

Lesson 4

Colossians 1.15–23: The Preeminence of Christ

Introduction

In the last part of the previous lesson we addressed Colossians 1.13–14, which present two important snapshots of the work of God and Christ in our salvation. Our eternal Father is a God of redemption and Jesus is the provider of that redemption. God is our deliverer, redeemer, and forgiver of sin, all by the accomplishment of Jesus’ sacrifice and subsequent resurrection from the dead.

This leads us into the next section. Some believe 1.15–20 is an ancient hymn sung by the earliest Christians. Over the last 130 years, many scholars have begun to argue that Paul did not compose this by himself, rather, *he edited a hymn or confession already in use, probably by the Colossian readers*. Not as obvious in English, the writing in these verses has a poetic feel and uses *non-Pauline vocabulary*.⁴⁴

No matter if Paul did or did not “sanctify” the text by incorporating it into the Sacred Writ, the message remains the same. Jesus is the source of all knowledge and wisdom, which is why we should ground and root ourselves in Him. We have to anchor ourselves in the core principles.

1.15–20 can be fitted into two main sections:

1. 1.15–17—The role of Christ within the created order.
2. 1.18–20—The role of Christ within His kingdom.

Finally, in 1.21–23 this leads Paul to discuss our response to the headship of Christ:

1. 1.21–22—We have been reconciled for the purpose of being made holy, blameless, and above reproach.

44 Wall, Robert W. *Colossians*.

2. 1.23—We respond to God’s work of salvation by *continuing in the faith*, which is the gospel delivered by the apostles. By the time of Paul’s writing, the gospel had *been proclaimed in all creation under heaven*.

1.15–17—Christ’s Place within the Created Order

1.15—Who is Jesus?

In this verse, Paul answers this question in two ways:

1.15a—He is the image of the invisible God

During Paul’s time, a major question circulating among Jewish theologians and Greco-Roman philosophers was this: *where can God be seen?*⁴⁵ Paul says God is seen in Jesus, *who is the image of the invisible God*. Here, *image* is used in the sense that Jesus is a visual representation of the Father Himself. “In Greek thinking, the “image” was understood to share in the reality of what it represented. Thus, Christ is not to be understood as a copy of God; Christ is God.”⁴⁶ He is the complete revelation of God. This fact was not only the testimony of Jesus Himself,⁴⁷ but the undisputed testimony of the apostles. Jesus, the Hebrew writer says, is *the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*, Hebrews 1.3a. There are also many parallels between Colossians 1.15 and what John wrote in his gospel. *In the beginning the word was with God and was God*, John 1.1. What is written in John 1.18 is also important: *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known*. Later, Jesus would say, *I and the Father are one*, John 10.30.

Concerning the revelation of Christ, Paul declares that Jesus is the image of God and through the same wording used at creation,⁴⁸ let light shine out

45 Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians*, p. 118.

46 Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians : A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Reading the New Testament Series. Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2007.

47 See John 8.58: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am,” and John 14:9: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”

48 See Genesis 1.3.

of darkness, God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, 2 Corinthians 4.4b, 6. Other passages to consider regarding Jesus' deity are: Romans 9.5; Philippians 2.6; Colossians 2.9; Titus 2.13; Hebrews 1.8; 2 Peter 1.1.

1.15b—He is the firstborn of all creation

Down through the centuries, the word *firstborn* has been the subject of a great amount of error. Some believe this word indicates that Jesus is a created being and therefore He cannot be on the same level as the Father. This interpretation completely ignores the context, and especially the beginning of 1.16 where Paul affirms *for by him all things were created*.

Firstborn in this context refers to *superiority in status*⁴⁹ or *preeminence*. Birth order is not in view. The Psalmist foretold about Jesus' status: *And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth*, Psalm 89.27. In the New Testament Paul refers to Jesus as the *firstborn* in that He is the one into which every Christian will be conformed, Romans 8.29. He is worthy of worship, Hebrews 1.6. The church "absorbs" his identity as the firstborn, Hebrews 12.23,⁵⁰ and although he was not the first person to be resurrected from the dead, he is the greatest (firstborn) of those who have come back to life.

The superiority of Christ is also stressed in:

- 1.17a—He is before all things ...
- 1.17b—In Him all things hold together.
- 1.18—He is the beginning ...

