

# *A Symphony in 3 Movements*

(Christ the King Sunday)

Colossians 1:3-20

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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*3In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 4for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

*9For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. 11May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully*

*12giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and 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.*

I'll let you in on a little family secret: At one time I was known in my family for driving on an empty tank of gas. Family members knew that if they drove my car, their first task might be to go straight to a gas station to get some gas. It was partly strategic: it was my way of encouraging my kids to buy their own gas.

I would on occasion run out of gas. One time when I was in a hurry and ran out, I let the car drift under an overpass at a super highway. I jumped out of the car to find a pay phone. (This was long ago, way before cell phones, even before I carried credit cards.) My intent was to call AAA, of which I was a member, to have them send out their emergency unit with some gas.

After I started walking away from the car, some drivers beeped their horns at me. I turned around to see my car drifting. In my haste I had failed to put the car in gear or set the emergency brake. When I tried to get into the car, I realized I had locked myself out. So I got in front the car to try to slow its movement. It naturally turned toward an on-ramp, partially blocking access to the highway above. Drivers were not very pleased with me.

When I found a pay phone, AAA said they had many demands right then and it would be an hour before they could get to me. A used car dealership gave me a clothes hanger, so I went back to the car and worked my way in through the window. Then I sat there, waiting for AAA to show up.

Before long a woman pulled up beside me and asked if I needed help. I told her I had run out of gas. She lifted a gas can and asked whether I could use it. I said yes, but I had absolutely no money on me to pay her for it. She said no problem, handed it to me, and took off. I'm not sure I even had time to thank her.

In any case, I didn't need AAA services after all.

I used AAA the way I pray sometimes: Car trouble? Call AAA. Life problems? Call out God. In this passage from Colossians, Paul shows us another way to pray. His model of prayer is the first of three movements in my sermon this morning, each of which has multiple movements within them.

### **Movement one: Paul's prayer moves from thanksgiving to petition to praise of Christ**

**Thanksgiving:** As he did in many of his letters to churches, Paul said he was thankful for the faith of the people at Colossae. It may not have been because their faith was stellar, but because he was grateful they had any faith at all in their pagan culture. Paul heard reports of the faith, hope and love of the Christians at Colossae, the trinity of Christian virtues, which produced results in their everyday lives.

**Petition:** Paul prayed not on his own behalf, but on behalf of the faith of the Colossian church. Paul had never been there. He didn't know them personally. Yet he thanked God for their faith. And he prayed for their endurance in the faith in a context in which pagan faiths were very appealing. The pagan faith in Colossae apparently was a form of syncretism which drew together angelology, astrology, and culinary habits. Some wanted to find a way to integrate their new-found faith in Jesus into this mosh-pit of religiosity. Paul would have none of it. Christ was supreme over all the powers, not just one among them.

**Praise of Christ:** Paul's praise was especially for Christ's role in the work of God in the world. Colossians 1:15-20, a hymn of praise to Christ, is thought by some interpreters as an early Christian hymn that Paul was actually quoting here. More on this later.

This is not a bad model for our own prayers: **thanksgiving, petition, praise**. Here is a similar model that some people like to use in the private prayers: ACTS (Adoration, **confession**, thanksgiving, supplication/intercession/petition). This model adds a 4<sup>th</sup> dimension to Paul's prayer, confession.

### **Movement 2: The people moved from darkness to light (1:13-14)**

Imagine if you will two powerful, magnetic poles: a dark pole on one side, a light pole on the other. Each of these poles is attempting to draw us toward their own magnetic field. Paul was

exclaiming that the Colossian Christians had moved from the dark pole to the light pole. But how did this happen? Paul says it was through the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I'm reading a book right now by Michael Ignatieff titled *On consolation: Finding solace in dark times*. Ignatieff is totally secular; he claims no religious faith. Yet he finds solace in some religious writings, such as the Psalms, Job, and the apostle Paul. Ignatieff devoted a whole chapter to Paul. There were philosophies in Paul's day, like Stoicism and Epicureanism, that believed that through will power and practice people could become better persons. The people at Colossae no doubt knew about these philosophies and were influenced by them. The genius of Paul, says Ignatieff, the very secular person, was that Paul believed people could become *changed persons*, new persons, not just better persons. How? Through the grace of Christ. Ignatieff gets it!

It may be hard for us to imagine the darkness which Paul was talking about, especially for those of us who grew up in good, Christian homes and are around Christians most of the time. But I know some of you work in settings where you see people who are captives of the dark pole.

