

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians
(4) The Preeminence of Jesus Christ in All Creation (Col. 1:15-20)

We are in Colossians 1 in our study of this prison epistle of the Apostle Paul. Last Lord's Day we gave our attention to verses 9 through 14, in which Paul wrote to this church that he was always praying for their spiritual growth. Here are his words again:

⁹And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Today let us give our attention to chapter 1, verses 15 through 20. Here we read of the Pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in all of God's creation.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. ¹⁹For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

The paragraph designations in our English Standard Version (ESV) do not reflect the grammar of the original Greek in which Paul wrote. We had pointed out last week that although the ESV designates the paragraph as containing verses 9 through 14, actually, when Paul wrote the original letter in the Greek language, the paragraph did not end with verse 14¹, because Paul wrote this sentence that contains all of verses 9 through verse 17.² The next sentence contains verses 18 through 20.

One of the modern Greek New Testaments sets forth verses 15 through 20 in poetic format.³ If we were to do so in English, verses 15 through 20 would look like this:

¹ Actually the Greek of the first century was written in all upper case letters with no space between words and with very few punctuation markings. But a "sentence" can be distinguished in an ancient Greek manuscript by identifying the main verb or predicate of a sentence along with its subject, which would be distinguishable from subordinate clauses and phrases. Modern punctuation is a great aid to convey precision of meaning. Most punctuation markings are quite recent to modern written language. Even quotation marks had not been devised when the King James Bible was originally published.

² Aside from the Greek text that follows the majority text, or the Byzantine family of texts, the two Greek texts of the New Testament that most scholars regard as the closest to the original are the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Society (3rd or 4th edition), and the Greek New Testament published by the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, known as Nestles' Text (27th edition). I tend to follow the United Bible Society text. Interestingly, however, I noticed that the Nestles' Greek text has one sentence beginning with verse 9 and ending with verse 20.

³ This is my English version of the format in Nestles' Greek New Testament.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
The firstborn of all creation.
¹⁶For by Him all things were created,
In heaven and on earth,
Visible and invisible,
Whether thrones or dominions
Or rulers or authorities—
All things were created through Him and for Him;

¹⁷And He is before all things,
And in Him all things hold together.
¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church.
He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
That in everything He might be preeminent.
¹⁹For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰And through Him to reconcile to Himself all things,
Whether on earth or in heaven,
Making peace by the blood of His cross.

There is a cadence in the words and phrases that have led some scholars to believe that in verses 15 through 20 Paul was rehearsing an ancient first century Christological hymn which he had adapted for this letter to the church at Colossae. This may be the case.⁴ As one scholar has said,

If it is not a literary gem composed by the apostle himself, it was probably a hymn or other fixed testimony of the early church adopted by Paul and reproduced here by him either without change or with alteration suitable to the needs of the Colossian church.⁵

Before us we have our Lord Jesus set forth in the loftiest, even the loveliest of terms. The selection of words and the manner of expression elicit from the reader or the listener of this epistle the greatest thoughts of the Lord Jesus, exalting Him in the highest possible position.

Paul breaks into a doxology to the grandeur and glory of Jesus Christ... By doing this in a kind of hymn, he invites the readers to worship the Son of God.⁶

It is important as we begin to consider these verses that we recognize the doctrine or teaching of these verses in its service in Paul's instruction for this church. In one sense it is easy to understand why the translators would set these verses apart in a paragraph separate than what went before. At a casual reading the statements do seem to be quite different in substance and purpose than what went before in verses 9 through 14. But actually this is not the case. The apostle had stated that he had been praying for the spiritual growth of these Christians in this church at Colossae. In those verses, Paul set forth the matter of living so as to please God. Verse 10 identified one of the ways of pleasing God was to be increasing in the knowledge of God. It is fitting therefore, that the apostle sets forth the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ before these Christians. By increasing in their knowledge of Jesus Christ, and as our Lord is

⁴ William Hendriksen identifies 10 different proposals of the nature and source of these verses for Paul. Much is speculative about these proposals. However, the passage does appear to be structured in such a way to suggest a formal even liturgical use or origin. See William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Baker, Academic, 1964), p. 54.

