

(Colossians) Part Two - Col 1:15-20

by Douglas Moo

Douglas Moo's sermon emphasizes the supremacy of Christ as the image of God and his central role in creation and the new creation, providing assurance to believers.

Duration: 45:29

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Colossians 1:15-16, Colossians 1:18-20, Colossians 2:14-15

Topics: "Exposition"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes that through Jesus Christ, God has rescued and transferred believers from the dominion of darkness into the new kingdom of God's Son. The preacher highlights the importance of theology in the life of the church, urging the Colossians not to seek spiritual completion in other religions or philosophies. He emphasizes that all knowledge about God can be found in Christ, who is the image of the invisible God. The preacher also suggests that as agents of change, believers should not only focus on saving souls but also strive to end estrangement between human beings and spiritual forces of darkness.

Transcript

I was lucky to come out with anything left, I guess. At any rate, that might help with the overhead. I guess that's the point of the light, so thanks.

The parallelism there, note how it goes on. Who is first born? Who is first born? Who is image first born proportion? But I think, again, there might be reasons to see this as sort of a smaller transitional stanza. Again, in the Greek text, all of these lines begin with an and, and, and, and.

And a bit of, again, this inclusio we've been talking about, the first line begins, and he is, and the third line, and he is. And so here you have, again, these three compact lines that seem to belong together as well. Now, in the overall structure of the hymn, what clearly we have Paul doing, in quoting this hymn, is celebrating the supremacy of Christ in creation, and the new creation.

As Christ is the first born overall creation, the one who is primary over creation, and the instrument through which the original creation is brought into being, so he has the primacy and the supremacy in the new creation. The one in whom, through his resurrection, hinted at in the first born here from the dead, of course, through that resurrection, he has begun to establish the new creation. And all of this, very high, very, what we might even call, abstruse Christology, is, remember in our context, directed toward the

practical purpose of giving the Colossians assurance about this realm transfer that Paul has talked about in verses 13 through 14.

He has rescued us, he has transferred us from the dominion of darkness into the new kingdom of God's Son, and we can be sure about that, we can rest confident in it, we can know that it's taken place, and that our new position is secure, because God has done it in none other than Jesus Christ, the Lord of the universe, the one who is supreme over all the powers of darkness, the one who is supreme over all elements that we might encounter in our lives, that the church will ever face. It's a great, again, practical demonstration of why theology is so important in the life of the church. It is that theology that gives us our hope, that provides for the foundation that we all need to stand on.

Well, let's look at some of the things Paul says about the Son. First of all, his role in creation. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Image of the invisible God. Let me just back up a moment and talk about the issue of background here a little bit, which is very significant in understanding how this hymn is communicating its truth about Christ. I say it's very significant.

Most of us know, of course, that to interpret the New Testament adequately, finally, we need to have a little bit of insight into the world of that day and how people in that day used words and how they communicated. Just as in our day, we will frequently bring in a whole cultural dynamic and background and make it a point through a single word. Think of the way the little suffix gate functions in our political discourse ever since Watergate.

Just the addition of that little suffix, four letters, whether it's travelgate or Irancontragate or whatever we want to add it to, those four letters conjure up for us, who know American history, some of us old enough to have lived through that history, it conjures up a whole image of political corruption and scandal and cover-up and so forth that would be very difficult to express without maybe a couple of paragraphs even. So when we read the New Testament, we are reading writings from people who were so steeped in the Old Testament, the Jewish world, and of course also the Greco-Roman world of that day, that they will very often communicate something very significant by the choice of a particular word or phrase. And if we're not clued into that background, we're going to miss some of the point.

Maybe not all of the point, but we're going to miss some of the point. So there is lively discussion about where this hymn is drawing its language from. And there are some rich possibilities.