I have a friend who, with his wife, have 3 foster children: the great grandmother is an alcoholic; the grandmother died of an overdose about a year ago; sometime ago the father was killed in a mysterious car accident; the mother is a drug addict who can't keep a job and misses many of her court-mandated drug tests and weekly monitored visits with her children. This is a form of darkness that many of us don't know experientially. If only my friend and his wife would get the chance to adopt these children. Maybe the cycle of transgenerational family dysfunction would be broken in their cases. Maybe their experience could move from darkness to light.

The Christians at Colossae experienced the grace of Christ. They were able to move from darkness toward the light. But keep in mind: there are at least 2 kinds of grace: one is forgiving, the other is empowering grace. The conversion wrought through Christ that Paul experienced and preached doesn't just put us in good standing with God; it brings about real transformation of life through the Spirit's work in our lives.

### **Movement 3: Christ's work moved from creation to incarnation to redemption and reconciliation.**

Paul wrote in our text for this morning, "for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him." This resonates with the prologue to John's gospel: "He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

We typically think that God, the first person of the trinity, created the world and that Jesus, God's son, came along later to redeem the world. That is not what scripture teaches, at least not Paul and John: Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was with and was God from all eternity, and was an agent in creation.

Here's an analogy that may be helpful in understanding the relationship between God and Christ: we have an inner self that is unexpressed that we keep to ourselves; think of this as our inner being, our contemplative self. We also have an outer self that is an expression of who we are as persons—an outward self marked by expressiveness, creativity, and action.

Think of Christ as the outer, expressive side of God that was involved in the creation of God's world and then came into this world to redeem creation and unite all things through Christ. Christ as redeemer and reconciler was the full embodiment, in human form, of God; Christ was the outward, expressive side of God who wills our redemption and the reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth.

The instrument of God's reconciling all things to himself was the life and death of Jesus, offered up as a peace offering to overcome our alienation with God, each other, ourselves, and with God's creation.

### **Coda: The Cosmic Christ—Colossian Christology**

Christ created **all things**. Christ wills to **redeem and unite all things**. This includes us, but it also includes the whole cosmos, including the structures of this world (what Paul referred to as the principalities and powers): politics, economics, businesses, etc.

Although Christ created these structures for our good, they have been taken captive to the evil pole. Hence, they often don't act in our best interests or the interests of God's whole creation. They become oppressive; they don't recognize the Lordship of Christ—yet!

Elsewhere Paul envisions a time when all knees will bend and confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10b-11). Revelation envisions a time when “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (11:15b).” But we're not there yet. But what I am emphasizing here is that Christ's redemption involves the uniting of all things in heaven and on earth.

Before I worked at the *Christian Century* magazine, I worked for *Christianity Today* magazine. That's the magazine started by Billy Graham and intended for an evangelical audience. When I worked there J. I. Packer was a theological consultant for the magazine. Although he lived in British Columbia, he'd come to our office outside Chicago about twice a year to interact with us and sometimes do some teaching.

Packer was a Conservative Anglican whose theology was Calvinist refracted through Puritanism. He was sort of an unofficial evangelical “Pope.” Evangelical authors tried to get Packer's endorsements on their books.

Once I asked Packer at a CT staff meeting: “When did this terminology come into the Christian vocabulary, ‘accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Savior’ (some add Lord)?”

Packer replied: “I don't know, but I do know that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the two greatest evangelical preachers, Charles Spurgeon and D. L. Moody, didn't use that language. [Audible gasp in the

room.] I think it came through the Keswick movement, a spiritual renewal movement in England, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” That language of Jesus as my personal savior is nearly canonical in evangelicalism, hence the gasp in the room, as though those words came straight from Jesus’ own lips. And yet it is very late in Christian history, an expression of western individualism.

Please hear me out: Of course a faith which isn’t personal is an unrealized faith, a mere abstraction. But a faith which remains only personal is a truncated faith, reductionism. Faith in Christ involves the transformation of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit. Holistic faith transforms relationships and builds community. Cosmic faith involves the redemption and restoration of all God’s creation.

Until that happens, all creation groans in eager anticipation of its redemption. Until then, those of us who have already accepted the Lordship of Christ should live into the anticipation of Christ uniting all things on earth and in heaven: working at a ministry of reconciliation between ourselves and others and between others and God, building community, and caring for and restoring God’s good creation that is in desperate need of redemption. This is our calling in Christ!