So, Jesus is the perfect image of God. He existed before creation and is exalted in rank above it. Moo states it succinctly: Jesus is "unique in relationship to God" and He is "unique in relationship to creation" in that He

49 87.47 πρωτότοκος, ον: pertaining to existing superior to all else of the same or related class—'superior to, above all.' πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως 'existing superior to all creation' Col 1:15. See Louw, Johannes. *Greek-English Lexicon...*, Vol. 1, p. 737.

50 McKnight, Scot. *The Letter to the Colossians*. Edited by Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee, and Joel B. Green. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

is “the acting subject who extends God’s activity to the creatures that follow Him.”⁵¹

1.16–17—Evidence of Jesus’ Superior Status

1.16—For by Him all things were created

Jesus created everything in the universe. “All things” pertains to two locations: *in heaven and on earth*. Then Paul classifies two essences, i.e., things *visible* and *invisible*. **Everything everywhere** is subject to Him. This includes the angels. Jesus is not an angel, *but the creator of angels*, Hebrews 1.4–14. Ephesians 1.21; Philippians 2.10; and 1 Peter 3.22 all assert that Jesus is exalted far above *thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities*.

The final destiny of those in the spiritual realm and humans in the physical realm is subject to their relationship with Jesus. McKnight⁵² does a good job summarizing that all things were created:

- *By him*. Jesus is the essential *source of life* in creation.
- *Through him*. Jesus is the *agent* in creation.
- *For him*. Jesus is the *aim* toward which all of creation is heading, namely to honor Christ as King and Lord, Philippians 2.9–11.⁵³ All things have been fashioned with Jesus in mind and for His glory.

1.17a—He is before all things

Jesus existed *before* creation itself, John 1.1–2; 1 John 1.1; John 8.58. John also describes Christ as *the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end*, Revelation 22.13. Since this is the case, He is eternal. He is God.

1.17b—In Him all things hold together

For a moment, please consider the gravity of such a statement, especially in the way the message would have been received in the Greco-Roman

51 Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians...* p. 120.

52 McKnight, Scot. *The Letter to the Colossians...*, p. 152.

53 See also Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996.

world. Paul is affirming that the Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified in Jerusalem almost three decades before, is the Son of God, presently alive, and holding every piece of the universe together. In other words, Jesus is at the center of *everything*. He sustains it. He is the power and energy of the universe. This is in stark contrast to Greek and Roman philosophy which maintained that all things were held together by Zeus, by the Logos (divine reason), nature, or the *primeval fire*.⁵⁴

MacArthur concludes, Jesus Christ must be God. He made the universe, existed outside and before it, and preserves it.⁵⁵ We do not live in a “deistic” world in which God just set up natural forces and let them go about on their merry way, but God continually and actively sustains the creation (also Heb 1:3). If at any moment Jesus ceased to hold all things together, it would fall apart. All things that currently “work” do so because Jesus actively wills it and makes it happen.

1.18–20—Christ’s Place within His Kingdom

1.18—Jesus is inseparably tied to His Church, the body

1.18a—He is Head of the body

In previous letters to first century churches, Paul referred to the church as a *body*.⁵⁶ Here, as well as in the Ephesian letter, Jesus’ relationship to the body is stressed. Jesus is *head* over the body, *the church*. The Savior and His church are inseparably tied together. He is over every part, providing it with life and direction. He is the power behind the great diversity of the body, and the source of its unity. An ancient Jewish-Christian text said:

Pay heed to the streams: When they flow in the same channel they carry along stones, wood, and sand, but they are divided into many channels, the earth swallows them and they become unproductive.

⁵⁴ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

⁵⁵ MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Colossians*, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Romans 12.4–5; 1 Corinthians 12.21.

And you shall be thus if you are divided. Do not be divided into two heads, because everything the Lord has made has a single head. He provides two shoulders, two hands, two feet, but members obey one head.

—Testament of Zebulon 9.1–4⁵⁷

Something that must be seen here is that by using the metaphor of a *body* and *head*, Jesus is in a living and dynamic relationship to His people that stands apart from the rest of creation in general. He is united in the closest possible way to the body, supplying it with life, initiating control and direction, and going about His work.

1.18b—He is the beginning of the church

Not only is Jesus in first place within the church, He is the *originator* of the church. He is the life-giving power behind it.

1.18c—He is the firstborn from the dead

Not that He was the first person ever to be resurrected, as the Bible records many who have been brought back to life. But all those individuals died again. Jesus is the *firstborn from the dead* in that He is the first to be truly resurrected. Romans 6.1–11 attests Jesus did not die again and that is why Paul uses the firstborn imagery.