⁵ Ibid, p. 66.

⁶ R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1885.

set forth here as the Sovereign God and Lord of all that exists, Paul was helping these Christians to increase in the knowledge of God.

We have underscored here a very important doctrine of historical Christianity. God is revealed to us most clearly and fully through His Son, Jesus Christ. Paul declared that one important way in which we may “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him” is by “increasing in the knowledge of God.” *When the apostle would instruct them so that they could increase in the knowledge of God, he set forth the person of Jesus Christ as the full revelation of God to mankind.* One can only know what the true God is like and have a true relationship with the true God when one comes to know thoroughly the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

We can know the truth of this doctrine through several ways. First, the Holy Scriptures reveal the nature and being of the true God is *incomprehensible* to us, who are finite and fallen creatures. Calvin taught rightly that God in the depths of His being is past finding out.⁷ He wrote, “His essence is incomprehensible; so that His divinity wholly escapes all human senses.” God is the Creator and we are His creatures, we are therefore incapable of knowing what He is like and how we may know Him.

And yet, although the infinite creator God is incomprehensible, the Scriptures tell us that He is *knowable*. In fact, to know God is essential requisite to our salvation. Jesus said to His Father, “And this is eternal life, that they may *know* You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). But in order for this to take place, God must condescend to us and reveal Himself in a form and manner that we can comprehend Him. This is one of the primary reasons that God sent His Son into the world, so that we can know the true God. We read this in **1 John 5:20**:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

No one can know the true God apart from Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus claimed exclusive knowledge of the Father, “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (John 10:15). And only Jesus Christ is able to reveal the Father to His people. He declared in Luke 10:22, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” And so John wrote in his Gospel, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18).

No one, who claims to know God apart from Jesus Christ, knows God. The true God can only be known and worshipped as the true God through His Son Jesus Christ. For God has set forth His Son as the only Mediator between fallen man and Himself. No one can enter the presence of God except it be through the veil of Christ’s torn body on the cross. When God raised Jesus His Son from the grave and set Him on His eternal throne in heaven as the promised Son of David, God declared that He would only acknowledge them who acknowledged His Son. It is essential to come to God through Jesus Christ. God will not receive anyone who fails or refuses to come to Him through His Son. Our Lord declared in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Our Lord declared in John 10:1ff, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.” Since the coming of Jesus Christ, in order to know and honor God, one must know and honor Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus taught, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:22f).

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), p. 29.

Knowing God through His Son Jesus Christ is the essence of what it is to be a Christian. This is the nature of the Christian life, growing in our knowledge of Him. This is also the means of growing in the Christian life, even as we experience more fully the life of God in Christ. And so, in order to help these Christians grow in their Christian experience, the apostle displayed before them the glory of Jesus Christ.

Now before we look directly at the verses that set for the glory of Christ, which begin with verse 15, it would be good at verses 13 and 14 closely, which we passed over quickly last Lord's Day. Let us begin reading with verse 11:

¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13f)

Verse 13 speaks of God's work of bringing salvation to His people through Jesus Christ. Paul here was speaking of God the Father. Paul wrote of three aspects of our salvation that God the Father has secured for us. **First**, God the Father has "*delivered us from the power of darkness.*" He had just written of God having qualified His people "to share in the inheritance of light." He then speaks of God having delivered His people from "the power of darkness." They are destined to inherit the realm of light, but to do so they first were delivered from the power of darkness. This expression, "power of darkness" is seen in Luke's Gospel in his account of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our Lord made use of this term when He spoke to the ones who had come to arrest Him. We read in Luke 22:52ff:

⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, captains of the temple, and the elders who had come to Him, "Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs? ⁵³When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and *the power of darkness.*"

