

Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15-28

“All in All”

Psalm 52
July 21, 2013

Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

Here we find this tiny sect in a forlorn corner of the Roman Empire – They center themselves on devotion to a Jew - a convicted criminal who, after a trial before his peers, was tortured to death by the authorities. So now this little fringe group of extremists is holding on by their fingernails. They had managed to establish a few pitiful congregations here and there in the hinterlands of Asia Minor – places like Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, Corinth and now, here in Colossae.

Though their leader, Jesus, had once called them the “light of the world,” their light seemed fragile and dim at best, hence they were no real competition when compared with the brilliance of the Roman Empire. Yet they were convinced that an event had occurred no less cosmic and world-shattering than the end, and the beginning of all things. They felt commanded to proclaim this ... this salvation to the ends of the earth and to enlist disciples from all nations, both Israel and Rome without distinction. They were to enlist everyone ... all in all.

Previously there had been careful, religious distinctions between Jew and Gentile, male and female. But now they claimed that all such distinctions and dividing walls had been destroyed in the inclusive embrace of Christ. Though they appear to have had ‘next to nothing’ in the way of property and security, one of their leaders, Paul told that ragtag crowd of Christ followers at Corinth: “the world of life or death or present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.” There was a kind of reckless extravagance in their behavior. They took everything they had and piled it all together to be used for the care of all. They bragged about having no personal property or possessions, now having “all things in common”- all IN all, and all FOR all.

The basis for these effusive claims about God’s salvation was that something had happened to them. Perhaps nobody was more extravagant in explaining it than this self-proclaimed apostle named Paul, who in his sweeping claims as to what actually occurred, calls it an act of salvation.

No longer jerked around by the elements and forces of the universe, the otherwise intimidating powers and principalities, these new believers stood up and spoke up – now freed from sin and the fear of death. They spoke NOT about an opinion they shared, a new theory they had devised: They spoke of a series of

events and said they often said they were being saved. They thought something had happened to them and that “something” was happening even now.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul would say. And then perhaps quoting an early creed of the church, he would add, “[Christ] is the first-born of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible...” Then even in the face of the mighty Roman Empire, Paul would declare, “... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – ALL things have been created through him and for him” (Col. 1:15-16). Paul preached these words even in the face of arrest, jail and imprisonment. He was claiming a gift already received, rather than only a future expectation.

We get this same sort of expansive vision of salvation in the Book of Revelation. Here John writes about his vision of the curtain of eternity being pulled back and we are given a glimpse of creation completed.

In Revelation 5:11-13 we read: “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’”

One might think that the Book of Revelation – also addressed to a persecuted and struggling church- would stress the fortunate few – that faithful remnant who were rescued and safe before the Lamb’s throne. While the Book of Revelation is not above limiting such judgments, most of Revelation’s focus is upon the “myriads and myriads - thousands of thousands.”

Note that a huge crowd is gathered before the throne – a massive, constantly processing choir made up not only by myriads of people, but even “of EVERY CREATURE in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea,” as the text clearly says. What? So salvation is not only for humans, but is even for... the whales? Could salvation be that inclusive?

One of the more bizarre aspects of noted physicist Richard Dawkins book, *The God Delusion*, is his claim that religions like Christianity foster exclusion and an “insider/outsider mentality.” Professor Dawkins appears not to have read the New Testament very carefully. After all, Jesus was constantly criticized as one who “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2).

As search of that little word “all” in the New Testament reveals that inclusion was part of the very nature of Jesus. When Jesus miraculously provides bread in the wilderness, not just his followers, but “ALL of them ate and were filled” (Mt. 15:37). In the parable of the Great Banquet, after a failed attempt to invite close friends and business associates, the Lord of the Banquet, “gathered ALL whom they found, both good and bad” (Mt. 22:10).

Furthermore, Jesus predicts that “ALL who exult themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exulted” (Mt. 23:12). His message is “a testimony to ALL the nations.” And in the climactic scene in the temple, Jesus declares that the temple is not just for Israel, but is a “house of prayer for all nations.” (Mk 11:17). He promises that when he is lifted upon the cross, “I ... will draw ALL people to myself.” (Jn 12:32) He is the true light, which enlightens EVERYONE” (Jn. 1:9). He calls to himself, “ALL you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (Mt. 11:28). And the psalmist even exclaims that God saves not only people but even all animals (Ps 36:6) - It’s about all in all!

