

The Preeminence of Christ (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] Last week we finished looking at Paul's prayer in Colossians 1, 9-14.

! That prayer focused on God and what God has done. The section we start tonight focuses on Jesus Christ and what Jesus has done. The sections go together.

Verses 13 and 14 form the connection. Let's read those verses again for some review. Speaking of God, in verse 13 Paul said, He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Our verses tonight will tell us more about God's beloved Son. We'll only make it through verse 17, but let's go ahead and read verses 15-20 right now.

Starting in verse 15, Paul wrote, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

[1 : 19] All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 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. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

Even after His incarnation, Christ never ceased to be both eternal God and perfect man. Both Christ's humanity and His divinity are important. His divinity is important because it gave His sacrifice infinite value.

And His perfect humanity is important because only a sinless man can make atonement for fallen sinners. As we consider this section tonight and next week, we'll see that the verses speak about Christ's nature, His glory, His eternity, His preeminence, His fullness, and His reconciling work at Calvary.

This section of Scripture will show us that Jesus is greater than the contemporary view of Him.

There's really no more significant passage for today's world or today's church than this one.

[2 : 37] It also forms the basis of Paul's arguments throughout this letter. And whatever heresy threatened the Colossian church, it severely diminished the person of Jesus and tore away at the core of Christianity.

This dramatic and powerful passage removes any needless doubt or confusion about Jesus' true identity. It's vital to a proper understanding of the Christian faith.

We do know that the heretics denying His humanity viewed Christ as one of the many lesser descending spirit beings that originated from God. They taught that spirit was good and matter was evil.

To them, a good spirit like Christ could never take on a body composed of evil matter. And the idea that God Himself could become a man was absurd to them, so they also denied His deity.

According to the heretics, salvation required a superior mystical secret knowledge beyond that of the gospel of Christ, and it also involved worshiping angels and keeping the Jewish ceremonial laws.

[3 : 43] Paul starts addressing these heresies in the verses that we'll cover tonight, and we'll break the verses the next two weeks into four sections, starting with just verse 15.

And in verse 15, we see that Jesus is the manifestation of the concealed. So the manifestation of the concealed is what we'll look at first.

Verse 15 actually answers the question that has been asked so often throughout history, and that question is still being asked today. And the question is, who is Jesus?

Before we look at Paul's correct answer, let's summarize how some other worldviews answer that question. The Mormons claim that Jesus was the product of the physical union between the Father God and the Virgin Mary.

The Muslims claim that Jesus is just like Abraham and Moses and Isaiah. He's a prophet of God, but He Himself was not God. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that prior to His coming to this earth, Jesus was Michael, the archangel.

[4 : 51] So in that view, He's only a creature, the first product of God's creative work. The Moonies claim that Jesus was actually the illegitimate child of an adulterous relationship between Mary and Zacharias, the husband of Elizabeth.

So in their view, Jesus failed to establish the perfect family on earth. So God sent His second Messiah, which was Sun, Young Moon, to carry out the work. Apparently they like to raise roses as well, too.

The theological liberal claims that Jesus was the natural-born son of Mary and Joseph, and because of His exceptional virtue and humility and sensitivity, God adopted Him as His son, and then endowed Him with miraculous powers, and through Him proclaim the message of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.

And of course, there's somebody always trying to make peace, and he'll say something like, I always thought Jesus was just a good old boy who told us to love everybody and be nice. That person might go on to say, Hey, it's too bad He ended up getting killed like that, but as long as we believe a God exists, why does it really matter anyway?

Well, actually, how people answer the question, Who is Jesus, does matter, because each person's final destiny is dependent upon how they answer that question.

[6 : 16] You know, people today, though, aren't the only ones who struggle with the answer to that question. People who interacted with Jesus did so, too, including the disciples.

Think back to the night of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Remember, Jesus was sleeping in their boat, and the boat was getting tossed by a storm. Fearing for their lives, the disciples awoke Jesus, and they asked Him if He cared that they were perishing.

And after Jesus calmed the storm with His words, the disciples said these words in Mark 4, 41.

They said, Who can this be that even the wind and the sea obey Him?

Then in Luke 5, 21, Jesus healed the paralytic and forgave his sins, and the scribes and Pharisees said this. So this is the end of Luke 5, 21. They said, Who is this who speaks blasphemies?

Who can forgive sins but God alone? When King Herod heard about Jesus, listen to what he said in Luke 9, 9. Luke 9, 9 says, Herod said, John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?