F. F. Bruce described this well:

These last words of His refer to the supernatural forces marshaled against Him by Satan for a decisive combat. The dark power did indeed have its brief hour of opportunity against the Son of man, but it was only a brief hour, and it ended in the utter defeat of the dark power. By virtue of His conquest then, Christ now has the authority to raid the domain of darkness and rescue those who had hitherto been fast bound under the control of its guardians. Here, no doubt, Paul has the Colossian heresy in view, for those very guardians, "the world-rulers of this darkness" as they are called in Ephesians 6:10, are the principalities and powers to which the Christians of Colossae were being urged to pay some meed of homage. But why should they do any such thing? They had already been rescued from the sphere dominated by those principalities, and translated into the realm of the victorious Son of God. No longer was there any need for them to live in fear of those astral powers which were believed to control the destinies of men; their transference to the dominion of light had been accomplished once for all.⁸

The *second* aspect of the Father's work of salvation is that He "*conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.*" Here is a statement of realized eschatology; in other words, the promise held forth in the Old Testament of the long-awaited kingdom of God over which the promised son of David would reign, has come into existence through Jesus Christ. Although it is not stated here overtly, it certainly is

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians and Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (William B. Eerdmans' 1957), pp. 189.

elsewhere, the formation of this kingdom and the inauguration of Jesus Christ as its King occurred after our Lord was crucified and buried, but then raised, at which time He ascended into heaven and was seated as Lord at the right hand of the Father. When God saves one of His people, He snatches him out of the kingdom of darkness and makes him a citizen of the kingdom of God over which the Lord Jesus rules over them. He protects them. He keeps them safe and secure from all alarm. The evil one touches them not (cf. 1 John 5:18). “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:3). In a sense Christians have already been glorified; that is, “they have received here and now the glory that is yet to be revealed.”⁹

The *third* aspect of our salvation that Paul sets before his readers is in **verse 14**, “*in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.*” In verse 13 God’s work of delivering us and preserving us is set forth; here in verse 14 God’s work of purchasing us is set forth. This purchase, or “redemption”, is the payment that Jesus Christ made on behalf of His people to satisfy God’s justice. We owed God a great debt for having transgressed His laws. Our debt of sin was great, we might even argue infinite, because our sin was committed against an infinite God. But through the death of the Lord Jesus, the pouring out of His life on our behalf, that debt to God was fully paid on our behalf. “Just as according to Israel’s ancient law the forfeited life could be ransomed (Exo. 21:30), so our life, forfeited through sin, was ransomed by the shedding of Christ’s blood” (Eph. 1:7). Our sins have been fully forgiven, we who have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation.

Let us now turn our attention to what could be an ancient Christological hymn, in which the glory of Jesus Christ is set before us. Again we read in **verses 15 through 20**.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. ¹⁹For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

These verses may be seen to convey two major themes. *The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in creation* (vs. 15-17). *The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in redemption* (vs. 18-20). Here, then, Jesus Christ is set forth as the source and meaning for all that is and occurs in creation and in history. There is security set forth for the one who is in Christ Jesus.

William Hendriksen wrote of the practical application of the teaching of this passage:

The present-day application of this truth is immediately evident. Since the Christ of Calvary rules the heavens and the earth in the interest of His kingdom to the glory of His Name, always overruling evil for good, neither automation nor bomb nor communistic menace nor depression nor economic unbalance nor fatal accident nor gradual decline in mental vigor nor hallucination due to nervous disorder nor any invader from outer space (about which some people have nightmares!) will ever succeed in separating us from His love (Rom. 8:35, 38). He who tells us how to go to heaven and actually brings us there, also knows how the heavens go; for He, all things having been created and “holding together” in Him, through Him, and unto Him, causes them to perform their mission and to go to the place predestined by Him.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, p. 190.

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Baker, Academic, 1964), p. 70f.

Now here before us God has set forth the person and work of our Lord Jesus. These verses identify and describe for us what Jesus Christ is truly like, who He is in truth. This is important. For there are many in “churches” who claim to believe the Bible and even believe in Jesus Christ, but when you examine their doctrine, what they are saying about the nature and ways of our Savior, it is clear that they do not know the true Jesus of Scripture, that they believe in another Jesus who has not and does not exist. Paul wrote of this danger in **2 Corinthians 11:4**, in which he was criticizing this church for putting up with terrible error. Paul wrote:

Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly-- and indeed you do bear with me. ²For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. ³But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. ⁴For if he who comes preaches **another Jesus** whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted-- you may well put up with it! (2 Cor. 11:1-4)

It is all important the Jesus that we believe in is the true Jesus as He is displayed before us in Scripture. And here before us is one of the clearest and fullest expressions of His person. There are nine specific traits of our Lord set forth by the apostle. Let us take each of these phrases and clauses and consider their meaning and implication.

