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A LOVELY
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Collected
Sermons of the
Church Year

EUGENE H. PETERSON

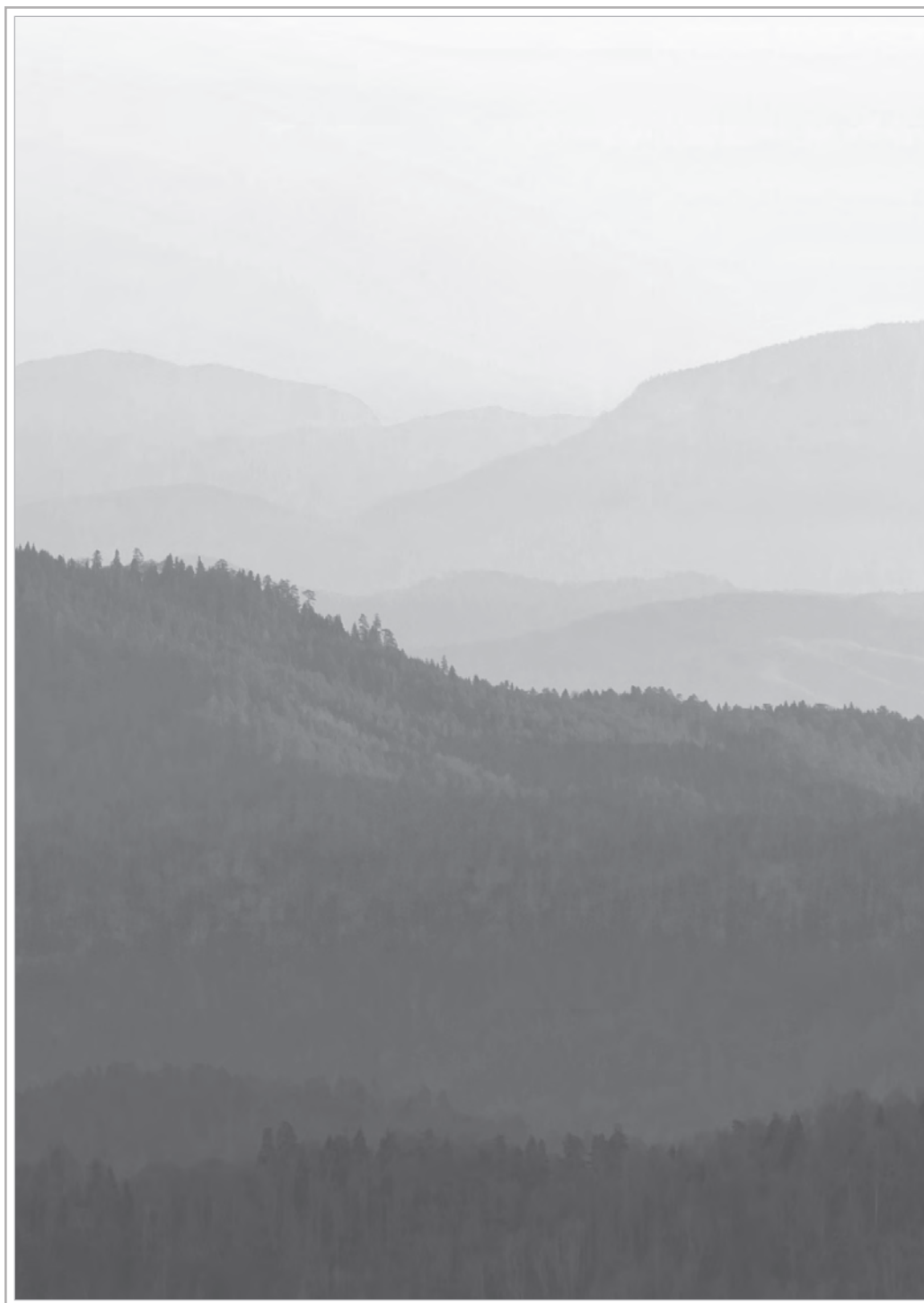
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LIGHTS A
LOVELY MILE





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Collected Sermons of
the Church Year



EUGENE H. PETERSON



WaterBrook

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Editor's Note



Like any good writer, every good preacher is an artist who paints by means of words. But while the writer paints on the still surface of *space* (the page, kept blank), the preacher paints on the flowing surface of *time*.

