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The Preeminence of Christ

Who is Jesus?

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-20

Sermon Series: *Colossians*

Topic: Jesus, Messiah



Colossians 1:15-20 (ESV)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and

in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Introduction

Who is Jesus? Is he purely the creation of literary fiction? Is he merely a first-century, wandering teacher who turned into a cultural revolutionary like most Americans believe?

Is he simply a historical figure whose followers made up a bunch of crazy stories about and who has now grown into a mythological, spiritual super-hero like most Europeans believe? Or is he a merely a notable prophet like Muslims believe? Is he the first created human being like Jehovah's Witnesses believe?

Or is he a malintentioned rabbi and "failed messiah who led the Jews to be killed and exiled, changed the Torah, and led the world to worship a false God"¹ like Jews believe? Was Jesus a pathological liar? Was he a lunatic? Or is he someone entirely different?

What do you believe about Jesus? Who is He to you?

In the next portion of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he answers this question. These six verses are the most Christologically dense portion of Scripture in the whole New Testament. These verses are worthy of memorization. I urge you to commit these verses to memory. In fact, this section may have been written in such way to make memorization easier.

Creed, Hymn, or Poem

When you analyze these verses in the Greek, there are two particular features which grab your attention. *Stylistically*, there is rhythm, meter, and parallelism² which point to an intentional structure. There is also alliteration and chiasmus.³

¹⁶ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

¹⁷ For by him all things were created
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible

all things were created through him and for him

¹⁸ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together

¹ Source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/what-do-jews-believe-about-jesus/> accessed 13 October 2018.

² Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 33.

³ An inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases that when diagramed form one side of the Greek letter X.

Linguistically there is unusual vocabulary that Paul does not use elsewhere in his letters. This may mean that it was intended to make memorization easier. These facts have lead scholars to believe that this was either a kind of early creed used by the early church to concisely teach the nature of Jesus, or perhaps this was a hymn, or it may have been a poem that Paul wrote in order to pass on essential truths about Jesus that were necessary for the Colossians to remain firm in their faith.

Why does Paul Write This?

Apparently when Epaphras gave Paul an update⁴ on what was happening in the Colossian church, he told Paul that there were some false teachers among them who were putting forward certain “arguments” (2:4), “philosophies, and traditions” (2:8) which were contrary to the gospel. Apparently some of these may have included teachings that presented Jesus as simply one of the many lower spiritual emanations (2:8-9) by which one could spiritually ascend upward toward God. Therefore, Paul, at the beginning of his letter wants to make it abundantly clear who Jesus is. Paul writes this portion of the letter in order to clarify the true nature of Jesus and thus give a firm foundation for their hope in him and assurance of salvation.

Why Include This Here?

In verses nine through fourteen Paul had written out a prayer for the believers in Colossae. At the conclusion of that prayer (v.13b-14), Paul turned his attention to the fact that God effected redemption, i.e. the forgiveness of sins, through the person and work of Jesus. It is only through Jesus that forgiveness of sins can be found. So Jesus is at that moment on the mind of Paul and he knows there are questions swirling in Colossae about who exactly Jesus is. Therefore, Paul turns his attention quickly to Jesus and offers this densely packed, theologically rich description of who Jesus is.

The Preeminence of Christ Seen in Three Relationships

Paul’s conclusion is that **Jesus is preeminent above all**—all persons, all kingdoms, all spirits and angels, all institutions, and all created order. There are two reasons for this preeminence. The first is because of *who he is* and the second is because of *what he has done*. Paul illustrates the preeminence of Jesus by referring to three relationships; His relationship to God, creation, and the church.

Jesus’ Relationship to God

Paul begins by describing Jesus’ relationship to God the Father. He touches on this relationship in two places.

Colossians 1:15a, 19

⁴ Col. 1:4, 8-9.

¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God,*
¹⁹ *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*

Jesus the Image of Invisible God

Paul opens this hymn/poem by stating that Jesus is the *image of the invisible God*. The Greek word translated 'image' is (εἰκῶν) *eikōn*. From which we have our word 'icon.' The word means "an object (not necessarily three dimensional) which has been formed to resemble a person, god, animal, etc.—'likeness, image.'"⁵ Jesus used this word when he was asked if taxes should be paid to Caesar and he asked for a coin.

