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Claiming All Things for God

a sermon on Colossians 1.15-20

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Do you have spiritual power? I suppose I ought to define what I mean by *spiritual* and *power*. A precise, technical definition is difficult, so let me describe what I mean instead. If your workplace is toxic – people don't cooperate; they gossip; management is unreasonable – are you able to turn things around? If you have family issues – for instance, a strained relationship with your parents or siblings or spouse or children – can you make things better? Can you take a home full of strife and make it peaceful and happy? We're talking about power to change things, so why limit ourselves to dealing with other people? What about financial matters? Are you able to reach a place of financial strength and security? Can you deal with health issues and overcome them? If your children or grandchildren are on the wrong path, can you straighten them out?

When I ask, "Do you have spiritual power?" I want to know if you can rise above the problems of life and make things the way you want them. My guess is you don't have much of that, but you'd sure like some. That's what this sermon is about: spiritual power. I have the perfect text for it. It is, in fact, one of the great passages of the Bible, the hymn to Christ in Paul's letter to the Colossians. There are two things you need to know about this passage so that we can get started.

First, how beautifully written and elegant it is. It is certainly poetry. Many scholars believe it was a hymn that either Paul wrote or he just quoted it here to make a point. I wish I could show it to you in the original Greek and walk you through step-by-step pointing out the structural elements that make it so lovely. There are two main verses, the first dealing with creation and the second dealing with salvation, and they are held together by a neat little bridge like a chorus. Words and phrases, such as firstborn and "heaven and earth" show up in both verses. We find parallelism, where words or lines mirror each other. I could go on and on. In this passage, truth and beauty meet, and it really is delightful.

I know that in our society people don't care about this kind of thing. We don't even care about the basic rules of grammar and punctuation anymore. The English language has become an incomprehensible series of capital letters texted in a hurry. I have nothing against technology or shortcuts. But I do believe beauty matters. Art should serve more than the bottom line, art should serve truth. In this passage it does. In his

Word, God gives us the very best. He gives us truth and beauty. Not only is reality described, so that we can find our way in this world, it is described with elegance. We ought to give God our very best also. This passage reminds us what that looks like.

Second, you need to know the story behind our text. Paul was in prison in Rome. He had been arrested in Jerusalem because of his missionary work. His case dragged on. He felt he wasn't going to get a fair trial. So he appealed to the Emperor. The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest, freely preaching the gospel to guards and visitors. During this time, his friend Epaphrus visited him to encourage him. Epaphrus was from the church in Colossae, a city in what would today be southwest Turkey. Epaphrus brought mostly encouraging news: The church in Colossae was holding its own. The Christians there were faithful and true. Alas, however, there was one small problem. Some false teachers were causing trouble. We do not know exactly what they were teaching. We only have Paul's reaction to help us piece it together. It seems they were like a lot of people today. A lot of people today pick and choose ideas from many different religions, blending a concoction that goes down smoother than any one faith taken straight. The false teachers in Colossae got a few ideas from Judaism, a few from paganism, a few from somewhere else maybe; and they built them together into a whole new system, the purpose of which was spiritual power.

They paid a lot of attention to angels, spiritual powers and principalities, unseen forces thought to control aspects of human life. They had strict laws about what foods were OK to eat. Strict laws about the body. All sorts of holy days to observe. You can see the same dynamic in a lot of religions, especially primitive ones, but even in the things people come up with today. The basic idea is: you do certain things and you don't do certain other things, in order to get in good with whatever cosmic powers are calling the shots. You don't want the gods or karma or the cosmos or the force or whatever to be against you. Ideally you want them working for you. And that's the payoff. That's why you go through with all the rules and rituals, so that you can control. You can get what you want. A lot of false religion comes down to that.

You can see why this would be appealing to the Christians in Colossae. They didn't have a lot of control over life. We feel our own weakness, but in the ancient world they felt even more vulnerable. Who doesn't want peace and security? Who doesn't want to control all those messy pieces of life that constantly surprise us? So the false teachers gained a footing. The problem was, of course, their teaching was false. Paul countered them by telling the truth, and that truth is what I want to share with you.

The truth is the sufficiency and the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is the image of the invisible God. In other words, no one has ever seen God, but Jesus reveals God to us because he is God. So if you want to know God, get to know Jesus. The hymn opens with this bold statement about Jesus' relationship with the Father. It's a shocking statement, actually, when you consider it was sung about a man who was a

contemporary of the first singers and who was crucified. Jesus is God, but this hymn is more about his relationship to the world and to us than to the Father.

The hymn goes on therefore to say he is the firstborn of all creation. It does not mean he was created. In this context, it can't mean that. It means rather that he has the same relationship to creation as the firstborn son had in a family in ancient times. In fact, he created everything and everything was created for him. When Paul says *all things*, he means all—seen and unseen. He hits here at the heart of the false teachers' doctrine and the fears of the Christians in Colossae. If I am not in control, who is? They thought it was thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. These are terms to describe a hierarchy of spiritual forces. Spiritual powers. Paul says, "Ha! Those powers you think so much of, they were created by God. He rules over them. They have no power against him. Why would you bother with those rinky-dink little principalities and powers when you know Jesus Christ! He is supreme in all things."

