

This evening we will look at the second part of this paragraph which deals with Jesus and the creation and Jesus and the new creation. Last week we looked at Jesus and the creation. This evening we will consider Jesus and the new creation.

Let me first show why I am using the language of new creation to refer to the subject matter of the second part of this paragraph. That term is not used in these verses. Why then am I using it? One of the interesting things about the theme of the new creation in Scripture is that it is a very pervasive theme, but that precise term is only used a couple of times. What we have instead are all kinds of hints and terms that make it clear upon reflection that the biblical writers understood the work of Christ as the renewal of the creation.

And that is very clear in this passage, Colossians 1:15-20, that we are looking at. The verses that we looked at last week, verses 15-17 are clearly and explicitly about Jesus and the creation. And then in verse 18 Paul says of Jesus, "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...." In the first part, Paul says that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. In the second part he refers to Jesus as the firstborn from the dead. In the first part he says that Jesus is "before all things." In the second part he says that Jesus is "the beginning, the first born from the dead." In the first part he says that by Jesus, "all things were created, in heaven and on earth...." In the second part he says that God through Jesus was pleased to "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." It is clear from all these parallels that Paul wants us to think of salvation through Jesus in terms of the renewal of the creation.

So that is why the use of the term "new creation" is helpful to see what Paul is getting at in this passage. Paul wants us to see this parallel between creation and new creation. He wants us to see Jesus at the center of the original creation and Jesus at the center of the new creation. And he wants us to understand salvation as the renewal of the creation that has been under the curse of sin ever since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin.

His main point is still that Jesus is at the center of everything. And so, in verse 18 he refers to Jesus as "the head of the body, the church." Paul has been saying that Jesus is the head of the creation in the sense of being the one who made it and holds it all together. And now he says that Jesus is the head of the church in the sense that the relationship between Jesus and the church is analogous to the relationship between Jesus and the creation. The emphasis in the idea of Jesus as the head of the body, the church, in this context, is on the fact that Jesus is preeminent in the church. Just as the creation itself, the church is "through him and for him." He is the head in the sense of being the creator of the church and the goal of the church and the sustainer of the church and the Lord of the church.

Douglas Moo expresses this idea by saying, "Just as Christ is preeminent in the universe, so he is preeminent in the new creation, the assembly of new covenant believers."

Jesus is preeminent in the church. The church exists because of him. Its life is his life. Its strength is his strength. Its purpose is to serve and glorify him.

One definition of the word “preeminent” helps to convey the idea. Preeminence has to do with “having paramount rank, dignity and importance.” Jesus has paramount rank, dignity and importance in the church. So just as all things are from Jesus, through Jesus and for Jesus so the church is from Jesus, through Jesus and for Jesus.

Next Paul speaks of Jesus as “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” The Greek word that is translated “the beginning” means “first principle”, “source”, or “creative initiative” (Wright p. 98). The idea is clearly tied to creation and the connection to Jesus as the firstborn from the dead indicates that we are to see the resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of the new creation. As the “firstborn from the dead” Jesus is the beginning of the new creation.

Now one of the things that this means is that the new creation begins in time. The new creation began when Jesus rose from the dead and it will come in its fullness when Jesus returns, and all of his people rise from the dead. In the biblical understanding of salvation there is an overlap between this age and the age to come. The end-time salvation – the renewal of all things - begins before this present age is over – so there is an overlap between this age and the age to come. For instance, we receive eternal life in the here and now. Eternal life is the life of the age to come. The final state – what we think of as end-time salvation - begins with the resurrection of Jesus. The final state begins before this present age is over. We experience the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth in this time already because we participate in the resurrection life of Christ.

That is the significance of Paul’s teaching here that Jesus is “the beginning, the first born from the dead.” Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of the new creation and when we receive new life in Christ we participate in Jesus’ resurrection and thus in the beginning of the new creation.

Then Paul goes on to say, “that in everything he might be preeminent.” That is really the point of this whole passage. As the heading in the ESV suggests, a good title for this whole section is “The Preeminence of Christ.”

How different is this from the way that Jesus is viewed by the world! For fallen human beings life is all about us. And this is the governing perspective of the world. In the view of the world, humanity is preeminent. Life is all about the human race. It is about the satisfaction of our desires. It is about what we want to do with our lives. But the biblical perspective is that Jesus is preeminent. He is preeminent in creation. And he is preeminent in new creation. And we are both created and redeemed to give him the priority that is his due. But that is a good thing because giving Jesus his due is what we are designed for and saved for and so it is the most fulfilling and satisfying way that we can live.

The next verse speaks of how the fullness of God dwells in the God-man Jesus. This is really an amazing idea because Jesus is a true human being. You might think that a human being is not a big enough container for the fullness of God to dwell in. That is to put the matter crassly, but I am trying to grapple with how amazing what

is being expressed here is. When we think of man in relation to God with think of God as infinite and man as puny in comparison. And that is certainly what the Bible teaches. Just think of the perspective of Psalm 8:3-4, where the Psalmist says, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him....” We are so small before the vastness of the heavens and the heavens are the work of God’s fingers.