Quickly, focusing on four items in the hymn that are said about Christ that are probably the most significant ones we need to look at as far as background goes. Image, we just looked at, firstborn overall creation, the mediator of creation in verse 16, especially this is emphasized, and then calling Christ the beginning. Where does this stuff come from, if anywhere? Well, one, of course, immediate possibility when we hear the word image is Genesis 1. Now I know that all of you have a disposition against Genesis 1. Apparently none of you have read it.

If you've read it, you don't remember the chapter, you're just not clued in. But take a look at it sometime and read it because there's some good stuff there. And one of the things that you find there, of course, is this great foundational theological statement about God creating human beings in his image.

And if you do just a quick word study in the Old Testament and Jewish sources as well, that's where the language of image is more often used. It's attached to creation. It's attached to human beings as made in the image of God.

So Jesus as second Adam, which, of course, is a very significant Pauline theological development. Even if Paul's not the author of the hymn, it certainly might have been a reason that led him to quote the hymn here, if this is the idea. I think there's something to that.

A second background we need to look at, though, and this is particularly significant for the title firstborn, because read in its context, by itself, the language of Christ as the firstborn of creation might sound like the light verse of Arius. It sounds at first like this hymn is propagating a sub-Orthodox Christology. Christ, well, apparently was not eternal.

There was a time when he was not, to quote the famous language that surfaced at the time of the Arian controversy. He was born. He came into existence.

The first to come into existence, but still, apparently, you might assume from an initial reading of this verse, a creature, one created by God. Yes, God in some sense, his son, but nevertheless, a created being of some kind. Well, when we look at the background again carefully, I think some of that conclusion pretty quickly falls to the ground.

And we realize that we have made the mistake of reading the word as if we're using it in 21st century English, rather than it being used in 1st century Greek against the context of the Old Testament, where the language of firstborn is applied to the idea of supremacy. It comes from the literal sense of a firstborn child who is the one who is most prominent, who receives the inheritance. It used to be, as we know, in 16th and 17th century England, someone had three sons, and the first one got the estate, and the second one became a soldier, and the third one had nothing better to do than become a pastor, which explains the state of the church sometimes in those eras, I think.

But this is the way it worked. The firstborn is sort of the one in many societies who is the one who is prominent, the heir. And so from that usage, you have clearly in the Old Testament and Judaism, this movement then to use firstborn simply as a metaphor for the one who is the most prominent, the one who is superior.

And this Messianic text, I think, Psalm 89, illustrates this point very well. David will be appointed as my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. Nothing about David's birth order here, obviously, or if the text ultimately is looking beyond David to the greater son of David to come.

The point is supremacy. And hence, the translation you might have seen before you from the TNIV, the firstborn over all creation, which I think is the translation that rightly captures the semantic sense of firstborn in its context here, you see. I think that's quite an appropriate and indeed preferable translation here then because of that background.

All right, but the third background here is the concept of wisdom. We can say an awful lot about this, and it's become very popular of late because feminist theologians have seized on wisdom, since it's a feminine noun, to bring certain perspectives of femaleness into conceptions of God, spirituality, religion, and so forth. We don't need to do all of that stuff.

But there is no doubt that this idea of wisdom, as it gets used in certain Old Testament passages, and especially as it gets developed in the Jewish writings post Old Testament and pre-New Testament, very significant development. By wisdom, the Lord laid the earth's foundations. And often in these texts, wisdom is an expression of God himself, you see.

It's a characteristic, an attribute of God. But in some of these texts, the personification becomes so strong that wisdom almost seems to begin to be an entity in its own right. And this begins to happen again in the Jewish world.

The Proverbs 8 passage, as many of you will know, is a key passage in this development. And again, what you have here, as you have so often in Proverbs, is a bold and extensive personification. We have to be careful about thinking that the author of Proverbs here is in any way suggested that wisdom is a person or an apostasis or something.

I think it's just very bold, poetic language here. But nevertheless, it goes quite a ways toward talking about wisdom almost as a kind of independent entity, as you see. Involved in the beginning, involved in creation and so forth, you see.

