Colossians 1:15-22
NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,

for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him.

He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.

Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything.

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.
Back in the day, before I went to seminary, I worked as a corporate trainer for a global tech company, the number two computer company in the world at the time. The class I taught most often was titled “Power and Influence.” It was four days long.

One day a supervisor called me. Would I be willing to teach the power class to a select few from the artificial intelligence group? This is decades ago, the early days in AI research. I knew three things about the people in the AI group. They were unconventional; they wore t-shirts to work. They were very smart. And they were teaching a computer to play chess. Since I don’t play chess, I knew that artificial intelligence had nothing to do with me and would never affect my life.

I asked the natural question. Do they want to take this class? Can you guess how many people who think night and day about artificial intelligence wanted to sit in a classroom for four days learning how to work effectively with human beings? None. Not one. There were zero volunteers. It was people in the work groups around them, who had to work with them, who were asking that they please get some training. As I look back, the irony is obvious. I was going to teach them about power, while they sat quietly in their seats thinking about inventing artificial intelligence, a power that would change all of our futures.

How does artificial intelligence affect us today? Every device we use, every financial transaction, our entertainment and communication—all of it has artificial intelligence buried in it. We will never know all of the ways and all of the places it is at work all around us. It is unfelt, unheard, unnoticed because it is unseen. But it is there, changing the world. Real power can rest, quiet and unseen.

We saw that last weekend, as we remembered the events of Holy Week. There stood Pilate with all of his power. Before him stands this silent man, Jesus. Who feels uneasy that day? Pilate does. He says to Jesus: “Do you not realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus replies, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” That’s in John chapter 19.

Jesus had made claims like this before. He had said, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” That’s in John 10.
Pilate does hold life and death in his grasp. His power is evident. But where is Jesus’ power? The power of the state stands before him, lies swirl around him, a mob is roused against him, yet he stands silent. The power of God fills the moment, quietly hidden for God’s own purposes, by God’s own design. Real power can wait. Pilate grows uneasy. He can’t see the power that Jesus possesses but he senses something.

From the cross, Jesus prays two prayers: “Father, forgive them..., Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.” These words are the will of God at work, but who can see the power in them? Who can understand? A Roman officer armed with the weapons of execution does his job, but he sees, he hears, and like Pilate he is uneasy. “Surely this was the son of God,” he says.

Then came Resurrection Sunday morning, the first Easter. Pilate can cause death but who can make the dead alive again? Only God.

On that great day the power of God becomes visible and we all stand to sing Hallelujah. Fifty days later, on Pentecost, the power of God breaks out and the Church is born. Hundreds and hundreds believe and are baptized. They share their food and their friendship and their faith. People are helped and healed. The power of God in this new band of Christians is heard, felt, seen and noticed. Acts 5:13 says this: “Everyone held them in high regard.”

But turn the page and there is a warning to keep silent about Jesus. Turn the page and there is an arrest. Turn the page and there is violence. A young man named Stephen, not a disciple, just a member of the church, becomes the target. He has been chosen to be a deacon because his faith is fervent; the Bible says he is full of God’s grace and power.

False witnesses are recruited, Stephen is accused of blasphemy, and he boldly defends his faith. A mob is roused, a crowd incited, they pick up stones, and Stephen is attacked.

In an uncanny echo, facing his death, Stephen prays the same prayers Jesus did. Jesus prayed, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” With his dying breath, Jesus cried, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Stephen prayed: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”
In this tragedy, where is the power of God? Watching it all is another young man named Saul. He saw the death; he heard the prayers. The Dutch painter Rembrandt so loved this story that it became the subject of his first painting, *The Stoning of Saint Stephen*, completed when he was 19 years old, in 1625.

At the center you see Stephen. All around him are angry faces. In the top corner you see the young Saul, seated, holding the coats of those who testified against Stephen. Acts 8:1 says that “Saul was there, giving approval to his death.” Interestingly, a closer look reveals that Rembrandt has given Saul the same face as young Stephen, perhaps portraying that Saul will soon take the place of Stephen and become a mighty worker for Jesus.

From Jesus came the Church. From the Church came Stephen. From Stephen came Saul and from Saul came the gospel around the world. We know him by his Roman name, Paul. Saint Augustine said, “The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.” It seemed Stephen had no power at all. He was at the mercy of dark forces bent on his defeat. And yet, in his witness, in his praying, the power of God was working.

I wonder how uneasy Saul was after that day. Pilate was uneasy in the presence of Jesus. The Roman centurion was uneasy at the crucifixion. Both could sense a power they could neither see nor comprehend. What did Saul think about what he’d heard and seen, about what he had done?

Saul becomes an ever more fierce persecutor of the Church, determined to extinguish it. But then Jesus shows up. At a chosen moment, Jesus confronts Saul. He is knocked flat by the power of God, suddenly right before him, suddenly unmistakable.

