

Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith

“Who is Jesus?”

Cedars Sermon Series

Colossians 1:9-20

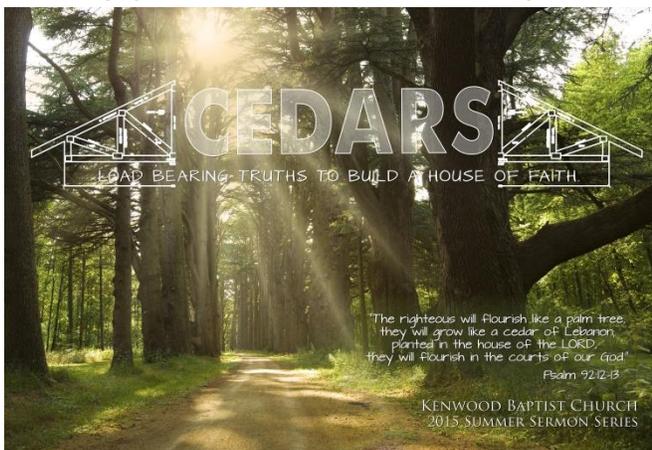
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

July 5, 2015

TEXT: Colossians 1:9-20

It is a joy for us to be back home with you after being in Greece for the past three Sundays. Our



hearts are with the people of Greece as they cast a vote today that few people understand and even fewer understand the significance of. We are reminded that the world is inclined to seek earthly comfort, but the reality of original sin shows us the only true hope for the world is Jesus Christ. So, it is fitting for us, as we continue our summer series this morning on *Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths of our Faith*, that we move to the

question: Who is Jesus Christ? This question comes after a progression of topics of Christian theology. The first question, What is the Bible?, has the implied question: “Where do I go to find the truth?” We go to the Word of God to find the truth. It’s in the Bible alone that we find out who God is, what He’s like, His character, His attributes. If God does not reveal Himself to us, then we don’t know Him. We cannot discern His nature and character from the stars. We get a sense of His power, but we don’t know of His steadfast love and His self-giving, sacrificial redemption in Christ. We ask then: “Who is God; what is humanity; who are we?” We are uniquely made in God’s image, uniquely made to know Him and reflect His character in the world. We have been given the capacity to respond to God in praise, and that is the essence of what it means to be in the image and likeness of God. When our image of God is reflecting Him well, we know Him and we live like we know Him, and we will see Paul praying for that in just a moment.

Though we were made in God’s image, the Bible teaches us that we are fallen; that we are marred by sin; that our image has been warped and does not reflect the image of God accurately; and that our lives are often lived as in a hall of mirrors. Some mirrors in the circus make our image large and wide, even as in our lives sin distorts and warps the image of God,

makes us not reflect His character. It makes us seek our own will and not His. Yet, the Bible then moves from our sinfulness to God's solution. The solution to our sinfulness comes in the Person of a Redeemer. God's solution is not an impersonal one; it is not a circular mailer; it is not a message sent from a distance. God's solution is His beloved Son. Can anyone help us? Jesus Christ can help us, and Jesus Christ is the focus of our passage this morning. Of all the passages in Scripture to answer the question "Who is Jesus Christ?", Colossians 1 is one of the high points of the New Testament. It is a glorious picture and statement, a poetic description of our Lord and of our Savior. Next Sunday, we will look more specifically at the work of Christ and His atonement on the cross, but this morning, we consider His person, His glorious person. He is unlike any other.

Let us first look at Paul's prayer for all of us in Colossians 1. Pastors pray for the people entrusted to their care, and this prayer is a prayer that a pastor, myself included, loves to pray for his congregation. It is a beautiful prayer, and Paul speaks to these people that he has not even met. He did not plant the church of Colossae. It was started by one of the men that Paul shared the Gospel with, Epaphras, and Epaphras took the Gospel, like everyone who receives the Gospel, and there is a spontaneous sharing of the Gospel. Epaphras first goes and communicates the gospel in this new city. The Gospel spreads, and Paul and Timothy hear about that. When they hear that these people have received the Good News of Christ, they do what good ministers and missionaries do. They pray, knowing that the real power of ministry is in prayer. Look at this beautiful prayer. Paul says in Colossians 1:9:

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you."

The work of ministry is never over. I love asking my physician friends: "Is the hospital ever closed? Do you ever wake up one morning to say, 'All of humanity is in good health and we are closed today?'" That never happens; ministry never ends. Paul goes on to say in Colossians 1:9:

"We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will."