[7 : 27] And when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the reaction of the multitude recorded in Matthew 21, 10 was typical of that day. And here is Matthew 21, 10.

And it says, And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, Who is this? So the Bible and overwhelming evidence give us the answer.

As Paul said in Colossians 1, 15, Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. By using the word translated as image there, Paul was writing about a symbol of something or a manifestation of something.

So image can be a symbol or a manifestation of something, but the symbol here was more than just a symbol. The symbol brought with it the actual presence of the object.

And in his translations, J.B. Phillips says, It's a visible expression. And by it, Paul meant that Jesus brought God into the human sphere of understanding.

[8 : 34] In other words, Jesus manifested God. And the terminology is similar here to Hebrews 1, 3, where the writer stated that Jesus is called the exact representation of God.

It's also similar to John 1, 18, which states that Jesus has made God known. The key is that in Christ, the invisible God had become visible.

He shared the same substance as God, and he made God's character known in the sphere of existence. And the revelation of God in Christ is such that we can actually see him, even with the limitations that we have.

Think about what it means to be the exact likeness of God like Jesus did. And like Jesus is still today. He's in the very form of God. We learn that from Philippians 2, 6.

And that's why he could say, Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. And that comes from John 14, 9. In Christ, the invisible God became visible, and we've seen his glory.

[9 : 38] Glory is the only son from the Father. Paul emphasizes that Jesus is both the representation and manifestation of God. He's the full, final, and complete revelation of God.

He's God in human flesh. That was his claim, and that's the unanimous testimony of Scripture. To think anything less of him than that is blasphemy, and it actually gives evidence to a mind blinded by Satan.

The end of Colossians 1, 15 says that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. And on the surface, that term translated as firstborn can be confusing.

I think I put this in your handout, but you see there from the Arians of the early church to the Jehovah's Witnesses that we talked about earlier, those who would deny our Lord's deity have sought support from this phrase.

The word translated as firstborn can mean firstborn chronologically, but it refers primarily to position or rank. In both Greek and Jewish culture, the firstborn was the son who had the right of the inheritance.

[10 : 48] He wasn't necessarily the first one born chronologically. We see that in the Bible, too, because although Esau was the firstborn chronologically, it was Jacob who was the firstborn in the sense that he received the inheritance.

So Jesus is the one with the right to the inheritance of all creation. We see a similar thing in other pages of the Old Testament, too, because Israel was called God's firstborn in Exodus 4, 22, and also Jeremiah 31, 9.

Obviously, they weren't the firstborn in terms of chronology, but they held first place in God's sight among all the nations. And in Psalm 89, 27, God says of the Messiah, I also shall make him the firstborn.

And then he defines what he means by that. He says he will be the highest of the kings of the earth. One more place to look at is Revelation 1, 5, where Jesus is called the firstborn of the dead, even though he wasn't the first to be resurrected chronologically.

And of all those ever raised, though, he is the preeminent one. That's why Romans 8, 29 refers to him as the firstborn in relation to the church. In all cases that we've talked about, firstborn clearly means highest in rank, not the first created.

[12 : 12] So Jesus is the perfect image of God. He both existed before the creation, and he is exalted in rank above it. And those truths define who Jesus is in relation to God, and they also devastate the false teacher's arguments.

Paul's not finished, though. His next point undermines what the false teaching of the Colossian heretics have said. And in the second section of the lesson, we see that Jesus is the maker of the creation.

So he's also the maker of the creation. Listen to 1, 16 and 17 of Colossians again. They say, 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.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Even the prepositions in these verses are significant. Paul says that things were created by Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus. And we'll spend some time looking at what each of these prepositional phrases means. But together, they give us a picture of just how powerful Jesus is. The Father, of course, has a significant relationship to creation.

[13 : 37] He determined to bring creation into existence. Jesus, though, actually brought the plans into existence because through his creative imagination and power, the created order exists.

So the first prepositional phrase speaks to Jesus originating the details of creation and bringing them into existence by his own creative energy. The second phrase is that creation came into existence through him.

And this means that creation came to be through his power and ability. All things owe their origin to Jesus Christ because he is the divine agent in creation. He made it all that we see and everything that we do not see.

He created both matter and spirit. And this is a restatement of his deity and also a declaration of his power. We see from Genesis 1.1 that the Trinity was active in the work of creation and the words by him show that God the Father works by the Son.

Everything came into being out of nothing by his power. Other biblical writers tell us the same thing. Listen to what John said in John 1.3.

