PART THREE – THE GOODNESS OF GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK

By Pastor Ricky Stephen
Colossians 1:15-20

Intro: Franky and the Wolf

Christians have diverse opinions about the scope of Jesus' redemptive work. Often, we narrow the scope of redemption to humans alone. Medieval stories of Francis of Assisi present an alternative. Francis preached to birds, and in one of his most famous legends, tamed a man-eating wolf.[1]

While it may sound strange to some of us, the story is a riff on the prophecy about the Messiah's kingdom in Isaiah 11, where we read, "The wolf will live with the lamb..." (Isaiah 11:6a). To Francis and his followers it was considered perfectly natural to extend God's redemptive work to creation and creatures other than humans. Christ's redemption, they believed, would affect all things.

We are not saved from creation, but for creation.

Colossians 1:15-20 is the New Testament text which most clearly demonstrates how Christ's work on the cross redeems 'all things:'

15 *The Son is the image of the invisible God,*
the firstborn over ***all*** *creation.*
16 *For in him* ***all things*** *were created: things in heaven*
and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones
or powers or rulers or authorities; ***all things***
have been created through him and for him.
17 *He is before* ***all things****, and in him* ***all***
things *hold together.*
18 *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.*
19 *For God was pleased to have* ***all*** *his fullness*
dwell in him,
20 *and through him to reconcile to himself* ***all things****,*
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood,
shed on the cross.

NOTES

1 St. Francis. (orig. 1906, trans. 16 May 2009). The Little Flowers of St. Francis, Ch. 21. Translator: W. Heywood. Evinity Publishing Inc.

I. Against Religious Escapism: Of Kings, Kingdoms, and Creation

Colossians presents Jesus' redemptive work on the cross as applying to the whole universe, not just human beings. It's a hymn unlike some of the popular songs Christian's have song—"I'll Fly Away, Oh Glory" or "The Earth Shall Soon Dissolve Like Snow."

Some Christian thinking has devolved into religious escapism by narrowing the scope of Christ's redemptive work to humans alone. Hope in our resurrection is encouraged, but it can be used as an escape from pain, difficulty and responsibility.

Colossians gives us a different song to sing. A song on the themes of kings, kingdoms and creation.

A great cinematic representation of these themes is *The Lion King*. When Mufasa rules the savanna flourishes. When Scar rules there is famine and drought (See 1 Kings 17). When Simba returns to take the throne, the first thing to come is rain.

When a righteous king is on the mountain the land is at peace.

It seems not only humans are waiting for a righteous King - all creation is waiting. As Paul writes:

> [19] F*or the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*
> [20] F*or the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope*
> [21] *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*
> Romans 8:19-21

In the Biblical Worldview, creation and humanity share a destiny. We are put here to help creation flourish through governing in God's way (Genesis 1:27), but when we fail creation is hardened (Genesis 3:17). Israel's faithfulness would lead to creation flourishing, their faithlessness would make the sky bronze and the earth iron (Deuteronomy 28).

These expectations become solidified around the kings of Israel. When the kings are righteous, the land produces. When they aren't, it doesn't (see Psalm 72).

Messianic prophecies include these expectations, when the righteous King comes to reign forever, all creation will be restored to order (Isaiah 11).

While it sounds mystical and spooky, we see the effects of greed on creation everyday. We see the effects of bad leadership on the planet.

Jesus gives hints towards His role through His interactions with creation. He calms the sea with a word, multiplies food, knows where the fish are (how I dream!) and tells a tree to whither and it listens.

When the righteous king is on the mountain the land is at peace.

As God's 'under-rulers' who have been reconciled through the blood of King Jesus, we are called to extend His rule and reign to creation. Creation care is not a politically motivated add on to Christianity, it is central to the gospel.

What if we loved the world as much as He does?

We are not saved from creation, but for it.

II. Against Religious Tourism: Of Temples, Idols, and Our Lives

Maybe you jive with creation's redemption; but there's another problem when we think about Christ redeeming 'all things' - It's us.

NOTES

Across cultures we've suspected that here is not the place we meet the divine. We separate sacred and profane. If we want heaven, it must be somewhere special, doing something special. Surely God can't inhabit my house, my back-fat, my pimples or my past mistakes.

So maybe Christ redeems some things in creation—special places, special times. Maybe I just need to travel there to get my head straight. It's a kind of religious tourism rampant in our world. Everything from elephants and mantras and *eat-pray-love* to Christian conferences, retreats, new preachers and better sound systems. We're convinced God can't inhabit the grayscale of our days.