Again, in the Jewish world, seen particularly in the writings of Philo of Alexandria then, you have this developed even further. Note, again, some of the parallels between what Philo says about wisdom and what our hymn is saying about Christ. Wisdom is the firstborn son.

Wisdom by whose agency the universe was completed. Wisdom is the beginning and image and vision of God. I have to confess something to you here.

I, for some reason unknown to myself that a psychiatrist might be able to uncover, have been reluctant to jump on the wisdom bandwagon. Because that's sort of what it is. In the last 20 years, there's just been an awful lot written about the figure of wisdom and related idea of word or logos.

Again, in Philo, these are developed in parallel. They're almost overlapping, wisdom and word. Because an awful lot of scholars have seen in this Jewish development a kind of background and precedent for New Testament Christology.

For some reason, I've been very reluctant to admit this influence. I don't know why. It's a peculiar thing, but there it is.

But I have to confess, as I've been working on this again in recent days, in writing the commentary, I'm very reluctantly being forced to the conclusion that there is something to this. That the background is probably significant for this hymn. It's kind of a lesson to me and all of us about putting ourselves significantly enough into the text to let that text kind of dismiss some of our prejudices, to allow it to have its authority in having its way with us, even when we're initially reluctant to let that happen.

So that's kind of where I am by the commentary when it comes out in a year and a half or two to see where I end up on this. But at this point, I am inclined to think that the figure of wisdom might indeed be affording this hymn some of the language it's using to talk about Christ. Now, we have to be very careful not to load too much into this.

On the one hand, the early Christian conception of Christ can in no way be seen as a kind of organic development from these Jewish intermediary figures. What is asserted about Christ in the New Testament

so distinctly differs from what any Jew will say about these intermediary figures as to be moving from one ballgame into another, as it were. It's just a whole different situation.

So I think we have to be very careful about suggesting that somehow, well, yeah, it was pretty easy for New Testament Christians to begin thinking about Jesus in the way that they do because they just sort of plugged them into these ideas that were already out there in Judaism about wisdom and logos and so forth. Now, I hear Richard Bauckham's little book, *God Crucified*, is an excellent response to that in which, again, he tries to show that the early Christians were doing something unheard of in the Jewish world in what they were saying about the person of Jesus Christ in his relationship to the Father. The second note of caution is this.

James Dunn, in his work on Christology, has strongly emphasized the wisdom influence here and makes a very interesting argument. He says that the language in the hymn that is applied to Jesus, let's go back to the hymn before we forget about it, the language in this hymn applied to Jesus, image of God, instrument of creation and so forth, simply serves the purpose to identify Jesus with the figure of wisdom. So all of the specifics Dunn suggests that are used here in the hymn simply serve to make the point that Jesus is now the one in whom we encounter what the Jews used to think about as wisdom.

And Dunn then concludes, we illegitimately read into this hymn concepts of pre-existence or incarnation which just aren't here. Because that's not what the language is doing. The language is not here to say anything ontologically, as it were, about Jesus' pre-existence or incarnation.

The language here is simply used to associate Jesus with wisdom. Errand nonsense. Think about it for a moment.

Think about the nature of the argument. If I'm trying to make a case that that X person, George Bush for instance, is President of the United States, my argument might go something like this. The President of the United States is surrounded by men in black suits with wires hanging out of their ears.

The President of the United States drives around in an armored limousine with flags on the fenders. And when the President of the United States shows up, bands play Hail to the Chief. George Bush is surrounded by men in black suits with wires hanging out of their ears.

George Bush drives around in an armored limousine with flags on the fenders. George Bush, when he shows up in a place, ends up having to hear Hail to the Chief far more often than I'm sure he would like. Conclusion, George Bush is the President.

But does that mean that the specific things attributed to George Bush are not in fact true? Does that mean that the specific points that we have used to create the case that George Bush is the President fall to the ground? Well, we say George Bush hears Hail to the Chief when he arrives. We don't really mean that that does happen. That's just a way of saying he's President.