Mathew 22:20 (ESV)

²⁰ *And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"*



Tiberias Denarius 14-37 A.D.

The *image* (or 'likeness') impressed on the coin was intended to accurately represent Caesar, so that when you look at the coin you say, "Oh, that's Tiberius Caesar." In the same way, Jesus accurately represents to us God the Father, so that when we look at His life we say, "Oh, He looks and acts just like God the Father."

God is spirit and has no physical body, therefore, we ought not to think this passage is pointing to some physical resemblance between God the Father and Jesus.⁶ What these words, "*He is the image of the invisible God,*" tell us is that the essential nature of God is rightly manifested and displayed through the person of Jesus. Jesus' qualities, character, and demeanor were (and are) identical to that of God the Father. The aspects of God's personality that were previously unseen have now been manifested to the world through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible attributes of God. The apostle John wrote,

John 1:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

Jesus is the one "*who is at the Father's side,*" and He has so accurately made God known to the world that John calls Him God too. Therefore, to know what Jesus is like is to know what God is like. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. As the author of Hebrews wrote,

Hebrews 1:3 (ESV)

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 64.

⁶ Is. 31:3; Lk. 24:39; Jn. 4:24.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature..."

To understand what moves and motivates Jesus is understand what moves and motivates God. To know what Jesus loves and hates is to know what God loves and hates. To embrace the purpose of Jesus in the world is to embrace the purpose of God in the world.

The Fullness of God was Pleased to Dwell

Then verse 19 helps us understand the *degree* to which Jesus manifested the nature of God.

Colossians 1:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

Jesus did not merely manifest the nature of God in small degrees and partial ways. Jesus was filled with the fullness of God's nature. In Jesus all of God's character fully dwelled. All of who God is was fully manifested in Jesus. The fullness of God's entire nature was completely manifested through Jesus. There was no part of God missing from the person of Jesus. And this *pleased* God the Father. He was pleased to pour out the fullness of His character in Jesus. How can this be? One cannot help but think of the events that took place at Jesus' baptism. Apparently this miracle happened by power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

God anointed His Son with the fullness of His Holy Spirit. The Father fully poured out His Spirit upon Jesus. The Father gave the Son His Spirit in full measure.⁷ This is good news for us. Since Jesus was filled with the fullness of the Father, He then has abundant resources with which to pour out divine goodness upon and in us. As John wrote,

John 1:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Because Jesus was filled with the fullness of God's character, He is then able to pour out upon us *grace upon grace*. Jesus is the perfect image of God the Father. The two are identical. So alike are they that on multiple occasions in Scripture, the two are referred to as one.⁸ This close and dear relationship was pleasing to the Father.

⁷ Jn. 3:34.

⁸ Jn. 1:18; 10:30; 14:9; 17:11, 22.

There is no other person about whom such things are said. There's no one else in the Bible who is spoken of in this way and neither is there anyone else in all of history spoken of in this way. Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God, being so filled with the nature and character of God the Father that nothing of his character is lacking. Given this intimate connection and relation to God the Father, Jesus is preeminent over all and as such deserves to be worshiped as preeminent.

Jesus' Relationship to Creation

The second reason for Jesus' preeminence has to do with His relationship to creation.

Colossians 1:15b - 17

...*the firstborn of all creation.* ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The Sovereign of All Creation

The first phrase, "**the firstborn of all creation,**" has caused many people to stumble. In the early fourth century an Egyptian priest name Arius was chief among them.

Without paying close attention to the context, it may appear to teach that Jesus is the first being whom God created. There are two uses of this word 'firstborn' (πρωτότοκος, *prōtotokos*) in the Old Testament. The first refers to "existing prior to in time,"⁹ such as the eldest child in a family. This is the way Arius understood the phrase, therefore he taught that "there was a time when he was not." By this he meant that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father. In other words, there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Then there was a time when God created Jesus and He began to exist being the first of all of God's creation.



