

## MAKING THE CHRIST CONNECTIONS

### III. “Connected in Christ”

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Colossians 1:15-23

#### INTRODUCTION

Whenever I visit at Apple Springs Retirement Home, there is usually a big jigsaw puzzle in the process of being assembled on a table in the hallway– I think Ethelyn Apple is the main one behind them. Having something like that as a group project is fun– you can take five minutes or an hour to work on it. But always, there is the top of the box nearby letting you know what the picture is you’re working on. That’s *very* important, isn’t it? Imagine trying to assemble a huge jigsaw puzzle with no picture to go by. Most would probably give up in frustration.

Life can be like a puzzle, can’t it? There are so many pieces– family pieces, social pieces, romantic pieces, financial pieces, career pieces, my desires, other people’s demands, and on and on. A multitude of voices call to us, “Put that piece there and this one here.” But your life is confusing, even chaotic– things aren’t fitting together. Inside there are the nagging questions, “What do all these pieces mean?” “Aren’t they all supposed to fit together?” “Who am I, really?” “Where am I going?” “Show me the big picture!”

This morning, our text gives us the BIG picture without which life will never make sense, but with it, everything begins to fit together. Jesus Christ is what it is all about–

*...all things were created by him and for him....  
and in him all things hold together. (1:16-17)*

The “all things” include you and your life with all its myriad details. But our Scripture goes beyond just a bold statement of purpose, it gives context and perspective this morning that can help us see what life is *really* about and also solve many of the puzzles of a world that seems to be spinning out of control.

The passage we’re looking at is generally regarded by Bible scholars as one of the most important Christological passages in the New Testament. Nowhere are we given a higher view of Christ and His place in the scheme of things. As we look at this, it has the capacity to bring the disconnected parts of our lives into a harmonious whole.

#### SEEING GOD

The first phrase is huge– *He is the image of the invisible God*. Jesus is the exact representation of who God is and what God is like. John, in his prologue, says, *No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son has made him known (1:18)*. And Jesus affirmed, *Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father (Jn. 14:9)*. So we no longer need to wonder about what God is like. We simply look to Jesus and see the perfect expression of God’s nature and qualities.

A few verses later in this hymn celebrating Christ, Paul gives us a glimpse of the incarnation–

that in Jesus, God was dwelling with us in human flesh— when he says, *For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him* (19). While it will always remain beyond our comprehension, the God who created all things has come to us in Jesus Christ. In theological language, Jesus was fully God and fully man at the same time. Not partially human and partially God— fully. Not a super-human, but one with all the limitations of all of us. Yet within that humanity named Jesus, God was fully present and displayed. In our efforts to understand this, we must not squeeze either the humanity or divinity from Jesus. Indeed, as N.T. Wright comments, “it is only in Jesus Christ that we understand what ‘divinity’ and ‘humanity’ really mean.” God came to us in Jesus to give us a perfect view of what God is like. Also in Jesus, God gives us the perfect view of humanity, how we are designed to be and live.

History is crowded with people who would be gods, but only one God who would be man. Think of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Adolph Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, and countless others trying to make themselves into gods. Most of us aspire to be in total control of our lives and the world we live in— little gods ourselves. But the startling and essential fact about Jesus Christ is that the God in charge of it all, left behind all that power and glory to take on our frail humanity— all because he loves us and wants to save us.

### **CREATOR OF ALL THINGS**

Beginning at verse 16 and continuing for the next six verses, seven times Paul mentions “all creation,” “all things,” and “everything.” He is making it clear that Christ is behind and over everything in heaven and earth. Listen again to vs. 16-17:

*For by him all things were created:*

*things in heaven and on earth,*

*visible and invisible,*

*whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;*

*all things were created by him and for him.*

*He is before all things,*

*and in him all things hold together.*

I’m not going to try and explain the trinity— how God can be one and yet three persons at the same time. But it is a clear Biblical teaching all Christians hold to. We usually think of God the Father as the Creator and Jesus Christ the Son as the one who visited our world. But the Son has always existed with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. In the beginning we see God speaking and the Holy Spirit accomplishing the works of creation. Gen. 1:26 reflects the trinity when it says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image...’” Note the plural. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all present eternally. And the fact we are made in the image of God is also a clue to understanding the trinity. We are likewise a trinity: body, mind, and spirit. We are all three parts, yet one. Is my body me? Is my mind me? Is my spirit me? Certainly all are parts of a whole, but any part alone is not exactly me. They are all designed to work together.