This time, called a “sermon” and generally lasting between fifteen and sixty minutes, has also been kept blank. It has been set aside by the church for the artist to come humbly, trusting that inspiration and preparation will not fail, and, in prayer, to begin to speak. To encourage, implore, inspire, and remember, as the voice of a particular group of people in a particular place. To paint the songs and stories of the eternal Word freshly across the hours, the days, and the years. The call is not to be an expert but to be a pilgrim. Not firstly to be smart in mind or smooth in speech but firstly to be true in love and to be wise.

This book collects such artistry from Eugene H. Peterson. In it are some of his best sermons preached during his years as pastor at Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland.

We have chosen to arrange these sermons according to the same logic by which Eugene originally preached them: the traditional Christian calendar of the church year. Whether this historic seasonality is part of your faith tradition or not, it's our hope that by encountering Eugene's preaching in the season in which he delivered it, you'll experience some of the “fit” his words were intended to encourage, as the truth of Christ dovetails with some space you create for it in your daily life. (The only exceptions to this sermon arrangement are found in Ordinary Time, which holds a few that

were preached elsewhere in the year but fit well in that location because of their theme.) However, these collected sermons were not all preached in the *same* year, nor are they arranged in the order in which they were originally given.

Forty-one sermons are included in this collection. Advent and Christmas have fewer sermons because these seasons are brief. Other seasons, such as Pentecost and Ordinary Time, have more sermons because those seasons are longer. While each sermon has a stand-alone quality, effort was made to establish a semblance of flow within each season—to be, as Eugene would say, “intently haphazard.”

Eugene was keenly aware of the difference between the two old Greek words for time. *Chronos* referred to the sort of time that belonged to calendars and sundials, watches and alarm clocks. *Kairos* was the marker of organic time: the time of planting and harvest; of festival and funeral; of birth, love, and death—and of the inner working of God in the human spirit.

In the rhythm of the church year, those two times overlap. The movement of the calendar syncs with the seasonality of our delicate, unpredictable inner lives, and we find, as weeks pass, that every day becomes an invitation.

Our prayer at WaterBrook, in partnership with Eugene's family, is that you take up that invitation in this book, through the company of a past pilgrim and an artist, who painted with words larger than his own on both space and time.

—Paul J. Pastor, editor

ADVENT



It Is Time to Wake Up to Reality



Why all this stress on behavior? Because, as I think you have realized, the present time is of the highest importance—it is time to wake up to reality. Every day brings God’s salvation nearer. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned. Let us therefore fling away the things that men do in the dark, let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day! Let us live cleanly, as in the daylight, not in the “delights” of getting drunk or playing with sex, nor yet in quarrelling or jealousies. Let us be Christ’s men from head to foot, and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling.

—Romans 13:11–14 (PHILLIPS)

A few years ago at the University of Michigan, a fantastic movement among the students was dominated by the belief that Christ was coming again very soon. On the surface, it was a Christian group, initiated by a professor who had a remarkable influence over the students. The group interpreted current-event reports as fulfilled prophecies of obscure sections of scripture and put them together in such a way to prove that the end of the world was imminent. The end would be initiated by the second coming of Christ, who would remove all his people from the about-to-be-destroyed world. One of the more spectacular things that many of these people did was go to Detroit and buy the most expensive Cadillacs available: Since they were going to be around only a short time, they knew they wouldn’t have to make any payments.

The frequency of such incidents is increasing today. There is an enormous amount of interest in the religious future. Books being sold today—purchased mostly by Christians—claim to show how current history is full of “signs of the end.” Popular preachers on radio and television are exploiting this interest and using it as material in their preaching. I know you are exposed to this kind of thing and are either attracted or repelled.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent—a Sunday that initiates a time in the church when we talk about what it means for God to come to us. In an age of intense interest in the coming of Christ, I want to spend some time understanding what scripture says, especially what Paul said in this classic Advent passage in Romans. The coming again of Christ is a very important doctrine. I want you to understand it and believe it.

