

Christ Supreme

Colossians 1:15-23 by Mark Hammer

1/21/2024

SUBVERSIVE STORYTELLING

Fake news is out there, and if you give into it, the news can lead you astray and destroy you. We've seen this in our culture within the political arenas. News outlets spin the truth, and use subversive storytelling techniques in which they take the truth of the day, and downplay it, suppress it, change the data, rewrite it, rename it, and over time it creates a new narrative that will sway less than critical thinkers, or those who have no concrete Biblical worldview, to align themselves to a movement or leader who is usually evil and worthless. We've seen this with topics such as human sexuality, racial equality, feminism, and the sanctity of life. Not only is subversion in the news media, but even in the entertainment industry, as I recently saw a trailer for a new animated show on Amazon Prime called *Hazbin Hotel* which retells the story of the fall in Genesis, portraying Satan and his love interest, Lilith, as two figures who graciously desired to give freewill to humanity and are punished for it.

This literary strategy of subversive storytelling was used thousands of years ago among the Ancient Near Easterns (ANE) mostly as a literary device to show whose local god reigned supreme. The strategy of subversive storytelling is this: Whoever can tell the best story ultimately wins. One might remember the god "Baal" in the Bible—"The Storm God" god of the Canaanites. Well, in the early 1900s, while excavating in Northern Syria, archaeologists uncovered the ancient port town of Ugarit, which they discovered was a very developed culture for its time. The writings they found also gave more background into the understanding of the Canaanite god, Baal, that we find in the scriptures. Through Mesopotamian subversive storytelling we hear of how Baal took his throne.

In what's known as "The Baal Cycle," which would have been known by Moses and influenced how he wrote some of His god-inspired writings of the Torah. We're told in the Baal Cycle that El was the supreme "Father of the gods," who lived on a cosmic mountain. He had a divine council of sons called "The Sons of El" who all vied for his power. When Sea, who was the chaos monster, *Yam*, is crowned by El and given a palace, Baal rises up and kills "Yam," taking its place as "Most High." The story continues on, but this type of subversive storytelling is what communicated to others, whose god is the top dog. It's no longer, Yam, but Baal.

Christian author, Brian Godawa wrote an excellent book on apologetic storytelling within the Bible called *The God Against the gods*, which unpacks this literary strategy. He says, "In subversion, the narrative, images, and symbols of one system [of thought or

worldview] is discreetly redefined or altered in the new system” (pg. 112). You might think to yourself, “Isn’t subversion bad or sinful?” My response: Is a gun bad or sinful? Does it not depend on who is using it and the purpose for its use? Subversion is simply a communicative tool that seeks or intends to overthrow an established system or institution (Is this not what Yahweh did in the OT, and Christ in the NT?). Therefore, when God inspired His human authors to use that known contemporary literary device of subversion to their advantage, it’s done in such an infallible and unique way throughout the Old Testament, that Yahweh was clearly exposed as the one supreme God of the gods and there was no way around it. When subversive storytelling has theological implications, it’s far more important to buy into the right narrative—the truthful narrative. Words create worlds of reality, and if those words are stepping stones towards one type of eternity over another, we don’t have time to rest our lives on the wrong words. **We can’t afford to buy into the wrong story, especially if the story concerns the deity of Christ.**

PAUL AND THE CHURCH OF COLOSSAE

Here enters Colossians. It is assumed that some within the church in Colossae were sharing a different narrative about reality, and more importantly about Christ. There were some among the faithful body of believers who were spinning the truth, telling a different narrative, and Paul is about to use some subversive tools to make it clear to them that the Christ he preaches is vastly different from the Christ they’re being told about.