Jewish people were expecting a final day of resurrection, just as Martha confessed in John 11.24. The idea the Messiah would rise first, and then everyone else later, can be demonstrated from the Old Testament, but is not its natural reading. Thus, Paul introduces the idea of Jesus as the first fruits of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15, and firstborn follows that same model: the presumption there will be others born from the dead as well.

57 Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. “The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.” *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*. Translated by R. Sinker. Vol. 8. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886.

1.18d—He is the preeminent one

He has first place in everything. Paul's writing in Philippians comes to mind:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
—Philippians 2.9–11

1.19–20—The Reason Jesus is Preeminent

First, we learn that the Son is *preeminent* because *in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*. First, we focus on the fact that God *was pleased* to dwell in Him. *Pleased* is used in such a way to describe a high degree of pleasure or mental satisfaction in. God was happy to dwell in Jesus for the purpose of our salvation.

When Paul asserts that *all the fullness of God* dwelled in Jesus, we might see this as a direct response to the false teachers residing in the Lycus valley who taught true *fullness* could only be found through their philosophy and rules. Paul asserts here that the *fullness* they were seeking is to be found only in Christ. “Fullness indicates totality.”⁵⁸ In the next chapter, Paul will insist that they are complete in Christ: *and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority*, 2.10. John affirmed that every bit of the *fullness* of Christ is available to believers:

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.
—John 1.16

In 1.16 we learned that Jesus created *all things*. Now, in 1.20 we see that through Jesus *all things* have been *reconciled* by the *blood of His cross*. Once we were in hostility against God, destined for eternal judgment. Now since that crisis has been resolved through the cross, 2.15, believers are not under condemnation. Paul's usage of *all things* being reconciled here is especially interesting. Does he imply universal salvation? Hardly. There is

⁵⁸ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians*, p. 132.

a line of thought regarding atonement in how Jesus is setting the creation right, thus, providing a means of making whole what was broken. Satan, his demons, and all the lost will ultimately be reconciled to God for judgment ... ultimately having their sentence carried out. *Their relationship to Him will change from that of enemies to that of the judged.*⁵⁹

1.21–23—Our Response

1.21–22—Your current status in Christ

This section closely parallels Ephesians 2.1–2, 12; 4.18. *Once*, the Colossian believers had been *alienated, hostile, and evil*. These words describe both the attitude and actions of people outside a relationship with God. *Now*, after the present reality made possible by Christ, they have been *reconciled* and are *holy, blameless, and above reproach before Him*. This is the current status of the faithful Christian who is walking by the Spirit.

Reconcile as used in 1.22 means *to make things right*.⁶⁰ It identifies “overt behavior” conducted to remove the hostility. In other words, it describes a change in relationship. In this context the word is used in such a way as to communicate the thoroughness or totality of God’s action. There is no need for anything else.

All of this is for a purpose, which is our holiness, blamelessness, and lack of reproach. We have been set apart by God, given a blameless character, and placed in a status where Satan cannot make an accusation against us, Romans 8.33.

1.23—Demonstrating your salvation

The fact that God, working through Christ, has done so much for us brings with it a tremendous responsibility. We must *continue* or “abide”⁶¹ in *the faith*. We work as God and Christ work. We are in a relationship together. Our works are a demonstration of our changed heart and newfound allegiance

59 MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Colossians*, p. 59.

60 Louw, Johannes. *Greek-English Lexicon*, Vol. 1, p. 501.

61 Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon*, p. 18.

to Christ. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2.10, we have been recreated for *good works*.

“The faith” as used here has to do with *the gospel* delivered to them by the apostles. This was the true faith ... unlike the false teaching many around them were peddling. Those who teach *a different gospel* stand condemned before God, Galatians 1.6–9.

For Thought and Reflection

1. What does *image* mean in 1.15?
2. Why is it so important we have a correct understanding of who Jesus is regarding His deity?
3. What does *firstborn* mean in 1.15b?
4. What did Jesus create at creation?
5. For what has everything been created?
6. What place does Jesus hold within the church? What are some practical applications of this?

7. What does it mean to you that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus?

8. Have we received this fullness? How do you know?

9. What does it mean to be reconciled?

10. What did God do to you when He reconciled you? i.e., what did God make you?

11. How do we demonstrate our salvation?

12. How far had the gospel spread by the time Paul wrote Colossians?