Here, in this beautiful hymn of praise, Christ’s role in creation is celebrated. Let your imagination go for a moment. Think of the vastness of our universe. Distances are measured by astronomers in light years, the distance light travels going 186,000 mi./ sec. in one year. I can’t even imagine that. Our sun is eight light-minutes away. The nearest star is 4.3 light years away.

Now to imagine this, if the distance to our sun is equal to the thickness of one piece of paper, the nearest star would be a stack of paper 71' high (think of a seven story building). Now, the diameter of our galaxy, the Milky Way, is 100,000 light years. That's a stack of paper 310' tall—think of a stack of paper from here to Olympia. Our Milky Way Galaxy contains millions of stars, but that is just a tiny drop in the bucket of the universe. Look up at the bowl of the big dipper at night and realize that bowl frames about a million galaxies, each galaxy with millions of stars. Scientists are guessing there are anywhere from 100 billion to 400 billion galaxies out there. Then there are black holes, where matter is so dense and gravity so powerful that even light doesn't escape. They are ever sucking more matter into their dark, dense mass. Here, a mere teaspoon of matter would weigh over 200 million tons. Then there are quasars, a special pulsing type star, most of which are at least 10 billion light years away. In one second, they throw out enough energy to supply all the earth's electrical needs for billions of years!

Now, let's think of the other extreme of creation. Atoms are the building blocks of everything in the material universe. Atoms are incomprehensibly small. An atom is one ten millionth of a millimeter. Think of the smallest lines on the metric side of your standard ruler. Each of the smallest lines is a millimeter. To put this in a proportion, the size of an atom is to the width of a millimeter as the thickness of one sheet of paper is to the Empire State Building. Or, in another analogy, if you were to take a single drop of water and enlarge it enough so you could begin to barely see atoms, that drop would have to be enlarged to 15 miles across. A half a million atoms lined shoulder to shoulder could hide behind the width of a human hair. And of course, atoms are made of electrons, protons, neutrons and all manner of other sub-atomic particles still being discovered. In fact, atoms themselves are mostly empty space inside. Can you imagine this infinitesimal world?

*For by him [Christ] all things were created:  
things in heaven and on earth,  
visible and invisible,*

Wow! At every turn, scientists are discovering more and more just how incredible this creation is. Emily Bronte expresses it well in poetic lines I love:

*Though earth and man were gone,  
And suns and universes cease to be,  
And Thou wert left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.*

This is just the physical universe. We haven't even considered the spiritual, unseen worlds of heavenly hosts and angels. Christ created those too.

*all things were created by him and for him.  
He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.*

I don't want you to gloss over that last phrase, *in him all things hold together*. Jesus Christ holds everything together. What fragments our lives and this world is rebellion against Him, who is the unifying force.

Now Paul moves on to the implications of all this for us.

## HEAD OF THE CHURCH

*And he is the head of the body, the church;  
he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,  
so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (18)*

Paul begins this great section about our salvation with the church. That may sound a bit odd to our highly individualistic society. I realize most of you here value the church— but I'm sure most of you have friends who consider themselves Christians but want nothing to do with the church. So, let me say a couple of things about that to help us all when we encounter that attitude. Unfortunately, large numbers of Americans have adopted a “Lone Ranger” mind set that says my faith is personal, just between me and God. In fact, the Barna research group reports there are 23 million Americans claiming Jesus Christ as their Savior but have no discernable church connection. (So this wouldn't include those Christmas and Easter Christians or members who rarely if ever attend. If you add those in, the numbers soar). Biblical Christianity simply does not allow for the existence of isolated, individual Christians. Life in Christ is a corporate affair. God's people need God's people in order to know God and grow in the faith. Individualistic faith is easy. It makes few demands of us. Our sloppy spiritual thinking isn't confronted. We don't have to forgive the difficult people in the church and learn to get along with them. We don't have to let go of our agendas in order to work with the whole.