And here in our text Paul tells us that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in a man named Jesus. That does not mean that Jesus’ divine nature is fully contained with in his body. God, by definition, is everywhere present. That means that God the Son is everywhere present. But Jesus’ body is not everywhere present. Like any other human body, it can only be in one place at one time. So, the fullness of God extends beyond the physical body of Jesus.

And yet Paul says that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus. Certainly, what that means is that the God-man Jesus is fully God. The divine nature of Jesus is not limited in any way by taking on a full human nature. Jesus is both God and man in one person. The person of Jesus is fully God as well as fully man. One scholar helpfully speaks of the “full divinity of the man Jesus.” (Wright p. 80)

What exactly this means belongs to the mystery of the incarnation and as a mystery it is not something that we can fully comprehend. But Paul is mentioning this here is part of his point that Jesus is preeminent. Listen to the way that the thought flows. “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. **For** in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” So, the reason that Jesus is preeminent is that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him.

This is something amazing for us to ponder even if we can’t fully understand it. It is amazing that the fullness of God can dwell in a human being. It is amazing that the fullness of God dwells in a person who is just like us as far as his essential humanity is concerned. It certainly brings God closer to us. And that indeed is part of the point. As we read in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” This verse gives us some insight concerning what it means that the fullness of God can dwell in a human being. The man Jesus Christ reflects the full glory of God and he also reflects the fullness of God’s grace and truth.

It is also interesting to consider how God being a man makes it possible to show the glory of God in ways that are more striking than is possible for God apart from Jesus’ human nature. For instance, a huge revelation of the glory of God has to do with Jesus becoming a servant and suffering and dying for the salvation of the world. The glory of God is not only seen in his majesty and overwhelming greatness, but also in his love and in the amazing fact that God was willing to humble himself in order to save us from our sins. So, the fullness of God’s self-giving love are shown through the man Jesus in ways that would not be possible otherwise.

Anyway, it is an amazing thing to think about – that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus. The word “pleased” here is also significant. It means that Jesus becoming the God-man was pleasing to God. God was not reluctant or hesitant about Jesus becoming the God-man. It is something that he was pleased to do. It was something that pleased him. When God spoke from heaven to say that Jesus was his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased, that is an expression of this truth that Paul is expressing that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus.

Pondering these things is part of what it means to delight in God. By this way of thinking we are reaching out for greater insight into the glory and the beauty of God. It gives joy to think of how the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus and how that reveals aspects of the glory of God related to his willingness to humble himself because of his love for us. And that insight into the glory of God in love is the core insight of the Christian ethic of love.

Now what comes next continues the feast of the wonderful truths that are found in this passage. What we read in verse 20 gives us a perspective on salvation that helps us to see the vast extent of what Jesus accomplished and what he is working towards and the implications of this truth for us are profound and life-enhancing. Paul writes in verse 20 that God was pleased “through [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

So, the peace that is the fruit of Jesus’ shedding of his blood on the cross as to do with reconciling all things to God, whether on earth or in heaven. Normally when we think of Jesus’ death on the cross, we think of God reconciling us to himself – we may think of God reconciling his people to himself – and certainly the Bible uses this kind of language. But verses like this one put God’s reconciliation of his people into a much larger context, the context of all things in heaven or on earth.

Now to understand what this means we must reflect on the idea of reconciliation. Salvation is about reconciliation. And reconciliation has to do with the restoration of broken relationships. And so, when our text speaks about the reconciliation of all things it is talking about the restoration of every possible relationship in heaven and on earth.

You see life in the Bible is about relationships. Our relationship with God. Our relationships with other people. But also, our relationship with the creation. And the three great relationships that define our lives are interconnected. Our relationship with God affects our relationship with other people and with the creation. We see that in the story told in the first chapters of Genesis. As soon as the relationship with God is broken because of Adam’s sin, Adam’s relationship with Eve is broken and his relationship with the creation is no longer one of peace and harmony. God said to Adam “[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;” The creation now resists us. The creation causes man pain in the form of everything from weeds to natural disasters and man returns the

insult by his misuse of the creation by wasting and polluting and the rape of its resources. The relationship between sinful humanity and the rest of the creation is not harmonious.

The whole creation came under a curse because of man's sin and all the relationships that define our lives were broken. That is why Paul, in our text, speaks about salvation in Christ as the reconciliation to God of "all things, whether on earth or in heaven." Salvation in Christ is about the reconciliation of all relationships to God. It is about the restoration of comprehensive and cosmic harmony. To reconcile all things to God is to bring the whole creation back to the harmony that it had before the fall. But we know that God's plan is to bring the whole creation to a new level of blessedness far beyond even the creation before the fall. I'll say more about that in a minute, but for now it is important to see that salvation in Christ involves God reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." – that is the reconciliation that God has accomplished through Jesus is cosmic – it includes bringing everything in the whole universe into harmony with God.