[14:49] He said, And the writer to the Hebrews put it this way in Hebrews 1.1 and 2.

He said, So the third prepositional phrase affirms that creation also exists for Jesus.

The literal translation there would be, It exists unto him. And this means that Jesus is the goal of all creation. In other words, everything exists to display his glory.

And ultimately, he will be glorified in that creation. So if Jesus made all things, how could he be a created being himself?

It would be hard to make all things if you had to have somebody make you first. But Paul's argument in these verses can be illustrated by an artist who produces a sculpture.

[16:03] Originally, the idea and details of the sculpture come from the mind of the artist. And he builds the proportions, the perspectives, the figures, and the things that he wants to emphasize in the statue.

Then the sculpture is actually constructed and the artist is the only person who can see it as it takes shape. But finally, when it's made, those who admire the finished work think of the artist to imagine, plan, and accomplish the work of beauty.

So as long as the sculpture stands, people remember and appreciate the artist. And in the same way, Jesus is the central point of all creation and he rules over it.

Many and perhaps most people today would say that if there is a God, God must have created the world for the people. The Bible says the opposite, though.

The Bible says that people were created for God and for his glory. Here's a quote from John Piper that puts it in perspective as well. He asked a series of questions.

[17:05] He said, Do you love the thought that you exist to make God look glorious? Do you love the thought that all creation exists to display the glory of God?

Do you love the truth that all history is designed by God to one day be a completed canvas that best displays in the best way possible the greatness and beauty of God?

Do you love the fact that Jesus Christ came in the world to vindicate the righteousness of God and to repair the injury that we had done to the reputation of God's glory?

Do you love the truth that you personally exist to make God look like what he really is? Glorious.

And then he goes on to say, I ask again, Do you love the fact that your salvation is meant to put the glory of God's grace on display?

Do you love seeing and showing the glory of God? This is why God created the universe. This is why he ordained history. This is why he sent his son. This is why you exist.

[18:08] Forever to see and to savor and to show the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

Then he closes it by saying, Do you embrace this calling as your treasure and your joy?

Here's another way to summarize Paul's use of three different prepositions here. It's a way to refute the philosophy of the false teachers. For centuries, the Greek philosophers had taught that everything needed a primary cause, an instrumental cause, and a final cause.

The primary cause in that model is the plan, the instrumental cause is the power, and the final cause is the purpose. Well, you can see from these verses that when it comes to creation, Jesus Christ is the primary cause because he planned the details.

He's also the instrumental cause because he made it, and he's the final cause because he did it for his own pleasure. When Paul talks about Jesus' work in creation, he expressed the dimensions of creations, and he said it like this.

He said, They are things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or dominions or authorities. We see a few pairs of things here.

[19:29] The first pairing of groups is things in heaven, and the second pairing here is things on earth. Then the next thing we see is visible things and invisible things.

So each of these pairings is another way to emphasize that Jesus created all things because if he created things on heaven and on earth, and if he created the visible and the invisible, then obviously he created everything.

And when he talks about thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities, he's referring to various ranks of angels here. Far from being an angel himself, like the Colossian false teachers taught, Jesus actually created the angels.

And we'll see as we go through the rest of Colossians that these spirit beings occupy a significant place in the letter. The special attention that they receive suggests that there's a preoccupation in Colossae about them.

They're going to be the object of a lot of discussion here and also in chapter 2, starting in verse 8 all the way to chapter 3, verse 4. And Paul seems to have felt the need to note that these spirit beings were created by the power of Christ and they're conquered by the power of the cross.

[20 : 48] So scripture is clear that Jesus is not an angel, but the creator of the angels. He's above the angels who in fact worship him and come under his authority.

Jesus' reaction to the unseen world, like his relationship to the visible universe, proves that he is God. Before we move on to verse 17, let's just look at some facts about creation that should make us appreciate Christ's power even more.

Because by studying the creation, we can get a glimpse of the power, knowledge, and wisdom of the person who created it. Think about the sheer size of the universe.

The sun, for example, has a diameter of 864,000 miles. That's 100 times that of Earth's. And it could hold 1.3 million planets the size of Earth inside it.

The star Betelgeuse, however, has a diameter of 100 million miles, which is larger than the Earth's orbit around the sun. So we can wake up each day confident that we won't freeze to death because in the sun that we so easily take for granted, hundreds of billion, billion, billion, billion, and if you're looking at your handout there, you see that's 10 with 38 zeros.