I will begin with an affirmation in its simplest form: Christ is coming again. He came once in history: in the first century, in the place of Palestine, and in the person of Jesus. He will come again.

The early church was formed and the New Testament scriptures were written with that belief. The belief was vivid and intense. Jesus provided mounds of evidence for expecting his return. You can't read a page of the New Testament without sensing that expectation.

Let me quote a few passages to give some substance to this early belief:

Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:28)

Now may our . . . Lord Jesus . . . make you increase and abound in love . . . so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13)

Be patient, establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (James 5:7, my paraphrase)

You must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.” (2 Peter 3:3–4)

And our text for today: “It is time to wake up to reality. Every day brings God’s salvation nearer. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned” (Romans 13:11, PHILLIPS).

The early church believed all that. And the Christian church has continued to believe it. Christ is coming again. History is not an endless repetition of the same old thing. Our Lord will finish his work in history, achieving victory in this creation and concluding his work of redemption.

For myself, I share that belief. I hold it in a rather naïve, unsophisticated way and can tell you very little about what accompanies it. My belief is quite simply that it is going to take place. Jesus said he would return—Paul believed it, the early church believed it, and the great majority of Christians ever since have believed it right down to our own day. And I believe it.

Now, having affirmed the doctrine of the Second Coming, let me point out something about its use that those who seem to talk the most about it rarely mention—yet is the most biblical thing about this doctrine.

When writing to the Romans, Paul told them how they ought to live as Christians. Beginning in chapter twelve, he gave them a series of rapid-fire commands. He told them to be hospitable, to serve, to teach, to contribute money, to feed hungry people, and to be lawful. He then brought these commands to a climax by saying, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another. . . . Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:8, 10).

You can imagine Paul sitting back and thinking, *How can I get these people to begin to act in this aggressively loving way to their neighbors? They have heard this so many times; they have gotten so used to being told this—what can I say that will get them going?* What he did was talk about the Second Coming: “It is time to wake up to reality. Every day brings God’s salvation nearer. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned.”

Quit procrastinating. Love now. Don’t be forever putting off the most important act that is commanded. Don’t make plans for the future love you will give your neighbor. Love your neighbor now.

Paul used the news of the Second Coming as a jab to wake believers up to the world around them where love needed to be acted out. He used it to bring an awareness of “crisis as a motive to ethical seriousness.”*

When Paul finished this paragraph about waking up to the fact that they wouldn’t have forever to obey the commands of God, he went right back to the ordinary instructions of everyday life: “As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him” (Romans 14:1). Paul was immersed in working out Christian solutions to daily, real-life problems. He believed that the doctrine of the Second Coming gave special urgency to the daily.

In his book *Exile’s Return*, Malcolm Cowley talked about his days in France when he and other American ex-patriates were involved in the revolutionary movements of the Spanish Civil War. He said, “There were moments in France when the senses were immeasurably sharpened by the thought of dying next day, or possibly next week.”† The Second Coming does this to Christians: It sharpens their moral/ethical senses. They are pulled out of sludgy lethargy and impelled to feel and act with intensity—because they know that the Lord may come “next day, or possibly next week.”

* C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 209.

† Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking, 1951), 42.

I think it is important that you be warned about this. For, in fact, a great deal of the stuff I hear about the Second Coming is wildly separated from the Scriptures. It is full of sensationalist headlines. It is designed to provoke a kind of panicky fright. It makes its case by a perverse reading of obscure scriptures like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. And because people are not familiar with these writings, they accept what such glib, smooth persons say without question. All such teaching reveals a vast ignorance about history—and an irresponsible handling of the scriptures of the church.

The result of that kind of teaching is to make people irresponsible. Why go through the patient motions of loving a neighbor if it is all going to be over soon? Why get deeply involved in a nation or community to bring about the realities of justice if there will be a cataclysmic war in the next year or two? Living the gospel is reduced to shouting slogans.

Those kinds of false prophets distract us from the daily living out of the gospel that our Lord and St. Paul so persistently affirmed as the context for experiencing God's presence. They take our eyes off the ball. They substitute fantasy, fears, or wishes for the realities of God's love, the needs of our neighbors, and the plain commands of Scripture.