This teaching contradicts dozens of other biblical passages, such as John 1:1, and the surrounding controversy was the occasion of the first church council, which took place in Nicaea in A.D. 325. At that council the teaching that Jesus was the first created being and not co-eternal with the Father was condemned as heresy. This heresy continues to be embraced by some today, the most notable being the Jehovah's Witnesses.

⁹ Louw & Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 157.

The second meaning of the word 'firstborn' refers to one who possess "priority in rank or supremacy in status."¹⁰ An OT example of this use of the word comes from the life of king David.

Psalms 89:27 (ESV)

*27 And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.*

"Firstborn" here clearly refers to David being the highest ranking king of the earth and the ruling sovereignty he would inherit by being given this status. This is the way the word is being used by Paul in verse 15.

Lectern of Metal, Elder of Church

Let's illustrate it like this. I could say, "This is a lectern of metal," meaning the lectern is made of metal. Or I could say, "I am an elder of this church," meaning I am one of five men who have ruling authority over this church. So the question is does "*firstborn of creation*" mean that Jesus is included in creation as part of it, or does "*firstborn of creation*" mean that Jesus posses highest ruling authority over creation. This is where the context is helpful. Whenever you have questions about a biblical passage, you must always take the context into consideration.

The Agency of All Creation

As we keep reading it becomes clear that Paul means that Jesus possesses the highest ruling authority over creation since he is *the agency of all creation*. Jesus is the...

Colossians 1:15b-16 (ESV)

...the firstborn of all creation. 16 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.

The first phrase of verse 16 clarifies what is meant by the final phrase in verse 15. Jesus is the highest ranking authority over all creation "*for by him all things were created*" and "*all things were created through him and for him.*" All created things came into being through Jesus therefore He must be separate from and above all created things. The point is this, Jesus has highest ruling authority over all creation because he is the source of all creation.

If "all things" were created through him and Jesus is a created thing, then Jesus would have to have created himself. That is an ontological impossibility.¹¹ A non-existing thing cannot

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ That which does not exist cannot be the source of that which does since the quality of existence is necessary in order to bring anything into being. A non-existing thing does not possess existence and therefore cannot be the source of an existing thing. Nothing is not the source of something.

cannot cause to exist something that does not exist, since it would be required to give away what it does not possess, namely the quality of existence.

Jesus is not a created being. He is the preeminent, *sovereign* ruler over all created things because all created things were created *by* him and *through* him. Jesus is both sovereign over all things and the source of all things.

Things Seen and Unseen

This is true of things in heaven, which we cannot see, and things on earth, which we can see. Paul wants these Colossians to believe that there is not one thing that exists, including the unseen things, that exists apart from the power and agency of Jesus.

In the middle of verse 16 he includes four different words—thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities—which, in the Judaism of his day, referred to four different classifications of angelic beings.¹² What's striking to me is that two of the terms, "*rulers and authorities*," he uses again in 2:15 to specifically refer to evil spiritual forces. Since we know that everything initially created was good, Paul is not here blaming Jesus for the problem of evil. Good angels sinned against God at some point and were cast out of heaven. These are the fallen angels who are now joined to Satan in opposing God's will and word in the world. What Paul is teaching is that Jesus possesses sovereign, ruling authority even over the demonic angels who oppose him. This was clearly manifested throughout His life and ministry on earth since every instance where Jesus gave a command over an evil spirit, it always obeyed. There is no created being that is more powerful than Jesus, including Satan. Jesus controls the existence of all powers and authority, seen and unseen, from every president and prime minister on the planet to every angel and devil in the unseen spiritual realm. Jesus' power and reign is preeminent.

The Sustainer of All Creation

Notice also that Jesus is the sustainer of all these things. Nothing can exist without Him. All things would cease to exist if He so willed it.