That is the meaning of the term new creation. It points to the fact that salvation in Jesus is about the renewal of the whole creation. And that involves reconciliation between God and man, reconciliation between people among themselves and reconciliation between people and the rest of the creation. That is why you have those passages in the prophets that paint a picture of harmony in the created order to describe what the coming salvation will look like. Isaiah 41:18-19, "I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together...."

Now this is vastly important for our understanding of life and of the Christian life. It helps us to understand what exactly God is working in Christ to save and that has tremendous implications for the way we think about the significance of this earthly life in the plan and purposes of God. What the biblical teaching about salvation as a renewal of the creation teaches us is that God loves the whole creation and his saving work in Jesus has to do with saving all of it.

There is in the history of the church a tendency to a dualism that makes a distinction between this earthly life and spiritual life. Sometimes it is necessary to make this distinction for communication purposes, but it is not really a biblical distinction. There is certainly no difference in value and significance between what we think of as spiritual life and what we think of as this earthly life. The biblical teaching about the new creation shows us that salvation in Jesus is not just about saving our souls, but about saving the whole creation. And the prominence of the resurrection of the body is a part of that perspective. God liked his original creation. He called it very good. His idea was that he would be glorified by mankind living the creational life that God had designed for him all the while living in fellowship with God. The ideal holy God-centered life is not a disembodied spiritual life, but is God-focused creational life of work and rest and relationships all for the glory of God and the true enjoyment and satisfaction of man.

The fact that our text speaks of God through Jesus reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to himself means that salvation is about saving the whole of God's intention in the original creation. It is emphatically not about being saved from the physical creational life to some kind of spiritual existence in heaven. The salvation of souls to heaven is a temporary measure as God moves history along to what he is ultimately working toward which is the renewal of the whole creation.

This has tremendous implications for how we think of the life we are saved to live. We are saved to live this physical creational life in all of its many dimensions in a way that reflects God's intention for life in his creation. The culmination of this salvation after the second coming of Christ is going to be physical creational life. The best biblical insight to imagine what the final state will be like for God's people is to think of what the world would be like had the fall never happened. There are indications that life in the new heavens and the new earth will be more glorious than even that, but the God's original plan is the best paradigm in the light of which to imagine what life in the new creation will be like. It will be what life would have been like had the fall had not happened only better.

The key point of the biblical teaching about the new creation is that God liked his original idea of the creation. In his work of salvation he is not abandoning that idea – he is not working towards something radically different. It is about bringing to fruition his original plan by conquering sin and all opposition to his rule.

It is significant that the fall of mankind into sin brought about the curse upon the rest of the creation and that the deliverance of the elect from sin will bring about the removal of the curse from the whole of the creation. This is why our text mentions the "blood of the cross" in connection with God reconciling all things on earth or in heaven to himself. Because of man's sin the whole creation was brought under the curse. Because of Jesus' deliverance of man from sin, the curse is removed from the whole creation.

Romans 8 speaks of this. Romans 8:19-21, "<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

This passage teaches that there is a connection between the salvation of man and the salvation of the rest of the creation. The whole creation is going to be set free from its bondage to corruption when God brings to its culmination the salvation of his people.

All of this means that this creational life will always be the way in which God intends for us to live to his glory. And the life of salvation is seeking to live all of life according to God's intention for life. That involves every aspect of human culture. Human culture is God's idea – it is what he created us to do. Because of sin, all of human culture is mixed with sin, but the idea of culture itself is God's idea. And so as people saved by Jesus blood we are to reflect in our everyday lives this idea that Jesus is reconciling all things to himself. If Jesus died

to reconcile all things then we live to reconcile all things. That does not mean that we should have grandiose ideas that we can transform the whole world for Christ – Christ is the one who is going to renew all things and a huge part of that will happen at his second coming. And yet, we are to seek to live in such a way as to reflect God’s love for human culture and seek to live our lives in a way that is in harmony with that.

For most of us that means things like living life according to God’s commands – working hard, loving others, seeking to be an influence in ways that fit with what Jesus is working towards. It means getting behind the churches mandate to make disciples of all nations, but it also means seeking to live new creational life in the here and now as a witness of what Jesus is working towards as he fulfills his purpose to reconcile all things to himself.

What this means is that salvation is not an end in itself. The purpose of salvation is the renewal of the creation. The new creation is the goal – the telos - of salvation. We are saved to live the life we were always intended to live. And that life is a physical life of working and creativity and accomplishments on a physical earth in relationship with God and other people. That is something that is wonderful to look forward to, but it is something that begins in the here and now.