Everything, you see, finds its meaning and purpose in Jesus Christ. He is the reference point for everything. So much for creation! He is also the head of the church. He is the firstborn from the dead, meaning he was the first to be raised, but those who belong to him will be resurrected also. He has first place in everything! Why? Because in him the fullness of God—and I think Paul is using one of the false teachers' favorite words against them. I think *fullness* was a word they used, maybe to describe the powers they thought emanated from God. Paul takes that word away from them and says, "The fullness of God dwelt in Jesus Christ. Don't look anywhere else for God." Anyway, the fullness of God was pleased to do two things in and through Jesus Christ: (1) to dwell in him, and (2) to reconcile to himself all things, making peace by the blood of his cross.

He created all things. Even what he may have lost through human rebellion, he regained through the cross. Therefore, Christ is supreme. He is the ultimate power, and there is no other power in heaven or earth that does not exist for him and answer to him.

This means that Christ is sufficient. He is sufficient for your salvation. How do you gain eternal life? Jesus Christ plus nothing. It's not Jesus plus good works, or Jesus plus religion, or Jesus plus being a nice person, or Jesus *plus* anything. It's Jesus Christ, first and last.

He is also sufficient for your life. How do you navigate the confusing path of life? How do you overcome circumstances? How do you press on and rise above it all? Jesus Christ, first and last. You don't need anything else. No rituals. No spiritual forces. Nothing except Christ. This was an incredibly liberating truth for the Colossians. They did not have to worry anymore about whatever forces might be controlling their fate. They discovered only one power controlled their destiny, Jesus Christ, so they did not

have to be afraid anymore. They finally had peace and security. The same is true for us. Let me lay down three facts about spiritual power:

1. You do not have any spiritual power. That is, most of life is going to be beyond your control. Nobody knows that as well as a pastor. I walk into a hospital room. I do not have the power to heal. I counsel with a couple having marital problems. I do not have the power to make them love each other. On and on it goes. I can give encouragement and speak the truth. I can point people to Christ. But he has the power, not me. If you ever want to feel powerless, become a pastor. The best you and I can do is: we can be a channel through which God pours his grace, or we can be a tool in his hand. But the power is never ours. Our puny strength is no match for the problems and pain we inevitably face. ... However ...

2. Jesus Christ does have power. All authority in heaven and earth belong to him. And this is the truth that sets us free from fear and despondency. If you belong to him, you are in his hand. Nothing can change that. No circumstance of life, no spiritual force or power – nothing in all creation can separate you from his love. His plan and purpose for you are good. He aims to make you just like him. He has promised to raise you to eternal life and to give you an inheritance with the saints. Is there a chance he might fail? Absolutely not! You heard our scripture reading. He is God. He is supreme in all things! Knowing this should give you peace and security, regardless of how crazy life gets.

Now there is one bit of a down side to all this. Namely, you are not in control – he is – so it's his will that's going to be done, ultimately, not yours. I offer this caveat because some people get the crazy notion that what God wants for them is pretty much the same as what they want for themselves: a good job; a happy, fulfilling marriage; bright, healthy kids; a nice home; good health; and so on. The fact is, God may give you some or all of these. But not necessarily. God cares far more about your holiness than your comfort. He cares whether your life reflects his glory; he does not care what kind of car you drive. I also suspect he does not care whether your favorite team wins or loses. All this to say, you have nothing to fear, because the One who loved you enough to die for you controls your destiny. But you may not get what you want out of life – though he can use even your failures and frustrations for your ultimate good. And you have a part to play. You are not passive. Go back to the desire for a happy marriage, a fairly standard hope for many people. If you are married, some of that depends on you. You do not have the power to change your spouse, but you can be faithful and find God's grace, even in a less than ideal situation. And that brings us to the last fact about spiritual power.

You have no power. Christ does. But you do have a role to play. What is your role if you lack power?

3. Your role is to claim all things for God. Our text says everything that exists, exists because of Christ and for his glory. This includes you. It includes your job, your home, your church. You go into each situation saying, "Lord, this belongs to you. I'll do this for you and for your glory." You face each problem saying, "Lord, this problem is not bigger than you. I'll face it for you and for your glory." You have no power of your own, but you will be surprised what God will do through you when you claim all things for him. He can change hearts and minds. He can change situations. He does work miracles even today. Never limit God. Never write him off. You just don't know what he will do. You still won't get your way very often, but you'll at least have the right attitude. You'll find his strength will give you resilience and peace.

In conclusion, the hymn to Christ in Colossians 1 is ever Christian's declaration of independence. We are free from powers and principalities or fate or whatever you want to call it. We are free from fear and despair. When we suffer, we know even our pain can be used for God's purposes. This hymn to Christ is also our declaration of *dependence* on him. But this is not a bad thing at all. He loves you so much he died for you. Therefore you can be confident that his plans for you, which cannot fail, are good. He will bring you at last to your eternal inheritance.

Meanwhile, you live by claiming all things for him. Your job, your home, your family, your very self. And then you live that way. You trust him, and you lean on his strength. Amen.

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