Well, we're wrong.

'All things' includes all things in our lives and histories—the mundane and the mistakes. To understand how, listen to how this hymn in Colossians riffs on temples, idols, and purpose.

In Genesis 1, 'image of God' could just as easily be 'idol of God.' Genesis unfolds creation like a temple being built, culminating with God placing His idol there, us. Idols are conduits for the divine. They are hot spots of presence.

We were made to be the place creation and others meet with God.

Our fall represents an exile from the fullness of God's presence. Somehow, God's fullness is dangerous to our fallenness. Israel was given a temporary solution - tabernacle and temple as pieces of creation purified for God's fullness. Sacred space required purification. Anything tied to death—blood, corpses, defiling diseases—was kept away from the God of life.

Which makes Jesus astonishing. What happens when He touches the unclean? They get clean.

Jesus is the travelling tabernacle. He is the true idol of the living God, the image of the invisible one.

Now we understand Paul:

> "*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him*"
> Colossians 1:19

Jesus is the traveling tabernacle - the sacred space on the road. When His temple-body was destroyed, the curtain separating God's presence tore open (see John 2:19-21/Matthew 27:51).

The band Rush has got a lyric:

> "In the whole wide world there's no magic place / So you might as well rise, put on your bravest face."[2]

Oh contraire, Geddy - The whole world is now a magic place. No place is off-limits. No person is off-limits. Scot McKnight writes:

> "No part of human existence remains untouched by the loving and liberating rule of Jesus."[3]

You don't need to be somewhere special doing something special. God's glory charges every day, even when kids scream and dinner burns. Redemption isn't escape from your life; it's the reclaiming of it for Jesus.

As Jesus' followers we become the temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19). We become the place, through Jesus' blood, where the fullness of God's holy presence is available to creation and each other (see Hebrews 10:19-22).

NOTES

2 Rush. (2007). "Bravest Face". Snakes & Arrows. Anthem Records.
3 McKnight, Scot. (26 Feb 2018). The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letter to the Colossians. Eerdmans.

Jesus' special identity as God incarnate is necessary for the efficacy of His redemptive work, and it is what enables our being drawn into the life of God (John 14:20).

You aren't saved from your life, you're saved in it and into it.

III. On Fire but Not Burned Up

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."[4]

Elizabeth Browning's stanza comes from an orthodox place, from good theology. Christ's cross is cramming heaven into earth and inviting us to see God's fire on every bush, tree and baby.

Perhaps, the burning bush is a good image for redemption. When Moses approached the bush it was 'on fire but not burned up' (Exodus 3:2). God's glory is like that. It burns on and in and through things without using them up or destroying them. It warms and lights up my life and yours without undoing or unmaking all we are.

It's the tongues of fire over the heads of the first people filled with God's Spirit. The tongues of fire over your life, over the whole earth, shining with the glory of its loving Creator - both itself and something more.

Perhaps we need to stop trying to escape this place and our lives and our prayer should be rather for open eyes. Eyes open to the tongues of God's glory burning - the fires set by the tinder of the cross. Yes, we pray for change. Yes, we pray for revival. But the best prayers for these things involve praying:

Lord, help me to see how you have reconciled and are reconciling all things to yourself.

As His image we pray about our responsibility too:

Lord, help me to hear where you'd like me to participate in your reconciliation of all things to yourself.

The full force of the effect of the cross is just this - learning to kick off your shoes and to roll up your sleeves because yes, even this, by the blood of the Lamb, is holy ground.

NOTES

4 Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. (1856). *Aurora Leigh*, Book Seven. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Elizabeth_Browning_Aurora_Leigh

Open Up:

Given your upbringing and experience, how have you been taught to think of 'redemption by the blood of the Lamb?' What's included in redemption, what isn't?

Dig In:

Re-read Colossians 1:15-20

- When you read 'all things reconciled' what surprising images or ideas come to you?

- How have you observed the connection between creation's flourishing and human flourishing?

- What would change in your life if you saw creation as part of God's redemptive plan?

- How does seeing yourself as God's 'idol' effect your view on the mundane and difficult aspects of life?

- What makes you think you're counted out of God's redemptive work? How can you practice reminding yourself of God's presence in your life?

Prayer:

Share one or two areas, personal and global, where it feels like Jesus' supremacy isn't visible, areas that look like they need redemption. Pray for Jesus to reconcile these things to Himself through His blood and through our participation as His under-rulers.