So what were they being told? What’s the story? What’s the narrative they’re hearing about reality and specifically Christ? A lot of philosophers during this time taught a belief system known as “dualism.” This meant that the spiritual was good; therefore God was good, but the physical/material was evil, so this presented a problem with understanding the very deity of Christ as He is preached as God *in the flesh*. In that dualistic belief system, God in the flesh made as much sense as oil mixing with water—the two don’t mix. Therefore, the character of Christ was under attack, and Paul is determined through a method closely related to subversion to proclaim the truth about Christ and his deity, because **one thing we do not want to get wrong is the answer to, “Who is Jesus Christ?”**

THE VISIBLE OF THE INVISIBLE

Paul opens in Colossians 1:15 writing, “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Paul starts off here confirming who Christ is—the physical image of the invisible God. This presents a dilemma to those who held that the physical was just garbage—something that could be trashed, because the spirit was all that mattered and all that would be saved. However, God took on a physical body in Christ, so the body has to matter for something. Jesus said, “To see me is to see the Father (John 14:9). The author of Hebrews wrote “[Christ] is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature....” (Heb. 1:3). He is also the “Firstborn of all creation.” The word “born” isn’t here in the greek; a better translation is “first to bear or inherit.” The point being made is that if there was succession, there would be *nothing* before Christ (vs. 17 “before all things”). The Psalmist writes in Psalm 89:24-27:

My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted. 25 I will set his hand on the sea [yam] and his right hand on the rivers [nahar]—both chaos monsters of the water in ANE literature; revealing the coming Messiah as the one in control. 26 He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’ 27 And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.

This is about rank and superiority. **This fact associates Christ with being God’s unique son, whom NOBODY else is like.** I do believe scripture is clear that there were other “sons of God” (Heb. *beney ha’elohim* - Gen. 6:4; Deut. 32:8; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 82:6 MORE ON THIS LATER). Jesus is God’s son, but no other son of God is like Jesus. He’s unique. It is important to understand the word “firstborn” as defined as ranking, because otherwise a misinterpretation of that word can lead to heresy. A philosopher named Arius, in the middle of the 4th century, actually developed a heretical teaching that stated that God the Father first existed alone, and *later* created Jesus and that’s what’s promoted by Jehovah Witnesses today. The Bible actually never speaks of Jesus as “created,” but that he was unique compared to all creation—one of a kind (*monogenēs* “begotten” - John 3:16). “Before Moses was, I am” (Jn. 8:58). The next few verses serve to clarify why Christ is worthy of the supreme title—“firstborn” and how he stands out among the rest.

CREATOR OF THE COSMOS

Paul writes in Colossians 1:16 “*For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.*” The Apostle John, the disciple Jesus loved, wrote in his gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being* (John 1:1-3). Paul is doing two things here: First, he’s attacking the idea that physicality is bad and evil, by revealing Christ as creator of the physical; God looked at creation and said, “*It’s good*” (Gen. 1:31). Secondly, to those who both held spirituality as good and obsessed over spiritual mysticism, he called them back to reality by making it clear that not all spirits are good. Some among the faithful were actually encouraging and promoting the worship of angels, as a means to achieving exaltation (Col. 2:18). Paul instead, teaches the supremacy of Christ through a “subversive storytelling” strategy.

As I mentioned in my introduction, subversive storytelling was a contemporary literary device of it’s time used to show the supremacy of one God over another in ANE culture, and within subversive storytelling, *Chaoskampf* was a *type* of account in which a divine being must triumph a chaos monster in order to become “Most High.” This is what we saw of Baal, “The Storm God ” of the Old Testament, as Mesopotamian literature revealed him defeating “Yam,” the chaos monster of the Sea. Interestingly enough, Moses intentionally used the word “Yam” when he described the creation of the “sea” in the Old Testament in Gen. 1:10 as a *way* to show Yahweh’s sovereignty compared to Baal. Yahweh has no need, like Baal, to defeat the “Sea god,” because Yahweh is the very one who separated the waters, put it in its rightful place, and named it “Yam”—all signs which divinely revealed the superiority of one deity over another in ANE thought (separate it, name it to claim it, and order it). Furthermore, in other Old Testament passages, we see Yahweh showcasing His supremacy over Baal, “the storm God,” by revealing Himself as “God *OF* the storm,” as He holds back Baal from sending fire down to consume an offering (1 Kings 18–Elijah and Prophets of Baal).