Once you receive the Gospel, the goal of the Gospel received is a life transformed, the image of God renewed and restored. So Paul says he prays continually that "God would fill you with an understanding of His will; that you would know His will." We know His will through Scripture and through God's active filling of us with wisdom and understanding that come from the Holy Spirit. The life of discipleship is dependent on knowing what God requires of us and being empowered to live that way by the Spirit. After saying, "I pray that you would know His will," Paul says in Colossians 1:10:

". . .so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way."

There is no dichotomy in the Bible between head knowledge and heart knowledge. That is an

artificial dichotomy. You can't live out a life worthy of the Lord if you don't know His will. Husbands have a very difficult time pleasing their wives if their wives never tell them what is pleasing to them. They must be told clearly. So, Paul says: "I pray that you are filled up with the knowledge of His will to live a life worthy of the Lord." The idiom that he uses is the Hebrew idiom *to walk*. The NIV obscures this because we don't typically talk about our lives as *walks*, but that is the way the Bible describes it. It is an active walking in obedience. Thirty times in Paul's letters, he describes a Christian life as walking. I am relieved that it is not running. It is walking. It is an andante case; it is a steady walk with Christ, faithful step after step. This is what we read of Enoch, that he walked with God, not in front of Him, not behind, but a walking with Him. It is an image of relationship, to walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord.

We took an epic hike on our trip to Greece. We hiked through the longest gorge in Europe, the Samariá Gorge. We received information that, even for the most extreme, the hike would take four to five hours, that it wasn't too bad. We were in pretty good shape, and I'm thinking, it's Greece, how hard can this be? It was immense and epic. It started in a forest and ended in a riverbed in blistering heat. It was a beautiful portion of God's creation, and yet we had to walk carefully every step. Even the guide gave us one piece of advice. She said, "When you're walking through the gorge, if you to stop and take a picture, stop walking, because if you take a picture and keep walking, you might walk right off the path and perish, or you might lose your footing." We walked carefully for seven and a half hours and it was beautiful. The imagery here is walking worthy, pleasing God in every way.

Paul gives four phrases in Colossians 1:10-12 that describe walking worthily, pleasing God in every way, phrases that echo deep themes of Scripture. In his first phrase, he says that we would **bear fruit in every way**, bursting forth with fruit in every good work. This recalls the imagery of Genesis to be fruitful. He says in his second phrase, that we would **grow in the knowledge of God**. As we walk worthily, we grow in knowing God and bearing fruit and reflecting Him. This is the call in Genesis 1, to be made in the image and likeness of God and to reflect Him in the world, to walk worthy and bear fruit, increasing in the knowledge of God. His third phrase is that we **be strengthened with all power**. Life is hard; this world is marred by sin and greed, and we need God's strength and power to have patience and endurance, to let the transformation have its effect. The Gospel comes into us and we begin to be renewed in the image and knowledge of God. Yet, our old sinfulness sometimes has deep roots and has to be broken off or uprooted from within us. We need patience for this deep work of God, and Paul prays that we would be strong. We need God's strength to be patient for His work to take effect. His fourth qualifying phrase is that we would **be giving thanks to God joyfully**. This thanksgiving, this life of gratitude, is because of the work of God in our lives. Our lives have a fragrance of thanksgiving and gratitude, and he expounds on this now. We are grateful to God

because He has qualified us, Paul says, to share in the inheritance of His people in the Kingdom of light. The gratitude that marks the renewed humanity in Christ is a life of thanksgiving and gratitude for the specific work of Christ. This thanksgiving is not just abstract and general, but it is very specific. It is a specific thanksgiving to God for what He has done. He has qualified us, the unqualified. We will see more about this next Sunday. He has not only qualified us, but, Colossians 1:13 tells us:

“He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.”

Paul's anchor of thanksgiving for us in Christ is that we are thankful because of what He has done. God has rescued us in Jesus Christ, and when the Gospel comes into our lives, it renews us into the image of our Creator and Redeemer. We are brought in and given a portion and a share in Christ's own Kingdom. He says in Colossians 1:14 that in Christ . . .

“we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

This is the language of the Exodus: to be redeemed; to be forgiven; to be brought inside God's Kingdom, His holy dwelling; to be part of His family. We saw last week the sinful plight of our humanity, but God did not leave us in our state of sin. Instead, He sent a Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and it is in Christ we have this redemption. We have forgiveness of sins; we have a great transfer of identity; and a renewed humanity begins. Jesus Christ's work is unique, and His Person is unique. Paul affirms Christ's work, and now, affirming His work, he speaks of this Person in a glorious, glorious way.

