

HOW GREAT THOU ART

by Steve Zeisler

Twenty-five years ago my father helped me pack my suitcases to go to college as a freshman. We bought a little desk lamp, and that went into a cardboard box with some other supplies. We bought a typewriter, the kind that had no electrical connection to it whatsoever (we're talking ancient history!). We got what I would need as a college student all organized, and then drove north together (we lived in Southern California at the time) to Stanford, where I entered college. I started attending this church in the fall of 1967 and have been here in one way or another ever since. It was a period of change for me, the end of one part of my life and the beginning of another.

Last week my daughter did much the same thing with me and my wife. We got cardboard boxes from the grocery store to put her things in and packed her clothes in suitcases. (She had a little more gear than I did.) We piled it all in our car and drove her north (from the Bay Area to the state of Washington), where she is entering college as a freshman. And the future, of course, is yet to be told, but very likely this is the same sort of change for her, the end of one era and the beginning of another.

Such events cause us to reflect on cycles, seasons, change, milestones along the way. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes began his powerful description of human life by talking about life's cycles, and his observation that they were vain and meaningless. Ecclesiastes 1:1-9:

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:
"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."

What does man gain from all his labor
at which he toils under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

FINDING MEANING

"Generations come and generations go," says the Teacher. "The earth remains forever. Streams run into the sea ceaselessly. The sun rises and sets forever. There is nothing that is new. This endless repetition declares we don't amount to anything and that life is vain and meaningless." The meditation of the Teacher begins with those words, and yet even he can't be satisfied with that conclusion. The rest of the book of Ecclesiastes is the account of striving to find meaning.

As a matter of fact, the conclusion drawn in these verses from the cycles we observe in life, that there is nothing new under the sun, is not true. There is a unique event in human history that gives everything else meaning, an invasion of human history by God himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 1:15-23 we're going to encounter one of the great statements in all of Scripture describing who our Lord Jesus Christ is, and our concern this morning will be the effect it should have on us.

"And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities---all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach---if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Now, this wonderful declaration of the unique place of our Lord Jesus not only in history but before and after history; and not only in the cosmos but above it, beyond it, and undergirding it; comes right after a prayer that Paul prays for the people that he has heard of from Epaphras. He speaks of the condition of the Colossians. He was grateful for everything he has heard of them; things were going very well, and he was encouraged. But he recognized that there were dangers afoot in Colossae, deceivers who had infiltrated the church, things to be concerned about. So he prays for their future in verses 9-14. And then he breaks in with a word of praise of the Lord, the one who will meet the needs of people who pray to him. In effect he is saying that this is the one who will answer prayer. If you or I ever feel overmatched by life, unequal to the demands of emotional struggles, painful and difficult relationships, deterioration of our physical health, economic turmoil, or whatever we have to face in life; the one to whom we pray for help, who hears us cry, understands, and cares for us is this one, the master of everything!

IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

There are four very important things that we can distill out of this description of Jesus as we examine it together. Verse 15 says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The triune, eternal, omnipotent, ineffable God is not visible. In order for anything to be visible God had to create matter and the senses needed to apprehend light and interact in other ways with the material world. And God existed before all those things ever even came into being, so we might well say that he is beyond visibility. Therefore, in order for people like

us, who have been made with finite, physical bodies and lives, to be able to know him, he had to make himself visible. The son of God became a baby born in a stable. He grew to be a man who taught, laughed, and cried, whose heart was broken, whose tenderness was obvious to all, the depth of whose wisdom was beyond any of his contemporaries' ability to plumb. "The word became fles and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" John 1:14.

Now, you may have read of or even known someone who went on a pilgrimage to find God. History gives us many accounts of those who have done extraordinary things---they went off into the desert for decades at a time by themselves, lived with barely adequate clothing, climbed the mountains of Tibet, made pilgrimages to Mecca, and went through all sorts of deprivation---so deep was their longing to know God, to find their origin, to answer the problem raised in Ecclesiastes that life is meaningless, circular, and that nothing amounts to anything. They must find God if they are to find meaning. I even think when adults go on quests to find parents from whom they have been estranged, trying to put together what was broken or find what has been lost in relationships with relatives, that these are ways of looking back to foundations to try to find meaning. They mirror the greater hunger to ultimately find our purpose in our creator. And yet he is not far away. He has made himself known in Christ, the image of the invisible God.

LORD OF CREATION

The second point here is that Jesus is the first-born of all creation, and that needs to be explained a bit. Paul does not mean that Jesus was created, born into creation as the first of a series of like beings. It's very clear as you read the rest of this that he is the creator, the one through whom everything was made. Rather, the term first-born has to do with the matter of inheritance. In the ancient world and in other cultures today the first-born in a family is the one who stands to inherit everything; the first-born is absolutely different from everybody else in that respect. It doesn't make any difference if a child is second, third, fourth, etc.; all of them will lose out. The first-born in the family will inherit the property and will be the master of all. That is the point here; saying he is first-born is a way of declaring Jesus' lordship. He is the first-born of creation, and that means he is the master of creation.