Here in Colossians 1:16 through subversion, Paul reveals Christ’s higher ranking in the fact that these “angels”--spiritual beings that some obsessed over and worshiped, were created *BY* Christ and *FOR* Christ! This is what is unique about Christ, the Son of God, compared to the other sons of God. Christ wasn’t created, He created them and for His

purpose. It's important to note that these sons of god fall under the general title of "angel" in the New Testament, and some of them are in service to Yahweh and some have rebelled against him. The word angel (Gk. angelos) is primarily used in the NT for God's celestial/heavenly beings that are in service to Him. The word is much more functional than ontological. Angelios is an umbrella term for the faithful supernatural agents in God's service (Only 4 of the 175 occurrences refer to a fallen divine being: Mt 25:41; Rev. 12:9; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). Paul uses major terms here in Colossians that would paint a picture of the more complex hierarchy of fallen spiritual beings being worshiped, so that he's clearly casting Christ as superior to them all no matter their rank

In verse 16, Paul writes, "*Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*" which is connected to terminology describing the territorial spirits of the Old Testament rooted in Deuteronomy 32:8-9ff (ESV) and Psalm 82 (ESV), which when read in its original Hebrew, supported by the Dead Sea Scrolls, speak of the fallen "Sons of God," or "Sons of the Most High," which I personally believe, because of a strong contextual, grammatical, and historical basis, while supported by many of the early church fathers and 2nd temple period writings as well, were the divine beings from Genesis 6 who came down, slept with the daughters of men and bore a giant race—the nephilim, who played a role in the corruption of all flesh and the wickedness of man which brought upon them a condemning flood of punishment.

After this, at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), men continued in their wickedness, attempting to make a name for themselves and manipulate the heavenlies, and so as condemnation, God confused their tongues, separated nations, and gave His Sons of God authority to deceive the nations and hold them captive, and in turn they rebelled against Yahweh and were worshiped by men but Israel would be God's portion—His nation (Deut. 32:8-9) (**There are other positions out there; this is the one I hold to, but I talk about this more extensively in a sermon I preached in August 2023: "Hiding in Plain Sight," during our *Heart to Heart* series which you can listen to on the church website). But I believe having *that* Biblical supernatural worldview in our minds helps us to fully grasp what Paul is sharing with the faithful in Colossae. Similarly, Ephesians 6:12, *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places* (see also Eph. 3:10; Rom. 3:38). Paul brings to light the fact that there are real, intelligent, deceptive spiritual forces in our world today. Yes, we battle our fleshly desires (James 1:14), but there are principalities at work prowling around like a lion looking for a meal (1 Pet. 5:8), as they deceive, influence, tempt, and lead astray.

With the fallen sons of God/sons of the Most High in mind, being elevated in the eyes of some, along with the demonic entities and evil spirits attached to these principalities, Paul intentionally reveals to the church in Colossae, Christ, as superior to them all, because “*ALL have been created BY Him and FOR Him.*” **Why obsess over any inferior heavenly beings, when Christ is far superior?**

Psalm 89, which many scholars believe was originally a poem about the supremacy of Baal, turned into a polemic against him, reads in verse six and following:

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, 7 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? 8 O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you? 9 You rule the raging of the sea “yam”; when its waves rise, you still them (Psalm 89:1-6).

What Paul is clarifying is that **Christ ranks first because all things, visible and invisible have been created BY Him and FOR Him.** For that reason, we should pursue Christ, and rest in His supremacy! There is no need to look anywhere else for our spiritual needs!

CONQUEROR OF CHAOS

Colossians 1:17: *He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.* Christ, God in the flesh, is existence. **There is no time when Christ was not**; therefore, he outranks all other spiritual beings that some people in Colossae were trying to attach themselves to as a way of achieving godliness. Paul is showing that these lesser “elohim” (a term which simply denotes a spiritual being) don’t begin to compare; Christ takes first place and there’s no close second. Christ, as God in flesh, is elohim and no elohim is like Christ! Now, let’s talk about our present day gods. Who are the equivalents? Yam—the Hebrew word used for sea, which alluded to the sea god of pagan writings, eventually was used as a metaphor for a ruling government or Kingdom. Any group of people, any nation or kingdom, that doesn’t submit to the headship and authority of Christ will eventually cause chaos and disruption. It’s the historic pattern of history with all kingdoms who reject Christ as King. All nations with their politics eventually become chaotic monsters of the sea, a beast doing the bidding of the dragon of old. We see this imagery in revelation as it reveals a beast coming up out of the sea (Rev. 13). This is why Christ