Beginning in Colossians 1:15, Paul bursts into poetry. Many scholars think of Colossians 1:15-20 as an early Christian hymn. It is an elevated style; it is rhythmic in tone; and, having mentioned the work of the Son, now speaks of His person and His unique glory. The Person of Jesus Christ is utterly unique, without equal, the supreme Preeminence, rising above, giving orientation and meaning to our lives. When you're flying and the flight begins, you are accustomed to hearing the pilot come on the air, telling you some statistics about your flight, information about the journey, and the weather upon your arrival. When the speaker comes on midway through the flight, it is usually that you are coming into some turbulence and everybody should sit down. It is not usually a word of encouragement, saying we are halfway there or something like that. In those few seconds when the microphone comes on, you wonder what's happening. I had that feeling as we were flying back from Greece and were flying over Europe. The microphone came on and I thought, “Oh, what's happening?” But the pilot came on and said, “Everyone look out the left side of the plane.” Of course that applied only to those seated on the left side of the plane. I was thankful because I had a left-side window, the last seat of the plane. I looked out, and there were the Swiss Alps. It was crystal clear, and I just thought: “Wow, how impressive are Your works, oh Lord!” How impressive were the cities and valleys in the Alps, and the pilot

wanted to make sure we saw it all. It was inspiring. Then he came on a couple of seconds later, and he said, "Look far in the distance and you can see Mont Blanc, the White Mountain." I looked. I had never seen it like that from the air. As impressive as the Alps are, to see one peak rising crystal clear, far above even those Alps, was so moving. I thought of Psalm 57:5:

"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let Your glory be over all the earth."

As huge as Mont Blanc was compared to the rest of the Alps, so is the Person of Christ in Colossians 1:15-20. The Person of Christ rises before our imagination in this poetic set of verses. When Paul mentions the work of Christ, he elaborates on His person. Notice the uniqueness and the answer to the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" from this text:

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross."

Christ is first and foremost. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the One that you can see and know who God is. Jesus, in His real humanity, is both fully man and fully God. Jesus said to His disciples: "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." The Greek word here is *icon*. He is the icon, the living Son, the radiance and reflection of the invisible God. This is Jesus Christ.

Not only is Jesus Christ the reflection of God, the perfect One to reveal His nature and character, Paul says He is firstborn over all creation. *Firstborn* is the language of rank and status, and Jesus is said to be the first, the One who occupies the place of priority and preeminence. He immediately tells us why. He has first rank in Colossians 1:16 because in Christ, or by Christ, all things were created. This is a staggering statement, that all things that you see and all things that you don't see, things in heaven, things on earth, have been created by Christ. That means that Jesus is not part of this created world. This is the fundamental mistake of ancient Arianism; it is the fundamental mistake of the Jehovah's Witnesses today, to think that Jesus is part of this creation. He is not. He is the one by Whom all things were created. He Himself is uncreated; He is eternal; and everything that is made is made by His agency. Also, He is the beloved Son; He is the Redeemer; He is the image of the invisible God; the firstborn; the One occupying the place of preeminence. He is the Agent of creating all things. Not only is He creation's agent, but He is creation's purpose. In Him everything is made, and all things have been created through Him. Notice that little phrase at the end of this verse: not only are they made through Him, but they are made for Him. Everything in this world is

created through His agency and finds its purpose in serving Him. If you are not serving Christ, then you are not serving the purpose for which you have been made. The trees of the field exist to serve Jesus Christ; they are for His glory. Metaphorically, in the Bible the trees clap their hands when He returns. Human beings are made by Him, and they are made for Him, for His use, for His delight, for His joy. All things, not only what we see, but what we don't see, even thrones, powers, rulers, or authorities, heavenly powers, earthly powers, governmental structures, everything that exists is created by Christ and for Him, and anything in this world that operates without reference to Him is drifting into chaotic darkness.

Paul goes on. He has only just begun. He says that Christ is before all things; He exists before everything. It could mean that He is before all things in rank. I remember when I first became senior pastor of this beloved church, and Pastor Alex, our pastor emeritus, this beloved man of God of this congregation, and I had finished doing a funeral, and we were deciding to come to the front of the church to walk out in front of the casket. I told Pastor Alex, "Please, you are my elder, you are the emeritus, stand on my right." He said, "No, you are the senior pastor, so you stand on the right." He said, "Look, you are the senior pastor; no one stands on the right of the senior pastor. You stand on the right!" "Okay, I'll stand on the right." It was a short, mini pastoral contest of rank, of no great eternal significance. But Christ is in the first rank. He is the agent of creation; He is the One for Whom all things exist; and He is in front of everything. Not only is He in front of everything, but in Him everything holds together. If Jesus Christ lets go of you, you will fall apart. Jesus says don't worry. It is a command, a command that comes out of the reality that He holds us together. If He stops holding us together, we would utterly dissolve.