Colossians 1:17 (ESV)

17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Jesus is logically prior to all things. He is before all things. No created thing existed before Him. And "*in Him all things hold together.*" Jesus keeps things existing. He is the sustainer of all things. My friend Keith Hornbeck once told me, "Todd, if Jesus stopped thinking about you for one second, you'd cease to exist." As the author of Hebrews says, "*He upholds the universe by the word of His power*" (Heb. 1:3). The seasons continue to come and go because Jesus wills them to do so. The sun rises in the sky each day because He commands it to. The leaves change and reflect the multi-colored brilliance of fall because Jesus is the foundation for

¹² O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 46.

all consistency in the universe. He holds everything together by the word of His power. He is the sustainer of all creation. Jesus is preeminent above all things because it is His power that sustains all things.

Jesus' Relationship to the Church

The final reason for his preeminence is because of his relationship to the church.

Colossians 1:18, 20

¹⁸ And 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.

²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Jesus is the head of His body, the church (i.e. His people). At first it might seem strange to think like this, but remember what Jesus said to Paul when He appeared to him. "Saul, Saul, why are persecuting me?" Paul was stunned and asked, "Who are you, lord?" He heard back these words, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."¹³ Paul probably thought, "I've never persecuted you. I've been going after these crazy Christians." Then it dawned on Him. The Spirit of Jesus dwelled within His followers. To persecute the followers of Jesus is to persecute Jesus Himself. He is the head of the body. To poke a member of Jesus' body is to poke Jesus.

He is the beginning. Jesus is the beginning of a new thing that God is doing. Jesus is the head and beginning of a new body that God the Father was building. He is the beginning of a new people that He is creating. He did this so that Jesus might be preeminent in everything. Jesus is the head of the church, which is an entirely new kind of people that God is creating. Jesus is the beginning of the new kingdom based upon a new covenant.

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. He is the first of among the New Creation. Jesus was the first of those born to life from the dead who will never die again. Jesus is the beginning of the undoing the curse of sin which came upon the world through Adam. Jesus is the key that unlocks the door to the New Creation which is effected through His death.

Colossians 1:20 (ESV)

²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The universalists take this verse, ignoring its context (which the verses immediately following include a warning not to reject the gospel) and other verses which teach the contrary, and claim that this teaches that God will one day save all creatures—all humans, all fallen angels, and even Satan himself. However, we need only read a bit further into chapter 2 verse 15 and we'll

¹³ Acts 9:4-5.

see that this is not the case. God does not save evil angels through the cross of Christ, rather He puts them to shame and triumphs over them.

What Paul means in these verses is that there is a cosmic reconciliation that happens through the cross of Jesus. Creation itself groans under the curse of sin (Rom. 8:20-22) and when the end of time comes, because of the cross of Christ, that groaning will cease. There will then be peace in heaven and on earth. All wrongs will be put right. Those who have willingly surrendered to Jesus and rejoiced in His cross will be welcomed into heaven, while those who have rejected His cross will be justly condemned by it. At that time, the time of final judgment, there will be peace by the blood of His cross—peace in the purification of those who willingly submit to Him and peace by the eternal imprisonment and punishment of all who reject it. But in the end “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess,” some willingly and happily, some unwillingly and sadly. Which will you be?

Conclusion

So who is Jesus to you? Fictional, mythological, spiritual superhero? Or Sovereign, Savior, Son of the living God? Is He the image of all non-intellectual stupidity, or the image of the invisible God? Is He the source of all the strife and contention, or the source of all peace and comfort?

Does He hold your world together or is he to blame for it all falling apart? Is He the beginning of your life in God or he the last thing on your mind? Is He the one who has all authority to tell you what to do, what to believe, and how to live or there someone else in your life sitting on that throne?

This hymn says:

He is the image of the invisible God.
He is the highest ranking authority over all creation.
He is the source of all creation.
He is the goal of all creation.
He existed before anything else existed.
It is because of Him that everything exists today.
He is the head of the church.
He is the beginning of the new creation.
He is preeminent over everything.
He is the fullness of God.
He is the only source of reconciliation with God.
In Him alone can peace be found.

Is He preeminent in your life?

Will you worship Him or wave him off?