Well, if you're going to make the case that those things show he's President, those things have to be true. Or the whole case falls to the ground. Dunn's attempt to avoid the high Christology of this passage with the assumption of Jesus' preexistence, his incarnation, simply won't work.

And this is an abuse, not a use of the background material. All right, with some of that in view, let's get back to the text. Image of the Invisible God.

Well, I don't need to say much about this because Tom Wells has already taken through this so well. Nice conjunction. Of themes this morning.

God in himself is invisible. Of course, teachings you have throughout Scripture. In Christ, we see his image.

His exact image. Not that in some ontological or physical sense, of course, but that when we see Jesus, we see who God is in his fullness. Such an important point that Paul needed to make to the Colossians.

One of the things this hymn is saying, made clear down here, where Paul kind of repeats the idea, all the fullness dwells in Christ. He's going to make the point again in 2.8.9, a key hinge passage which we'll look at, I hope, tomorrow. Maybe this evening, we'll see how our time goes.

His point to the Colossians is to say to them, don't go running around, dabbling in these other religions and philosophies, mystery religions, the folk religions, and so forth, to try to find spiritual completion. To try to find a bit more of God. All that you can possibly know about God is found in Christ.

Once you see him, the image of the invisible God, you've got the whole package. This is the point he's making to the Colossians, and a point that this hymn needs to make very badly in our era of pluralism, of quite extraordinary moves on the part of evangelicals to, in a sense, dabble in other religions. To see what more we can learn about God by pursuing this track or that track or something of the sort.

My wife and I have photography as our passion, and we are the sorts of photographers that want sharp photographs. If we'd lived in the Ansel Adams era, we would have belonged to what they called the F64 school back in those days. The lens of a view of a camera that was the smallest possible aperture, tiny, tiny opening, that gives you incredible depth of field from front to back.

So everything is detailed in your photograph. That's why my wife and I strive for that. That's why we keep having to buy more megapixels in our cameras and new lenses, because when we print in our home computer darkroom, we're able to print up to 24 by 17 inches is our enlargement size.

I want to be able to see every blade of grass. I want to see the detail. I want to be able to look at that and really see all the detail as well as the general picture.

That's the idea of the image of invisible God that we have here. In Christ, we have not just sort of a vague representation, a kind of blurry, impressionistic view of God. We have God in all of his detail made known to us.

Don't go looking anywhere else for him. Again, I'll just cite Tom here for that. Firstborn overall creation we've talked about a bit, supremacy.

The emphasis on creation now. Note again a bit of a kind of a chiasm or inclusio with the all things. In him all things were created.

All things have been created through him and for him. Wonderful assertion. Christ was the one through whom all things were created.

He is the one in whom, going down to 17, all things hold together. And he is the one toward whom all things are tending. Beginning, end, and everything in between.

Again, it's an attempt to assert the absolute supremacy of Christ in the universe. In a cosmological sense, he was the one who initiated creation. He is the one to whom all creation is moving.

He is its goal. And in the meantime, when I turn a switch and my electrical device works, the reason it works is because of Christ. All things are being held up, supported, continued in their course by Christ as this universe with God's sovereign intention runs its way.

Things in heaven and on earth. Note how this was brought in here. Some people even think this might have been a Pauline addition to the original hymn.

Sometimes we'll quote a hymn or a poem and we'll sort of take some liberties with it to make sort of an application, you know. We'll quote it, but then we'll add some language to sort of apply to our context. Some people think Paul's doing that.

I'm not so sure about that. What is clear, of course, is that there is emphasis here on the supremacy of Christ over the spiritual powers. Things in heaven and earth.

Visible, invisible. Thrones, powers, rulers, authorities. These are different words used in the first century context for the spiritual beings that all people in the first century world had a pretty robust belief in.

Not only that they existed, but that they had significant influence in the affairs of human beings in the course of world history. This was standard belief at that time. And the emphasis Paul gives this here and elsewhere in Colossians certainly suggests that one element of the Colossian false teaching was a tendency to give too much credit to these figures.