proclaimed the true gospel—He is the victorious King. You want to be a winner, don't give allegiance to Baal, Caesar, Stalin, Trudeau, Biden, Trump, Taylor Swift, or anyone else that tries to tell you they are capable of taming chaos and making things great again, because Christ is the only one who ultimately can. For there will be a time when the greatest game-winning touchdown occurs, and when the camera pans up to the stadium suite all eyes will be on Christ—for he will have the center of attention because of His good blood shed on the cross! If the world seems chaotic; take heart in the only King who can and will overcome the world (Jn. 16:33). As I explained earlier, Yahweh shows his supremacy over the storm god, Baal, but Christ does the same in the New Testament as He subdues chaos, calming the stormy seas (Mk 4:35-41) by “the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3), and walking on the waves of the twisting and writhing sea serpent (Mt. 14:22-23). He subdues chaos. **Christ ranks first because all things hold together in Him.** It's either Christ or chaos! Be found in Him and find order, which causes growth.

FULLNESS OF GOD

Colossians 1:18-19 *He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.* Christ is like that athletic adult, who when playing basketball with children half his size, never eases up, but dunks, crosses over, and brings them to tears as he dominates them. He doesn't want to lose, but shows himself as victor always and in all things. Christ will be the first to raise himself up from the grave, and nobody else can claim that. Because He was the first to conquer death by resurrecting, he gives us the hope of a glorified physical body in the future—because the physical is good and useful! *19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him....* As dualism would later mature into full blown gnosticism, it created a view that divine attributes and characteristics of God were divided in different stages, among different ranks of angels, and so people would aspire to move up the ranks of enlightenment as a way to deify themselves. Paul was inspired to step in front of that belief, proclaiming that God took pleasure in having His “full” divinity contained in Christ *IN* bodily form; there is nothing greater than trusting in Christ and resting in Him alone. Therefore, to the reader, there would be no need to chase after vain spiritual stepping stones of self-exaltation, because placing trust in Christ and finding your identity in Him alone would be exalting enough—there's nothing greater!

Although we don't live in a society where mainstream beliefs are *overtly* to move up the ladder of spiritual enlightenment to find exaltation—at least many will never say their ultimate desire is to become a god—there is still this drive for gaining knowledge, and out of that come slogans such as “Knowledge is Power.” A blogger wrote on that subject:

‘Knowledge is Power’ is the famous proverb which means Knowledge has the ability to conquer the world. It not only makes you intelligent BUT also gives you name, fame, strength, power, money, position, all those things which we would like to possess. Above all, knowledge is the ULTIMATE power.”

That description alone seems to make it clear that the pursuit of vain godliness is being described as the motivation behind the desire of knowledge. As I look out into society, many are unknowingly falling into a type of covert gnosticism, attempting to become the god of their lives and at times the god of others. Knowledge, and the pursuit of it, isn't bad in itself, but when one's motivation or pursuit of knowledge is not for the benefit of others or to glorify God, but instead is for the glory of the learner, it can become a slippery slope. *“Our modern worldview obsessed as it is with empirical science and human reason is so blinded to its own ignorance of transcendent reality and stunted imagination, that it amounts to idolatry, the limited, fallible human mind and senses as god”* (Godawa, p. 325). At the end of the day, one's pursuit of knowledge, as a power play, can become a person's stepping stone for trying to exalt themselves, trying to be like god.