1. The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in creation (vs. 15-17).

(1) He is “the image of the invisible God” (v. 15a). God is Spirit. He is invisible to us. We cannot see God with our physical eyes. In faith we see Him. Hebrews 11:27 describes the faith of Moses in this way: “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”

But although God is invisible, there is one in His image. Jesus Christ is the image of the Living God. As the image on the Roman coin set forth the depiction of Caesar; Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. Philip had foolishly asked of Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us” (John 14:8). “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? (John 14:9). Here Christ is said to be the visible representation and manifestation of the invisible God. Make a study of Jesus Christ, and you will become acquainted with God.

(2) He is “the firstborn of all creation” (v. 15b). The “firstborn” is not speaking of the origin of Jesus Christ but of His position. This speaks of our Lord Jesus as the One to whom all of God’s creation belongs, over which He governs. He is the “firstborn” as the eldest son in a household who would assume the position and responsibility of the father in His home. It was the eldest son who received the inheritance of the property from his father. Christ is eternal being the Second Person of the blessed Holy Trinity. Jesus Christ will inherit all things for it is His birth right as the only begotten Son of God.

(3) He is the Creator. “For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him” (v. 16). Verse 16 answers two very important philosophical questions. First, man has always asked himself, “How did I come to be?” The answer is “by Him.” And second, man has asked, “For what purpose am I here?” The answer is “for Him.”

(4) He is the Pre-existent One. “And He is before all things.” (v. 17a). This speaks of His importance, His pre-eminence above all created things.

(5) He is the One who sustains all things. “And in Him all things hold together.” (v. 17b). All power was evident in Christ when He created all things. His power is now evident in His sustaining or keeping all things existing. This speaks of the Son of God as in charge of the events of the world. He governs the world in His providence.

2. *The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in redemption* (vs. 18-20).

(6) He is the Head of the church. “And He is the head of the body, the church” (v. 18a). There are several ways in which Jesus Christ is “Head.” First, Christ is Head in that He represents us before the Father. God is pleased to deal with us corporately with one person as our representative, our federal head. Adam was our federal head or representative before God in the garden. And so, when he sinned, we sinned in him. But Jesus Christ is the head, or representative of the church. Second, Jesus Christ is Head in the sense that He gives life to the church, His body. He is indispensable to the life of the body. Third, Jesus Christ is head in the sense that He rules over His people. He is their leader. He is their King over Zion, the people of God, the church of God. God’s eternal decree has established Him in that place in which He has occupied since His resurrection. Fourth, Jesus Christ is Head in the sense that He is the husband to His bride, the Church. Because He is our head, the church can be assured of His love, devotion, commitment, concern, care, and in giving direction to His church.

(7) He takes precedence over all things. “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent” (v. 18b). All things began with the eternally begotten Son of God when He created all things. He is the Creator. Moreover, He was the first human being to be raised from the dead--He was the firstborn of the dead. This also speaks of His pre-eminence. He is the first of a vast multitude who will one day come forth from the dead.

(8) He is God incarnate. “For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v. 19). It was to the end that the Father would have Jesus Christ have precedence over all things that it pleased the Father that in Jesus all the Fullness of the Godhead would dwell. Now God is Spirit, and there is no place in His universe where God is not fully present and manifest. God is also in His fullness in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Blessed Holy Trinity.

(9) He is the Reconciler of fallen creation. “And through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross” (v. 20). When Adam sinned in the Garden, all of creation “fell.” Nothing was willingly submitted to God even though God continued to manifest His Sovereign Rule through history. But through Jesus Christ, God is returning His creation into willing subjection to God. Jesus Christ is reconciling all things unto His Father’s will. This will be realized at the end of history, when the Lord Jesus returns, the resurrection of the dead takes place, and the Final Judgment transpires. May that day come soon.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20f)