There are some important time references in saying that Jesus is first-born or lord of creation. It says, "...by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible...He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." If we were imagining a time line (which doesn't make sense if time hasn't been created yet, but just for the sake of argument), we would find him before the existence of anything else, including time itself. He began creation. And it says that in him all things hold together. Our galaxy is uncountable light-years in size, an immense, extraordinary expanse of stars. And it is just one of millions of galaxies that exist at unimaginable distances from each other, making up the whole cosmos. And he holds together the cosmos, everything that came into being at his initiation. Then "...all things have been created by Him and for Him." He is the one for whom all things are; he is at the end. So he is at the beginning, during, and at the end of everything that has been created. It was fitted for him and by him, and it is entirely sustained by him. He is the the first-born or the master because he is the owner, creator, and sustainer of everything that exists.

You probably saw the devastation caused by Hurricane Andrew in both Florida and Louisiana. Its whirling, 160-mile-per-hour winds worked their way inexorably across the water to the land, slowly but surely bearing down on people who could do nothing to stop the hurricane or prevent its devastation, who could only run from what would happen. The storm literally picked up twelve to eighteen feet of water, carried it across the land, and dumped it destructively, ripping buildings apart. Just the power of that single storm in a single region of this planet is shaking to think about. And yet that is just one evidence of the kind of power that is under the authority of the Lord of all.

SEEN AND UNSEEN

There is a series of pairs of words here that highlights an important notion. It says Jesus is lord of both the heavens and the earth, the invisible and the visible. The created world is not just what we can apprehend with our senses; there are invisible things that have been created as well. The terms thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities indicate types of angels. (Ancient teachers described types of angels, and *thronoi*, thrones, for

example, was one order of angels.) Paul agrees that there are invisible beings, very powerful forces, that only people who understand the Scriptures can even be certain exist. And Jesus is lord of them as well.

He is the lord of human history. The rise and fall of empires and the growth and disintegration of countries and cultures are all under his control. The Bible actually suggests that there is resonance on this earth from what takes place in the invisible world of angelic powers. When a nation grows powerful and evil at the same time or there is a concentration of power in the hands of those who are very destructive, callous, and wicked; it is because the events in the battle of the heavens has somehow allowed such a thing to take place. Examples of this might be the dictator in Serbia or Iraq or the decision-makers who are starving the Somalis. Eventually the evil will be overthrown, there will be the opportunity for peace, and righteousness will be in the ascendancy. Again, that somehow represents events that are taking place in invisible realms. And Jesus is lord of both what is seen and what is unseen.

When I first began to read for my own sake as a youngster, there were two types of literature that I loved: mysteries and science fiction. Sherlock Holmes was a favorite of mine early on. He would observe a loose thread on someone's cuff and a little dirt scuff on someone's shoe, and from that he would deduce all manner of things that had taken place, who was guilty and who was innocent, where the bad guys had gone, and so on. And he was looking only at the visible. He was not a magician, but merely a brilliant deducer of truth by just studying what could be seen. He was a genius for seeing what other people didn't see by looking at the details.

Scientists do the same thing. They use microscopes and learn all kinds of fascinating things about the visible world. And gravity, electromagnetism, the speed of light, and so forth are what they are because the Lord has created and sustains the visible world.

I use to love science fiction, too, on the other hand---the stories of the invisible world, if you will, where people would time-travel and zip in and out of different dimensions. There were all kinds of weird monsters that would come from various places and do things that were fantastic and other-worldly. I think most of us have some kind of connection to both of those notions: There is an unseen world and there is a visible world, and both are powerful, real, and important. And Jesus stands astride both the visible and the invisible as the master, the first-born, the lord of all.

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

The third thing that we're told of Christ in this wonderful section describing him is that he is head of his body, the church. Verses 18-19 say, "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything." The term first-born here, *prototokos*, is the same one that was used earlier. He is the heir, the lord of that which is from the dead. There is a new world being created, and in the same way that he was at the beginning of the cosmos, he is at the beginning point of the new creation. And the new creation is coming from the dead, out of the first creation that Paul tells us in Romans 8:20 was subjected to futility, death, and decay because of human sinfulness and rebellion against God.

Now, if you stop to think of the implications of what is being said here, this is really remarkable. There have been two great creative works initiated by God in all of time and beyond time: He made everything, and now he is remaking things; there will be a new heaven and a new earth. He is beginning the new creation by winning people to himself; this body of his, the church, people everywhere in the world who know him, who are connected to one another and indwelt by the Spirit of God, are being fitted for the new heaven and the new earth. We're right near the beginning, the big bang if you will, and there's a lot more to happen yet. His body, the church, is the beginning of the re-creation of everything. It's like getting to invest in a company that's going to turn out to be Hewlett-Packard, and you're one of the first few folks in.