What a person thinks about the future is very important. It influences in a pervasive way what she is in the present. In a day like ours of great uncertainty, many see the question of the future as up for grabs. In a time of historical transition, people are characteristically obsessed with the future, and their obsessions ruin their present lives.

The Christian gospel says something about the Second Coming to provide God's people with a joyful, mature means of dealing with the present—a way that does not narrow life to a few people who share our point of view, plague us with panicky fear about the end of the world, or give us a manic euphoria unrelated to any present reality.

The Second Coming means the overwhelming fact about the

future is that God will accomplish his redemptive purposes. He will get done what he told us he wants to do.

Other people are telling us other things about the future. Some describe it in terms of the “end of the world.” Others talk of the dissolution and breakdown of society; some give lurid descriptions of ecological disasters and population explosions; novelists tell us what a nuclear holocaust would be like. Doomsday people project all these possibilities on the screen of the future. And other people who specialize in talking about the Second Coming describe it as a kind of supernatural escape operation in which a few Christians are pulled out of the messy problems of society to enjoy an eternal bliss.

With this kind of rhetoric ringing in our ears, we might respond in a couple of different ways. One is to avoid dealing with the future by planning for it. Rationalizing that the future is a long way off, we work out elaborate insurance plans, retirement plans, and educational plans. We schedule the future on the calendar so that there is always a good deal of distance between us and it. We live in a kind of “preparation complex.” As a result, we never give our attention to what is in the present. We subordinate present things—like loving our neighbors, for instance—to those far-off goals.

Another way to avoid dealing with the future is to simply deny it and wallow in the present. With this mindset, I just do what feels good at the time for me, reducing the world to my own pleasures and whims. Since the future is so ominous, so unthinkable, I don’t think about it. I immerse myself in presentness—a very characteristic response today.

Yet neither one of these responses is much good. The gospel alternative is to affirm the Second Coming. The overwhelming fact of the future is that God comes—the same God we know about in Jesus Christ.

Knowing this, we can go about our work in the present with calmness, peace, joy, and sureness. We know that the future holds not something foreign to the experience we already share in the gospel but the completion of it. Therefore, it makes sense to love

my neighbor, help the hungry, and be generous with the church's mission. The future thus brings an intensity of grace into the present moment. Love, trust, hope, and faith make sense.

We return to Paul's words:

Why all this stress on behavior? Because, as I think you have realized, the present time is of the highest importance—it is time to wake up to reality. Every day brings God's salvation nearer. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned. Let us therefore fling away the things that men do in the dark, let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day! Let us live cleanly, as in the daylight, not in the "delights" of getting drunk or playing with sex, nor yet in quarrelling or jealousies. Let us be Christ's men from head to foot, and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling. (Romans 13:11–14, PHILLIPS)

Amen.

Awake!



You are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

—1 Thessalonians 5:4–6

God comes. He is not an object at the center of the universe; he is not a fixed point on an astronomer's map of heaven. He is active and moving. And this movement has direction. He comes *to us*. He does not wander around, window-shopping from galaxy to galaxy, juggling the moons of Jupiter and casually admiring the rings of Saturn. We are his destination.

He didn't simply come once and then return to spend the rest of eternity like an old tourist, telling stories of his trip and boring the angels with slides of his visit. He came. He comes. He will come again. And we know what to expect when he comes and comes again because we know exactly what happened when he came.

God came to us in Jesus. And at his ascension, Jesus promised that he would come again. The Christian life is lived between those two comings: He came, and he will come. To believe and serve a God who comes, to live a life in a world to which God comes—what does that mean? That is the Advent task: to clarify and celebrate this, to live heartily and hopefully in response to the God who comes to us.

Will you live slovenly, with unbuttoned mind and disheveled

spirit, thoughtlessly supposing that the same things are monotonously repeated in creation and in history? Or will you live alertly and ardently, convinced that God continues to come to us and will come to us again in Jesus? And in receiving his coming, being hospitable to his arrival, will you believe that we will get the most out of life?

A passage in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has been important to Christians for two thousand years now by showing us how to live wholeheartedly between the great fact of God's coming and the sure expectation of his coming again. The word *awake* sums up Paul's counsel.