Again, perhaps to suggest, well, you know, Christ is good in his way. Yeah, go to church and worship him. But, you know, just to cover all your bases, you better keep up with the mystery religions too to make sure that some of these other spiritual beings don't get mad at you.

You know, make sure you cover everybody. Remember Paul in Athens in Acts 17 walking around and seeing all the different inscriptions to all the different gods, you know, just to make sure you've got your bases covered. So maybe the Colossian Christians were falling into that tendency.

And so Paul asserts the supremacy of Christ with relationship to the power. Something we're going to want to talk about in terms of its ultimate theological significance. Clearly, the reference here in verse 20 is to spiritual beings, both good and evil angels in this context, I think here.

A whole spectrum of spiritual authorities and powers. But an interesting question is to ask whether in using this language, Paul and other New Testament scholars have taken baggage from their culture in terms of these powers lying behind many of the institutions of our world. Certainly this was the belief of the first century.

Not just that these were sort of individual, personal beings up there, but that people encountered their influence in the institutions, in the culture that they were dealing with every day. A number of modern interpreters have therefore taken this background and suggested that in the New Testament when we read language about powers and authorities, these are references not only to personal spiritual beings, but also references to human institutions that in a sense reflect the authority and work of these spiritual beings. Now, this has been taken in all kinds of directions.

This is a very popular interpretation, for instance, among liberation theologians who claim that on the basis of this language you have oppressive institutions of various kinds that Christians must respond to and must seek to be liberated from. And that a key ingredient, perhaps the key ingredient of the gospel is to bring liberation to people from these powers that enslave them. Whether it be a tyrannical government, an unjust economic system or whatever.

And again, this is where great caution is needed because this kind of interpretation of course can open the door to almost any sort of subjective application you want. But I think there might be something to it, granted the first century view of the powers. And maybe a good illustration from our history would be the institution of slavery.

Was this perhaps to some degree an institution, an economic factor that the powers have used to distort the image of God in human beings, to bring grief into human relationships, to bring evil in various ways into the world. And perhaps was it not then the not only option but the obligation of Christians to resist such an institution, recognizing it for what it was. I think there's something to that argument and leads us to ask the question as 21st century Christians, are there structures and institutions in our world that have become co-opted by the powers and that require our resistance? I think it's fair to say that particularly in North America, Evangelical Christians have often been pretty good at personal holiness.

But often we have not been very good at institutional holiness. We have sought to resist evil persons, but we have never even asked the question whether, as Christians, not just because of a political belief we happen to have, but as Christians, granted our world view and granted our understanding of how this world is working and the warfare that Russ was talking about last night, granted all of that, is it our obligation to resist institutions and structures that appear to have been co-opted by the powers in their rebellion against God? We'll come back to that. I think there again might be something to that.

Our intermediate stanza again asserts obviously the importance of Christ in creation, but then in 18a we have a significant move. Here is where Paul now kind of develops what's going to come after this, Christ's supremacy in the new creation. He is the head of the body, the church.

Christ's body, this great Pauline concept of the church as Christ's body, of which he is the head. He is the beginning, talking about God's new creation work now, the firstborn from among the dead, again reflecting that common New Testament teaching that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead. The first to experience resurrection in its theological sense.

What about Lazarus, you ask? He was not resurrected. He was revived. Lazarus was brought back to life only to die again.

Biblical resurrection is always resurrection to eternal life, an entrance into a new state of being that will never be reversed. Christ is the first to have experienced that resurrection, and of course as the New Testament teaches us, those who belong to him and ultimately all human beings will experience such a resurrection when Christ comes back in glory. He has the supremacy therefore in everything.

Note again how often we have that language of all and every. Eight times in our passage I've highlighted them, all, every, all things. It's just like a drumbeat that runs through this passage that we shouldn't miss as we go.