This is one of the heresies Paul is confronting that is beginning to affect the church at Colosse— gnosticism. For Gnostics, the spirit is completely separated from the physical. So, if they were in union with God spiritually, they didn't need the physical expressions of that found in church. Pressed even farther, if only the spirit matters, then what we do in the flesh is unimportant. So, as long as “my heart is right with God”, it makes no difference what I do in my body— opening the door to all kinds of immorality that Paul confronts later in this letter.

Paul is clear. It all starts with Christ and Christ is present with us now as the head of the body, His church. We dare not go off on our own and disconnect ourselves with the rest of the body.

Also, don't miss the fact that Christ is in charge— He's the head. Church is not about us. We don't get to decide who's in and who's out. The church is not about meeting our needs or doing what we think needs to be done. It is about what Christ directs us to do. This last week, as we organized as a new session, we began with that marvelous statement with which our Presbyterian Book of Order begins to remind ourselves this is not our church. That statement reads, in part,

*God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. Christ calls the church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God.... It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the church as he wills....*

I often have to come back to this thought in matters of theology in our denomination. At times I am serving with others in the church whose theology is much more liberal than mine. Yet, I know they are sincere about what is central— their affirmation of Christ as Lord and Savior. It teaches me humility to work along side those whose position “I know” is wrong. In those places

I've grown in love and trust in Christ as Lord of the church.

Back in 1928, a number of Christian leaders from various denominations met for 15 days on the Mount of Olives for study, worship, and prayer to build unity among our churches. Among them, from our denomination, was John MacKay, a leader with an evangelical heart. Out of those days of discussion, worship and prayer they emerged saying,

*“Our message is Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of what God is and of what men and women, through him, may become.”*

Indeed, that fits with what Paul is saying. Christ is the center– the center of everything. When we focus on Christ at the center, everything is clear and comes together. If we begin to get taken up with what is peripheral, things begin to come apart– the cohesiveness, the unity is lost.

### **RECONCILED!**

Look again at verses 19-23 as I read them. While this could be another whole sermon, at the same time the words are, I think, clear to those of us who have come to Christ for salvation. We don't have time for great detail here. Paul brings his thought that Christ is holding everything in all of creation together to a triumphant conclusion. We were alienated, had separated ourselves, we were off on our own, doing our own thing. Christ came down to us in a physical body in order to make peace and bring us back into harmony with God through the cross.

At the height of his stardom, actor Mel Gibson realized he was empty. He had achieved everything he ever hoped for– except a sense of purpose. He felt he was drowning in wealth, drink, and despair. This ultimately led him to his knees and back to God, through Christ. In a *Reader's Digest* interview last year he said,

*There was a time in my life when I was really searching. I was asking all those Shakespearean Hamlet questions: “What's on the other side? Why am I here?” I might have looked like I'm living the high life, making movies and jetting around the world, but true happiness resides within. I was spiritually bankrupt, and when that happens, it's like a spiritual cancer afflicts you. It starts to eat its way through, and if you don't do something, it's going to take you.*

This 12-year pilgrimage led Gibson to the Gospels and the passion of Christ. The blockbuster movie last year was his witness to the reconciliation he found through Christ's peace-making mission on the cross. He found meaning and purpose for his life in surrendering himself to this Savior in whom “all things hold together”– including our own lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

I hope Paul's Christ-hymn here has made you stand in awe of Christ and His love for us. It is a picture we'll never fully comprehend. But it is also highly comforting in our confusing world to realize Christ is holding everything together and He is Lord. One day, everyone and everything will come together in Him. Jesus is the one who gives us the picture of what the puzzle of life is about. If we follow Him, everything will come together in one satisfying whole.

Let's read this again responsively as we close.