We Stay Awake (1 Thessalonians 5:1–4)

One unforgettable thing we learned when God came in Jesus is that God comes into the everyday. He is God not merely of the big issues but also of the daily routine: bedding down in village stables, touching run-of-the-mill lepers, lunching with tax collectors, fishing with old friends, and so forth. Therefore, we stay awake lest we miss something significant.

When traveling with my children, it is disconcerting to have them go to sleep and say, "Wake me when we get there." Don't they know that the journey is part of the reality? And they miss so much: antelope, hawks, sunsets . . .

We Are Assertive (1 Thessalonians 5:5–8)

The coming of God in Jesus also convinced us of the reality that God is on the offensive: making persons whole and at peace, healed, and blessed. Living by faith is not escapist; God does not show us a place to hide in a world that is too much for us. Rather, living by faith is a strategy for doing something complete, great, final, and victorious.

We are given armor to live in the rough and tumble of life. We are not defenseless flowers in danger of being crushed by tram-

pling feet. We are protected, and we can take the initiative.

We Are Expectant (1 Thessalonians 5:9–11)

God’s coming to us in Jesus demonstrated and convinced us that God’s coming is good for everyone: Salvation is his purpose. Therefore we are full of hope, taut with anticipation. The person who is afraid, who feels “destined for wrath,” hasn’t listened very closely to what God is saying or hasn’t observed Christ’s coming very accurately. If we are mired in despair, we are missing the great reality of life: God has salvation plans for us.

Expectation has never ceased to guide the progress of our faith like a torch. The Israelites were constantly expectant, and the first Christians too. Christmas, which might have been thought to turn our gaze towards the past, has only fixed it further in the future. The Messiah who appeared for a moment in our midst only allowed Himself to be seen and touched for a moment before vanishing again, more luminous and ineffable than ever, into the depths of the future. He came. Yet now we must expect Him—no longer a small chosen group among us, but all men—once again and more than ever.*

The Advent candles symbolize the accumulation of light in our darkness. Week by week, the light increases until on Christmas Eve this sanctuary will be ablaze with the lights we hold in an act of praise. There is nothing complicated about living in Advent. It is as simple as waking up. What good is the light to you if you are asleep? Awake to God!

Amen.

* Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 134–35.

Christ in Creation



He is the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: the whole universe has been created through him and for him.

—Colossians 1:15–16, NEB

Paul is easily the most influential letter writer who ever lived. His letters have been read by more people than any other ever written—and have spoken personally and powerfully to many of these people. With that kind of success, we might suppose that he was some sort of literary genius, giving himself to a life of correspondence and doing it well.

But he didn't write very many letters. He wrote them only when he had to. And even then, they showed marks of haste, marred by a bluntness of style and a complete disregard for literary polish and form.

The circumstance of imprisonment forced him to write letters. Paul had a vital interest in supervising and training congregations of Christians in several cities in the ancient world. His usual practice was to travel between them, spending a few months in each. Then right in the prime of his life, in the full strength of his leadership, he was thrown into prison. So, he did the only thing left to do if he wanted to maintain contact with his churches: He wrote letters. Thirteen letters in our New Testament are attributed to him.

As letters go, they aren't particularly good. The English composition textbooks that include a section on letter writing wouldn't use any of Paul's as examples. A teacher would not want a student to imitate much of them in either form or style. But these letters, written by a man who had no literary pretensions or aspirations, are still the most influential ever written. Clearly, Paul stirred an extra ingredient into them besides vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and style. Something else must account for their power and influence. As mere literature, they are ordinary and even unimportant. As an influence on the minds of men and women, they are without peer.

J. B. Phillips, who translated these letters into modern English under the title *Letters to Young Churches*, says this about them:

The present translator who has closely studied these letters for several years is . . . continually struck by the living quality of the material on which he is working. Some will, no doubt, consider it merely superstitious reverence for "Holy Writ," yet again and again the writer felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to "turn the mains off." He feels that this fact is worth recording.*

In light of this kind of testimony and these letters' tremendous influence throughout history, I would like you to join me in reading, listening to, thinking about, and talking about one of them—in other words, trying to let it influence us as it has so many other people. We will take the brief letter Paul wrote to the little congregation in Colossae, a provincial, inland town in Asia Minor.