The theme of the conference I attended at Montreat a few weeks ago was “Heaven and Earth.” The Bible study was led by Dr. Stan Saunders, professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. It was Dr. Saunder’s contention that there is a thread running from the Old Testament into the New Testament that celebrates the unity of heaven and earth together, hence we are told repeatedly that God created the heavens and the earth – the entire cosmos and everything that is in it. Heaven and earth are both dimensions of God’s creation, hence both are related to God’s final judgment. But heaven and earth have been separated because of the fall and human sin. God’s intention then is to save the whole of creation, everything in heaven and on earth.

Dr. Saunders then proposed four questions before the class: Does God intend to redeem just humans, or the whole creation? Does human salvation entail only escape from this earth? Does God intend to eventually destroy the earth? And if so, why should we care or worry about ecology and the care of God’s creation? And that raises the question, “What role do humans play in God’s created order?”

Professor Saunders then pointed out that while we modern folks think of time in linear, chronological terms – time as having a beginning and an end; the Hebrew writers and the early New Testament writers viewed time as cyclical: season upon season, year upon year. That means the writer of the Book of Revelation’s vision was cyclical in nature – namely that God’s was preparing to bring creation back around its good origin - the end will be just like the beginning. The new heaven and new earth were to be a return to God’s original good creation – a creation

that was not broken. What God destroys in the Book of Revelation is the evil that has broken God's good creation.

When we view the Book of Revelation through those ancient eyes, it brings a whole new perspective to the texts. The Book of Revelation becomes not so much about our personal salvation, but rather about the salvation of the whole cosmos. Furthermore, we human beings become responsible partners in establishing that new heaven and new earth just like the original creation, as heaven and earth again come together, where God intends to redeem and save all. God intends to save the whales! - It has to do with "all in all."

Here's the vision: Behold - a fallen, silenced creation has been healed. Our post-Genesis, chapters one and two situation has been redeemed and fixed. As the Book of Revelation describes it, even the creatures are singing. One day, there before the throne, we shall take our places among the myriads of myriads, with the humpback whales and bullfinches, the wolves and the lemurs; with lions and the sheep. We shall stand with the myriads – those whom we have loved (and presumably, with the myriads with whom we have disagreed and even fought) and ALL will sing with one voice, "Blessing and honor and glory and might to the Lamb!" ALL creation will no longer groan in travail, but will sing in praise! "All in all!"

ALL? The whole cosmos? The whole universe? Well, no one is more convincing than Paul in proclaiming that God's present desire is restoration of ALL things in and through Christ: "In him we have the redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us... a plan for the fulfillment of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and on earth" (Eph. 1:7-10).

Paul has poetically sailed right past the merely personal "Jesus died for my sins" or "I know that I have been saved and will be in heaven." God's desire, in and through Jesus Christ, is akin to God's cosmic desire from the very beginning as recorded in the first and second chapters of Genesis. God is still very busy bringing worlds into being that were not; realms that have not yet existed, such as the Kingdom of God. The restless Creator became the relentless Redeemer. The Redeemer is the same fabrication of the chaos whom we met as Creator. The work of the cosmic Christ is cosmic salvation.

It's a strangely bold and optimistic text that Paul writes to the Church at Colossae. We can easily picture the fledgling little band of believers huddled there out on the fringe of the Roman Empire. Life could not have been easy for them, nor could they have felt very secure. But then comes Paul with this bodacious

claim to give them hope: Jesus is victor. The scope of his realm is far and wide, encompassing all within his reach.

So the significance of Christ and his work is more than merely personal. It has so much more than simply my individual significance – it is large, cosmic and grand. In him, ALL things are being and shall be restored to God's original intention. ALL who are separated from God and from one another shall be united in him.

On a late September Sunday in 1957, the great theologian Karl Barth preached to the prisoners in the jail at Basel. The title for his sermon was simply, "ALL!" His text was only one verse from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 11, verse 32, which reads: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

Barth told the prisoners that there was a lofty mountain "which we cannot climb, in our thoughts or in a sermon." It is a mountain "from which we can only climb DOWN." But then he said "But remember - God has mercy on us." God says 'yes' to us, and wills to be on our side – to be our God against all the odds.

For now the church's task is to proclaim in word and deed, the grand fact of our salvation. But it is a fact that is considerably more bold and inclusive than simply, "Jesus Christ died for me and my sin." It is a sweeping claim that eventually God shall complete the work that God began in Creation. God isn't done with the world yet – not by a long shot. All things shall be drawn to God, redeemed by God and united in God. It will be "all in all!"
Amen.