Now I think it is quite fair to say that as we move toward the end of 18 and into 19 and 20, we find less clearly hymnic structure, leading some to think that if Paul is quoting a hymn here, that at the end of it he's either elaborated the hymn a great deal or maybe dropped it all together to add some of his own ideas. I think there's fragments of the hymn still here as I will argue in a moment, but Paul is I think elaborating a bit more here himself. Why is it that Christ has this position of supremacy in the community of God, in the new creation? Because God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.

This concept of fullness might have, the concept of fullness plus dwelling, might have allusion to the temple. My colleague Greg Beale would certainly want me to say that. He's just written a book on the temple and tracing it through biblical theology, a great exercise in biblical theology by the way, a great model of biblical theology.

And poor Greg has had the temple on his head now for years. He's just full of this stuff. You can't talk to him without it.

This is a true story. He went out and created a garden in his backyard in the image of the temple. That's true.

Visit his house sometimes. We'll show it to you. The man is obsessed.

But he does have a very valid point about this great tradition in which God taking up his residence in his creation, of course, takes the form of a literal temple. But now, of course, in the new covenant era, God resides in Christ and derivatively in his people. Christ is the temple.

We are the temple. This is where the whole thing goes. And allusion to that might be present in the language of fullness and dwelling.

If you look at the way some of that language is used in the Old Testament. Now, we come in verse 20 perhaps to the most controversial element in this hymn. The universality of the hymn is obvious, isn't it? And that universality appears to spill over in the last verse into theologically questionable territory.

In Christ, God is reconciling all things to himself. Now, everywhere else where the word reconcile and reconciliation appears in the New Testament, it refers to a saving relationship with God the Father. This text, therefore, from ancient times, I think Origen perhaps was one of the first to argue the point, but it's been argued many times since, has become immensely popular of late for obvious reasons.

This verse is cited to prove salvific universalism, that ultimately all things, all human beings, all fallen angels will be reconciled to God in the sense that all will come into a loving, positive, saving relationship with him ultimately. That God, it's argued, cannot allow any part of his creation to be apart, in a sense, from his true saved family of people. And again, this is a very congenial teaching to our pluralistic and tolerant age.

The verse has been used in all kinds of ways. This is not the place to develop a case against universalism from Scripture. There are troubling verses that we have to deal with.

Romans 5, Romans 11-32, this text, several others, which do appear at first sight perhaps to talk about salvific universalism. We recognize, I think most of us who want to take Scripture seriously, however, that these verses must be put in the broader context of teaching about the reality of judgment, the reality of hell as a place where some people will live for eternity, which appears, and I think clearly is, irreconcilable with

salvific universalism. In our own passage of Colossians, if you just flip over a chapter, Paul says some other things about these powers that are mentioned here again in verse 20.

And what he says about them there seems to be incompatible also with salvific universalism. Because in chapter 2, verses 14 and 15, verse 15 in particular, we read that Christ has disarmed the powers and authorities. He's made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

This is an image of victory, perhaps even violent victory, if I may pick up the violence language that we've heard last night. That appears to be inconsistent with the ultimate salvation of these powers. So it has been, I think, quite appropriate to suggest that Paul must mean something else here.

And particularly if he's quoting from a hymn, he may be using some of the language here in a bit of an unPauline way. Sometimes that happens when you quote another source. That source might use a particular word in a way that's a bit different, of course related to the way you use the word.

I don't think we can restrict all things unless we want to do that throughout the passage. We don't want to do that, I don't think. We don't want to say, well, yeah, Christ is the one through whom all Christians were created or something.

No, I think all things have to be all things. And it's not all persons even here. It's all things.

It's a neuter expression. It's everything. I'll come back to that in a moment.

But I think a more profitable angle is to look at this word reconcile. And note, as many scholars have seen, that this word can mean not simply bring into positive, loving relationship with, but can mean what F.F. Bruce calls pacify. And I think that is suggested in our text also by making peace, which I am quite convinced is an allusion to the great Old Testament theme that God, when he establishes his righteousness in the last day, is going to establish shalom for the entire universe.