Paul says that Christ not only holds all things together, He is the Head of the body, the church. Jesus is in charge of the church, His church, the body of Christ in the world. I don't like it when people call Kenwood my church. I really don't like that because it is not. It doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Christ. It doesn't belong to any of us. It belongs to Christ, and we belong to Christ, and His church has a local expression here. It also has a global expression, and Christ is in charge of it, the Head of the body, the church.

On our trip, we saw a different piece of the body of Christ, and yet He remained completely in charge both in Cincinnati or in Athens. We visited ethnic churches and served people being called into ministry. We visited Greek evangelical churches. We saw churches being planted in different parts of the city. In one of the roughest areas of the downtown of Athens, an area called *Exarcheia*, is the home of the anarchist area of the city. Governmental officials who go into this part of the city are asked to leave. The police don't go in. It is a very unusual place, and many people are afraid to go there. We went there with a pastor, and as we walked, he asked us, "How would you start church here?" Do you know what God did? God took a rundown

building and He moved the heart of a man from Cyprus to renovate it. It is beautiful. There is lots of graffiti in this part of the city, and God called a man from London and gave him a vision to spearhead this work, and there it is in the middle of this city. As we came to the entrance of the church, there was a beautiful painting on the wall, and I said, "Tim where did that come from?" He said, "Well, in *Exarcheia*, there will be graffiti, and the choice you have to make is are you going do your own or is someone else going to do it for you? So we asked someone from a fine arts background to paint this painting." It is a gigantic painting that looks out to the city street. It is a painting called the *Son of Man* and is from a Dutch, modern painter. The painting is very artistic, and the man has an apple in front of him, obscuring his face. The response I had from the painting was that we are made in God's image; we have eaten the forbidden fruit; and now we don't know who we are. Everyone in this anarchist community knows that there is a church there and that you find the church by going to the *Son of Man* painting. We went to another church plant in an upper-class area of the city, totally different demographics, and yet God was working there. This church became aware of a piece of property, and they said, "How can we start a church here? It's beyond our budget." There was a Korean family who had been living in Athens for several years. They spoke very little Greek but were deep people of prayer. This Korean woman came to the Greek pastor and said in broken Greek, "This building is supposed to be a church." That was about all the Greek she could get out. The pastor inquired what the monthly rent would be to start a church in this property. When he knew what the amount would be, he gathered a core group of eight people, and he said, "I want you to write down on a piece of paper what you can commit to pay to start this church in this neighborhood." He said that if the group of eight comes up with anywhere close to the actual amount of the rent, then we will move forward. If not, we will have to look for something else. He moved the paper to his left, and this Korean couple took the paper and wrote down: "Count on us for 50% of whatever it costs." Now there is a new church. God is at work!

You know who runs all these things? Jesus Christ, every day! I preached at a Romanian church and at a Greek church, and then God said, "Let me give you a little taste of My sovereignty, just for your encouragement." We sat down in the middle the city of five million people and started to have lunch. As we finished our lunch, I looked five feet over, and Christine looked over and said, "There's Todd and Melissa Palmer!" In a city of five million people, Todd and Melissa Palmer sat down five feet away from us. For those who don't know, Melissa used to be on staff here; I went to seminary with Todd. They were in Greece for their 25th wedding anniversary. We just said, "Hey, guys!" Six hours later, in the same spot, we saw John and Roseann Scheller. The night before we had seen the Zannis family. So, we had all kinds of time with people from Kenwood by God's sovereignty. Jesus is trustworthy; He is running the universe; He is the Head of the body, the church. He is the Head of the new humanity; the beginning; the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have supremacy.

Paul closes this poem by asserting to us that in Christ the fullness of God dwells. Jesus is fully God and fully man. If He were not fully God, He could not bear the price of our redemption; if He were not fully man, we would not be renewed and transformed. Fully God, fully man, and as fully God, fully man, Jesus reconciles to Himself all things. We realize that the universe is estranged from Him and that He makes peace through His blood on the cross. Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message* paraphrases Colossians 1: in this way:

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him. . . . He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—He is supreme in the end. From beginning to end He's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is He, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in Him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of His death, His blood that poured down from the cross.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the Beloved Son; He is our Redeemer; He is the One who has absolute preeminence in all things; He is the one in Whom we find our meaning and purpose in serving and knowing; and it is He who makes peace for us through His death on the cross.

Amen.