If anyone tries to find significance or power in anything created, whether in angels, secret information, or one's own abilities, it's futile at the end of the day. It's chasing after the wind. **The motto of “living life to the fullest” only holds substance for those who find fullness in living life in Christ alone!** Outside of Christ, you'll always be scrapping for something more that will make big boasts but come up empty, and if you, as a believer, are still trying to find more fulfillment outside of Christ, REPENT!! **Adding anything to faith in Christ, in an attempt to save your life, is living out a different gospel. He is all you need!** Rest in that truth! All the fullness of God dwells in Him, so be found in His fullness!!! How? This prayer of Paul in **Ephesians 1:18-23** shares how:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20

which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:18-23)

There is nothing greater than to be found in the fullness of Christ, which *is* being found in His church, among the faithful! Therefore, don't stop meeting together. Don't forsake the gathering. The existence of the church is the evidence of a victorious King and a victorious Kingdom—proclaiming God's manifold wisdom in all his fullness throughout ALL nations! And each Sunday, we come together to make it known to the world that He is alive in all His fullness. **Christ ranks first, because all of God's fullness is in Him, embodied by His Church.**

RECONCILED

Paul continues explaining the supremacy of Christ in **Colossians 1:20-21**: *and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. 21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds* (deceived nations of OT in mind here). All things, which Paul already clarified in verse 16 as *“things in heaven and on the earth, visible and invisible; whether thrones, or dominions, or rulers, or authorities.”* ALL of them have been reconciled to himself, by the shedding of his blood, his death on the cross which brought peace. The Greek aorist tense used here demands the reader to understand that the action is completed; it's done! The reconciliation here is rooted in creation and authority; all things have been subjected back to its rightful place—under the headship of Christ—that is the peace through His blood. With that Deuteronomy 32 worldview in mind, with Yahweh allotting the nations to those vain and worthless gods to have authority over them, we are now reminded that through the cross [*Christ*] *disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display (spectacle) of them, having triumphed over them through Him (Col. 2:15)*. It's Kevin McCallister, singing a solo in the christmas choir, while His older bully brother, Buzz, stands behind him, mocking him, causing the choir and audience to laugh, until Kevin has enough, turning around and pushing Buzz, causing the entire choir to fall, making a public spectacle of them all as Kevin remains the only one standing. God exposed the

weaknesses of those forces of evil, breaking the nations free from the captivity of Satan, and Christ has been given full authority so that the gospel can go forth to nations that were formerly alienated, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds. **In other words, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ; therefore, we can now go and make disciples of ALL NATIONS** (Mt. 28)! This spiritual evil hierarchy of power, that can influence even human rulers and the politics of the day, has no stopping power against Christ, His Church, or the mission of the church—it can't stop it!

I'm reminded of that old game found in the arcades, "Whack-a-mole." You know that game where you have the big rubber mallet, and as soon as you drop your coins in to start the device, these ugly plastic moles start popping up from multiple holes, and you have to bonk them on the head to make them go back in their holes?. It doesn't matter how many times you bang them on their heads, making them go back into their hole, another mole resurrects elsewhere. It's irritating and you can never truly win. It reminds me of the Church, the Kingdom of God, throughout all generations and in all nations. Empires and Kingdoms, opposed to the cross of Jesus Christ and His faithful followers, will attempt to snuff out the flame of the church in order to stop it, but they'll never succeed. When one empire thinks they've stopped the church, just look across the sea, and watch his church resurrect elsewhere. We do win down here, not by overthrowing governments with worldly tactics, but through the continuous expansion and advancement of His church, enduring varying degrees of persecution at the hands of chaos monsters, through death, burial and resurrection. **For Christ ranks first, because He alone has reconciled all things to himself.**

REMAIN STEADFAST

Paul continues by writing:

"...yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (Col. 1:22-23)

Remain in Christ—don't forsake the assembly which *is* his fullness. Be loyal to your Lord and King as a good slave, proclaim the hope that is you! If there is a clear application, it would be that we must think rightly about Christ, His creation, and who we are in Him.

Don't ever forget: Christ is the image of God and ranks first. All things visible and invisible were created *BY* Him and *FOR* him. God's fullness dwells in Him, and is embodied on earth by His church. For He has reconciled all things to himself—establishing all authority and putting things back in their proper order.