He's going to establish peace, which does not mean saving relationship for everything to him. It means that God is going to reassert his sovereignty. All things will be brought under his control again.

It means that the universe will be put back to the state God intended it to be in, that there will be a shalom that will rule this universe. That's what Paul is talking about here, I think. And the implications are significant.

I might just end here. I'm going to take a few extra minutes, though, because I got on a few minutes late. So justice is being served here.

And I guess it's my discussion time anyway that I'm eating into, isn't it? So if I were holding you up for lunch, I wouldn't do that, of course. But I know better than to do that. But this idea that in Christ, God has acted to bring the universe back into the state he intends it to be in.

This happened in principle, of course, at the cross. The blood of the cross is what Paul refers to here. But it, of course, is going to be enacted gradually and especially climactically at the end of history.

It is a sweeping claim about what God is doing that should expand our horizons a bit. Now, do not misunderstand me. The need to bring the message of the gospel to human beings such that by God's grace they respond and enter into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ is clearly the primary task of God's people in this age.

So hear that, please. But what I would like to suggest is that sometimes in our evangelical movement, we have been too restrictive in understanding the job God has given us. Yes, we need to save the souls of human beings.

But along with that, I would suggest in line with what God himself has in principle done in Christ and proposes to do finally, we also are to be agents of change in the universe at large. We are to not only end the estrangement between human beings and God, we are to do what we can to end the estrangement of human beings from one another. To end the estrangement of human beings from spiritual forces of darkness.

To end the estrangement of human beings from the environment they live in. All of this it seems to me is contained in the mandate in this text to be agents of reconciliation in line with God's purpose of reconciliation. It means that we have here a mandate not only for evangelism, and again, primarily that needs to be our task, which we dare never lose sight of, but it's also a mandate to be agents of change in the social world.

To bring social justice to bear in our world, recognizing our best efforts will always fall short. The scripture is clear, I think, that only God, through a new act in Jesus Christ, is going to establish final peace. But that is not to say we should not seek, as I think we must, to accomplish what we can toward that goal in social action.

I would suggest the same thing, maybe more controversially to some, in terms of our obligations to the environment we live in. The world God has created is a world that he is planning on renewing. He cares for the earth, the material things around us, the air, the water, the trees.

And we have an obligation as Christians to be stewards of that which God has given us and that which he plans one day to restore to its pristine glory. I like to sometimes shake people up by asking them to find a verse in the New Testament that tells them that they are going to spend eternity in heaven. As many of you know, there is no such verse.

Heaven is the abode of God in the New Testament, but never the destiny of human beings. The destiny of human beings is to live in renewed, resurrected, material bodies on a material, renewed heaven and earth. As I was telling Fred and Jim yesterday, I've already staked out my territory in the front range of the Rocky Mountains.

I'm going to spend eternity. I've put my order in already. So obviously we're in danger here of loading too much into a single verse.

Of taking a single verse and trying to make it say far more than it does say. And I'm aware that that is a danger. But I would suggest that this verse, when read in light of other New Testament verses and in light of many Old Testament passages about shalom and peace and so forth, that what we're talking about in terms of God's purposes to bring all things back to where he wants them to be, is indeed his purpose that he will accomplish through Christ and his return, but is a purpose, therefore, that we should not simply say, oh, God's going to do it in his day, we don't need to bother any more than we say we don't need to evangelize because God has chosen those who will be his and they're elect and so God's going to bring it to pass.

No, we don't say that. We understand that to be misunderstanding of the dynamic of sovereignty and human responsibility. We understand that what God himself is intending and will do, as he has promised us, are things that we are to accomplish ourselves and be involved in, in his great plan for history.

God doesn't need us, but he's chosen to use us by his grace. And we need to be used, again, not only as agents of evangelism, but as agents of social change, as agents of appropriate environmental stewardship, as agents proclaiming and bringing liberation to human beings from these evil spiritual forces and institutions and organizations that Paul might be hinting at here as well.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/13/SID13054.mp3>

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