I think we value too little what it means to be Christian, to be part of this family. We had a Body Life time earlier in this service when people talked about their lives and what they were going through. We're connected to them and part of each other, whether it's supporting Christian publishing in Novosibirsk, praying for those who are ill, or encouraging others to begin a relationship with Christ. We get caught up too much with things

of this world that are essentially meaningless, and the fact that we're part of a Christian community in relationship to the Lord seems uninteresting. In last Sunday's paper there was a picture of Bill Walsh with a halo---the sainted Bill Walsh who has come back to lead Stanford football. Terms like the second coming were used to describe the return of a football coach to Stanford. I get all caught up in this; the team is going to win some games, there is the prospect of bowl games, and so forth. But that's not very important compared to what else is going on in the world, let alone what's going on forever.

RECONCILED TO GOD

The last thing that is highlighted in this description of Christ is that he is going to reconcile all things to himself. It is very important for us to remember that in all the work of our Lord's coming to earth and imaging the invisible God, he is dealing with a world in rebellion against him. His creative work of giving life to us, beginning a new creation, and peopling it with men and women like us cost him his life. It says it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in him, in order for him to "...reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him, holy and blameless and beyond reproach...."

This is very personalized now. The language is no longer the exalted language of the vaults of heaven, of the cosmos before and after its existence, of angels under the control of the master of everything. This is the language of redemption, and it is about you and me. We were formerly alienated in our minds; our minds were hostile. We were self-serving, crueller than we'd ever admit, blown about by passions that grew from within us (note that they didn't come from anywhere else; it was our own mind that was hostile); and we were engaged in evil deeds. Neither inwardly nor outwardly did we deserve his attention or care. And yet he came in a body made of flesh, and in the blood that stained the cross he reconciled us to himself.

He will present us before his Father, holy, blameless, beyond reproach, without a single mark against us, without even the memory of what we've done to deserve death, wholly cleansed, pure, righteous, irreproachable, presented as wonderful instruments to reflect the glory of God. At enormous cost we will be reconciled to God.

Now, there is an if clause at the end of this: "...if indeed you continue in faith firmly established...." The idea here is not that there is any chance that you won't continue in your faith if you are a Christian. There isn't really any question of that; he expects us to continue in faith. But what he's doing is reminding us that when we see ourselves continue, even at some surprise to ourselves, that's evidence that we really are Christians. We find ourselves at times wanting to throw off the Christian life when we're presented with other opportunities, captivated by other notions; when Christianity gets in the way of our self-advancement; or when we're told to liberate ourselves from our hang-ups and live in the glory of self-adulation. We find ourselves thinking, "I'd like to set it aside for awhile, shuck it off." But we can't.

At one point Jesus taught some very hard things to his disciples about the radical cost of discipleship and how at variance with the world we have to be, and most of them left. At the end of John 6 Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Will you leave, too?" Peter had a very interesting answer. He didn't say, "Oh no, Lord, we'd never think of it! We're committed to you a hundred percent." He basically said, "We'd love to leave, but we can't. You have the words of eternal life. This is costly and hard, and there have been a bunch of times we would just as soon have left, but we have nowhere else to go. You've overtaken us. We couldn't stop being your followers even if we wanted to."

I think that is what Paul is saying here. We need to discover that someone else has taken over our lives, and they are no longer even ours to sell to someone else anymore. When you've discovered that that is true of you, then you can be encouraged that everything else that is promised in the gospel will be true for you, too. He will present you before his Father holy and blameless and beyond reproach.

FIRST PLACE IN EVERYTHING

I have been gone for most of a couple of weeks, and this has been a wonderful day to return in many respects. I got to be part of a prayer service in the Couples Class to dedicate a baby, Hannah Mae Woodard, born to a wonderful couple in this church. Then this afternoon many of us are going to meet for Mel Bryant's memorial service and comfort one another, thank God for his life, and remind ourselves of his place in the presence of the Lord right now. And after that a group of us are going to baptize a new Christian. And it struck me that Paul's phrase in the midst of this section, "that he should come to have first place in everything," is illustrated by starting with a baby, meeting a young man who is new in the Lord and wants to be baptized, and recognizing that at the end of life Christians will gather to remember the life that has been lived. The reason for these events, and what it means to be Christian, is that he should come to have first place in everything.

But what we must recognize is that there are rivals to that. There are other points of view, deceptions, temptations, and siren songs. There are those who would replace his importance in our lives. But if we will only see clearly and embrace genuinely what is here, he must come to have first place and they must not be heeded.

At the very end of everything in Revelation 5:11-14 it says:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped.

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