood on the cross
Why was this done?	to reconcile all things to God through Christ

So there is one “why” for both v19 and v20: *to reconcile all things to God through Christ*.

But let's start with the beginning: it *pleased* God to do this! The fullness of God was not dragged kicking and screaming into redeeming man; he *wanted* to do it! He enjoyed doing it. Implied in this is the suggestion that God was *not* pleased with the situation before the first century—before the incarnation. God was *not* pleased to

- banish Adam and Eve from the garden
- enslave Israel in Egypt
- force Israel to sojourn in the desert for 40 years
- not permit Moses to enter the Promised Land
- punish Israel for its idolatry and disobedience by sending foreign invaders
- remove His chosen people from their land, dispersing them across the nations
- remove His glory from their presence

God *was* pleased to sacrifice His own Son on a cruel instrument of torture so that His blood would be the one sufficient atonement for all the sins of the world, thus removing all enmity between God and man.

Read Ephesians 2:13-18.

When you whittle this down to the essentials it is breathtaking. It was so important to God to remove all barriers between heaven and earth that He placed Himself—Jesus, the fullness of God—on the altar to die. God killed Himself to save man.

And here, once again, we have an incredible preposition that reveals the mysteries of God's kingdom and plan.

Read Ephesians 2:14a.

Jesus Christ did not just *make* the peace; He *is* the peace.

to reconcile all things to Himself

This phrase floats around in v20, depending on your translation, but is in all of them. Here is the important “why”—and it's even more interesting than you might think. The word translated “reconcile” is a double-compound word of, apparently, Paul's devising: *apokatallasso*. He uses it in only three places.

The three components of the word are *apo*, *kata*, *allasso*. The operative root of the word—*allasso*—means to change; adding *kata* to this means “to change mutually.”

In classical, secular Greek the word *katallasso* “denotes the restoration of the original understanding between people after hostility or displeasure” (Brown). If two people are neighbors and friends, but one day one of them throws a rock through his friend’s window and refuses to pay damages, a period of hostility might ensue. Later, after the one who threw the rock writes his neighbor a check for a new window, or after the offended party graciously forgives the offender, the friendship is renewed. They have *reconciled*.

Most commentators say that when Paul added *apo* to the front of *katallasso* he meant it to mean reconcile *fully*, completely. And we see this in the text:

to reconcile all things to Himself

And if that isn’t clear enough,
whether things on earth or things in heaven.

More on this in just a moment. But there is a slightly different way to interpret this word, according to Marvin Vincent in his Word Studies. He keys off the essential meaning of *apo*—which means “away (from something near)” —and that secular Greek definition of *katallasso*. In the KJV *apo* is translated “from” almost 400 times. And we see this connection in v21, where Paul uses one of his favorite words, “alienated,” which also begins with *apo*.

Read v21.

Alienation implies a moment in time when one was *not* “from” but near. If someone’s affections are alienated, it means that at one time they were not.

There *was* a moment in time when man was not alienated from God and Christ: the Garden of Eden. After Adam, however, we were. So Vincent proposes that here “reconcile” means a “restoration to a primal unity.” Reconciled *in* Christ, *to* Christ, we once more enjoy something we once had—speaking anthropologically—not something we (man) never had or experienced before.

Now, back to the more common interpretation. Douglas J. Moo writes about v20,

Since at least the time of Origen...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.

But then he points us to something Paul writes in the next chapter.

Read Colossians 2:15.

Moo: The spiritual beings to which Paul refers explicitly in v20 [“things in heaven”] are not *saved* by Christ but *vanquished* by Him... Colossians 1:20 teaches, then, not “cosmic salvation” or even “cosmic redemption,” but “cosmic restoration” or “renewal.” Through the work of Christ on the cross, God has brought His entire rebellious creation back under the rule of His sovereign power.

Which sounds not very different from Vincent’s interpretation of a “restoration to a primal unity.”