The letter is dominated by two words: a noun and a preposition. The noun is a most impressive proper title: Christ. To Paul this name consummated two thousand years of history, fulfilled centuries of longing, and brought a completeness to humankind's

* J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), xii.

fragmented life. The preposition, *in*, is a small word in both Greek and English, but it is not insignificant. And in this letter it regularly occurs with the aforementioned proper noun, sometimes before and sometimes after.

The subject of the letter is Christ—not as an abstract study but in relationship: Christ *in*, or *in* Christ. A preposition generally functions by showing the relationship between a noun and another word, and none does it quite so intimately or thoroughly as *in*. *On*, *around*, and *beside* are prepositions of the same type (locatives), but notice the difference. They all leave their nouns in proximity to each other: The book is on the table; the flowers are around the tree; the car is beside the curb. Yet *in* brings the two words into union: The nail is in the board; the heart is in the body; the seed is in the ground. *In* is a preposition of intimacy, immersion, and penetration.

What we can expect in this letter, then, is an incomparable proper noun (Christ) put into the most penetrating relationships (in) with several other nouns: creation, the Christian, the church, and our conduct, to name a few. Examining these relationships will give us an opening into Paul's preaching, a kind of foot in the door to the mind of this apostle who has helped shape the course of Christian thinking. But focusing on one relationship at a time is enough, and first of all is Christ in creation.

After the greetings and prayer (characteristic beginnings to Paul's letters), we read perhaps the most remarkable passage in the whole letter. One scholar thinks this may be "the most striking of all the Pauline expressions of conviction as to the status of Christ."^{*} Here is the passage:

He is the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers: the

* C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 58.

whole universe has been created through him and for him.
(Colossians 1:15–16, NEB)

This description, of course, refers to Christ. Now, the term *Christ* is not really the name of a person but a title. And we must remember that for a long time this title was unattached, floating around loose, waiting to be pinned on some person. For hundreds of years people speculated about who the Christ might be and built a great deal of anticipation and hopeful expectation concerning the time this individual would come. The New Testament Gospels narrate how that title was finally fixed on the man Jesus, who came from the little village of Nazareth in upper Palestine.

People attached the title to Jesus because they became convinced by listening to his words and observing his acts that this was, in fact, God speaking personally to them. God had taken human form and was living a life like theirs. And as he did this, they heard him speaking the eternal words of love and grace. God was there, establishing communion and fellowship with them. The God who had made the universe was now standing among them and making them whole. As they realized all this, they called Jesus “the Christ.”

And only some thirty years after Jesus’s time, Paul could say this about him: “The whole universe has been created through him and for him.” In other words, Paul was not content to see in Jesus of Nazareth simply the culminating expression of God’s love compressed into a thirty-three-year life span. He saw the eternal expression of God’s grace that, far from being confined to those middle years of the Roman Empire, was determinative in the original work of creation.

I just said that the title of Christ had floated around unattached for several centuries before it was fixed on Jesus. It certainly looks like that historically. But no, Paul said this one called Christ was active from the beginning. This was no late development, no modern solution. Christ is and has been at the center of everything ever created.

Another New Testament writer independently testified to the same thing: “In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son [that is, in the years of Jesus’s life], whom he appointed the heir of all things [placing him in the culmination of time and history], through whom also he created the world [confirming Paul’s point that Christ was active from the very first]” (Hebrews 1:2).

There is a message in all this that must be spoken personally to us, that struggles out of the past to find practical expression in our lives. There is a word here that can reorient our lives and pour meaning into some of the empty places in our living.

Listen to Paul’s words again: “In him everything in heaven and on earth was created. . . . The whole universe has been created through him and for him.” What does this mean for us?

Well, it means that God’s plan that we should share in his love is built into the very stuff of creation and is demonstrated in Christ Jesus. Christ is the image of God, showing us that God is love and that he is actively engaged in making it possible for us to live in and enjoy that fellowship. And this Christ, the one who shows us these things, is at the very center, at the very beginning of creation. Christ—that is, God acting to win us in love, drawing us to himself, healing us, and forgiving us—is the “primacy over all created things.” This is why everything visible and invisible was created: so that we might share in his love and know his grace.