Think about the memory Paul has to live with. He now knows that it was all true, that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus’ death was unjust, that what the disciples preached on Pentecost Day was the truth. Everything Stephen said was true and now Paul knows it. Imagine living with that. He witnessed the brutality of the death of Stephen. He called for it. He gave his approval to it. He held the coats of the lying witnesses. What must it have been like to remember that? To know that he had been responsible for the death of an innocent person? How do you carry the
weight of the worst thing you’ve ever done? Carry a memory that can’t be forgotten? Carry a terrible mistake that you cannot undo or make right again?

Paul had been so proud of his heritage, his pedigree, his education, his intellect. But he would become a man who said, “I only want to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings.” He said to the people in Corinth, “I don’t come to you with polished strategies or techniques. I only come with the truth about Jesus and his power. That’s all.” Paul would write, “I am the worst of sinners.” And yet he experienced what the cross was for. Jesus didn’t die just to be right. He died to save. He earned for us a way out and a way forward. He became for us the door to heaven, the way to God. He opened for us the right to be the very children of God, the sons and daughters of God, with all of the position and standing that offers. He created freedom for us. Paul knew the power of God to forgive utterly, to take the worst thing a person can be guilty of and offer a new identity, a fresh new day. Paul prized the grace of God because he needed the grace of God. Paul preached grace with tenderness and with fierceness. When anyone suggested that the grace of God was not enough, Paul brought all the forces of his considerable intellect and strong personality to bear. He was a passionate explainer and defender of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ—and that’s grace.

So Paul, arrested and sitting in a prison cell, wrote a poem:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created
and is supreme over all creation,
16for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities
in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.
17He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.

Colossians 1:15-17
On another day, he would stop in the middle of a long letter and burst out in doxology:

Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?
For from him, and through him, and to him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

And on another day, in a letter to Timothy, he wrote, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God be honor and glory forever and ever.” That’s 1 Timothy 1:17.

Paul could forget his own resume and credentials. He had seen the power of God and he wanted us to see it. He wanted you to see it. He knew that the greatness of the power of God also contained the depth of the tender mercy of God to open the way for us to know forgiveness and peace and love and enjoyment of God forever. That mercy came at a great price and that’s the story of the cross. That’s why Paul is called the apostle of grace. That’s why he wrote:

... through him God reconciled everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.

21This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him.... 22Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

Colossians 1:20-22

Holy, blameless, without a single fault. That is the power of the grace Paul knew and loved and preached. He knew the freedom that God has
for us. This is the power of God at work. The quiet power. At the cross
that day, no one could know the plans and purposes of God. No one
could comprehend a love so deep, a wisdom so profound, a grace so
overwhelming, a purpose so intent, a power so mighty. Only the Sover-
eign Lord, Creator of all that is, seen and unseen, the Supreme Intelli-
gence, whose nature and character is love and perfect goodness—only
this sovereign Lord could do such a deed, accomplish such a victory.

Rembrandt loved the story of Stephen and so did someone else. In 1535
Sir Thomas More was the chancellor of England. Next to King Henry
VIII, he was at the top of the government in England. The king insisted
he give consent to breaking with the Church in order to annul his mar-
riage to Catherine of Aragon. Thomas More’s conscience would not let
him agree to this. The clash of powers was on. Charges were brought,
Thomas More stood accused, there was a trial and he was condemned
to death for treason. James Monti, in his history of the period:

The dreaded words having been uttered, More was given one final
opportunity to speak—a chance to plead for mercy customarily giv-
en to convicts after sentencing. But More did not ask for mercy; in-
stead he offered forgiveness:

“More have I not to say, my lords, but that like as the blessed
Apostle St. Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was pre-
sent, and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their
clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now both two
holy Saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends forever,
so I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that
though your lordships have now here in earth been judges to
my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all
meet together, to our everlasting salvation.”

Sir Thomas More, caught in a churning of powers of many kinds, hears
himself condemned to death by men he knows and who know him.
Forced to stand alone, on the conviction of his conscience, he extends
forgiveness and the hope of reconciliation. He sees in the story of Ste-
phen’s stoning not just the enmity of Saul, but the reconciliation that
would take place in heaven. Sir Thomas More offers forgiveness and the
hope of restoration to those condemning him. Just as Jesus did. Just as
Stephen did. He saw in those fractured friendships, those injured relationships, not a tragic final end but a possibility for God’s renewal and reunion and reconciliation.

Here may be another takeaway for you. If you know the sorrow of injured or estranged relationships in your family, take heart. There yet may be a day for the grace of God. May this give you hope for the restoring of every imperfect or fractured relationship that causes you sorrow. God intends life and restoration and joy and blessing and renewal and reconciliation. Live with intention in that great hope, that God does make all things new.

Jesus prayed, “Into your hands I commit....” And you can pray, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit, myself, my concerns, my brokenhearted love for my child, my great love for my country.”

To this God, come. Come as you are, to be met with mercy and love. Everything has been done; Jesus rightly said, “It is finished.” The purposes of God are realized; our rescue is secured. Take courage, take comfort: The Lord is sovereign still and his power is great.