The great thing for Paul about creation was not any theory of how it happened—whether our universe spun out from some other galaxy several billion light-years ago as a set of suns congealed and separated or some other equally plausible theory (and several were current in Paul’s day). It was the discovery, the revelation, that at the very center of creation was a good meaning, good news: Christ himself.

The fact that the universe was created through and for Christ means the only reason God created was so that he could love. Creation is a stage on which God engages in loving relationship with his creatures. Creation is the external scaffolding for the internal movements of love and grace. Creation is to Christ what a pail is

to water: There was water before there were ever pails to carry it. Pails were devices by which water could be directed, conveyed, and shared. And there was Christ before there was ever a creation. Creation was a device by which Christ (God's seeking love) could be directed, conveyed, and shared.

It follows, then, that Christ is no afterthought. He is not a kind of emergency measure designed to fix things up after the original plan goes wrong. He is not a kind of cosmic fireman called in a panic to try to keep the house (the world) from burning up. He is there from the beginning. The Christian gospel is an original plan, not an emergency provision.

And that means, you see, that we need Christ simply because we are creatures, not because we are sinners. We are sinners, so we need him all the more. But before we were sinners, Christ was there, the "image of the invisible God," the evidence that God's first word was a word of love and grace bringing all creation into fellowship. We are more likely to think of Christ when we are in trouble than when we are at ease. We are more likely to pray when we are sick than when we are healthy. And we are more likely to think of the church when we are confused than when we have things tidily figured out. But in doing so, we miss at least half—and maybe the better half at that—of Christ.

Christ was not intended to be a tool to use when everything else quits working, a kind of last resort. Christ will help us when everything else goes wrong; he is a last resort. But it certainly cheapens his work and minimizes his power to think of him only as that.

Infant baptism symbolizes this truth. Before a child thinks his own thoughts, takes his own steps, or does anything on his own, at the baptismal font we witness that God's grace is on him. We witness that he was created in and through and for Christ, that God's love and grace are the original and primary factors in his life, and that the meaning of his life must be understood from then on in terms of grace—that is, in terms of Christ.

Paul's word here is simply an extension of that symbolism to the whole creation. Everything that exists must be construed and

understood in terms of God's love and grace. The meaning of our lives on any plane, of the circumstances we encounter at any level, and of our participation in the events of business, society, and recreation—all these exist through and for the sake of Christ. Therefore, if we are to know meaning at any of these levels, if we are to know love and grace here, we must know Christ.

The little congregation of Colossians to whom Paul wrote was not very different from many congregations in America. Back then, Paul was so insistent on putting Christ in creation, at the beginning, preeminent and sovereign, because some religious teachers were demoting Jesus to a kind of medicinal role. They didn't deny Christ or anything like that. They wanted only to put him in his place. If you had committed a sin and needed forgiveness, it was all right to call on Christ then. If you felt guilty about something you said or had an uncomfortable blotch on your conscience, Christ was very useful in setting you right and cleaning you up. But for the regular business of living, the important ways of thinking, or the rough and tumble business of human relations and commerce, he was out of his depth; they had other gods to take care of such concerns.

After two thousand years, we need to hear Paul's insistent words again because we very easily become involved in a similar attitude toward Christ. What was explicitly taught in Colossae is implicitly communicated today. We readily call on Christ for help in private crises, but when the crises pass, so does our reliance on Christ. We call for aid in personal disappointments, but when time begins to take the edges off our unhappiness, the name of Christ also becomes a dim memory. We acknowledge our devotion to him in worship on Sunday mornings, but in the six days following, he is often conspicuously absent. As a result, much of what we call our lives—maybe the major part of our existence—has no meaning, no love, and no grace in it.

Paul's word—and this has become the word of God for us—is to look around at creation, at all things visible and invisible: our lives and the lives around us; the visible world of people, animals,

houses, and food; and the invisible world of thoughts and emotions, ideas and feelings. We must look at all this created world, visible and invisible, and realize that Christ is *in* it. It was all created in and through and for him. If we don't see him at the center, we see it hollow and empty and meaningless.

But having seen Christ there in creation—that is, in everything—we must seek to know him. And as we do, we will participate in the joyful meaning of creation, for he moves in it all as its internal word of love and grace.

Amen.