[22 : 06] Anyway, 10 with 38 zeros fusion reactions take place every second. So that's just one second that that happens in. And more than 400 million tons of hydrogen are converted into helium every second in the heart of the sun.

And this is only one sun among billions of trillions of others, which are a constant inferno of chemical and nuclear reactions. All of those are the product of the power and sustaining energy of Jesus who sits enthroned at the right hand of God.

Here's another fact for you related to the sun. It actually takes sunlight traveling at 186,000 miles per second about eight and a half minutes to reach Earth.

But that same light would take more than four years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, which is some 24 trillion miles from Earth. The galaxy to which our sun belongs is the Milky Way, as we know, and it contains hundreds of billions of stars.

And astronomers estimate that there are millions or even billions of galaxies. What they can see leads them to estimate the number of stars in the universe at 10 to the 25th power.

[23 : 21] So that's roughly the number of all the grains of sand on all the world's beaches. That gives you an idea of just how big the universe is, and that's only what we know about so far.

The universe also bears witness to the tremendous wisdom and knowledge of its creator. Some of you may have heard scientists talk about the anthropic principle, which states that the universe appears to be carefully designed for the well-being of mankind.

Think about this. A change in the rate of the Earth's rotation around the sun or on its axis would be catastrophic. The Earth would become either too hot or too cold to support life.

If the moon were much nearer to the Earth, huge tides would inundate the continents. A change in the composition of the gases that make up our atmosphere would also be fatal to life.

A slight change in the mass of the proton would result in the dissolution of hydrogen atoms, and that would result in mass destruction of the universe because hydrogen is the dominant element.

[24 : 30] It's interesting, isn't it, that they're finally starting to realize that Earth seems to be designed for the well-being of mankind? We knew all that all the way back in the first chapter of Genesis.

But the creation also gives silent testimony to the intelligence of its creator. I put this quote from Max Planck in your handout as well. He won the Nobel Prize, and he's one of the founders of modern physics.

He wrote, According to everything taught by the exact sciences about the immense realm of nature, a certain order prevails, one independent of the human mind.

This order can be formulated in terms of purposeful activity. There is evidence of an intelligent order of the universe to which both man and nature are subservient.

Scientists may have learned of this principle that we refer to as the anthropic principle and also intelligent design only recently, but the Bible speaks of these principles in both the Old and New

Testament.

[25 : 38] We mentioned Genesis already, but listen to David's words in Psalm 19, verses 1 through 6. David wrote, The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In them He has sent a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The testimony of nature to its Creator is so clear that only through willful unbelief can men reject it. And Paul spoke about that truth in Romans 1, verses 19 through 23.

So listen to Romans 1, verses 19 through 23. Paul wrote, For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

[26 : 50] For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

So like those who deny Christ's deity, those who reject Him as Creator give evidence of a mind darkened by sin and blinded by Satan. And this brings us to verse 17 of Colossians 1, and it's the last verse we'll cover tonight.

Verse 17 is a summary statement of both sections that we've considered so far. Verse 17 says, And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

[27 : 54] This is similar to what John said in John 1, 1 and 2. John wrote, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. Jesus said these words in John 8, 58 about Himself. He said, Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.

And of course, He's saying that He is the true God there, the eternal, existing God. The Old Testament affirms this truth as well, and these words come from the prophet Micah.

Listen to Micah 5, 2. Micah 5, 2 says, But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days.

Obviously, you see there that even before He came forth, He existed, which of course we knew that already from the verses we've seen tonight. And then Revelation 22, 13 describes Him as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

[29 : 06] We see from verse 17, though, that not only did Jesus create the universe, He also sustains it. He maintains the delicate balance necessary for life's existence.

He quite literally holds all things together. He's the power behind every consistency in the universe, and He's the one who keeps all entities in space in their proper motion.

He's the energy in the universe, and listen to this quote from Lee Chestnut. He describes the puzzle of why the nucleus of the atom holds together. He says, Consider the dilemma of the nuclear physicist when he finally looks in utter amazement at the pattern he had now drawn of the oxygen nucleus.

For here are eight positively charged protons closely associated together within the confines of this tiny nucleus. With them are eight neutrons, a total of 16 particles, eight positively charged, and eight with no charge.

Earlier physicists had discovered that like charges of electricity and like magnetic poles repel each other, and unlike charges attract each other. And the entire history of electrical phenomena and electrical equipment had been built up on these principles, and they're known as Coulomb's Law of Electrostatic Force and the Law of Magnetism.

[30 : 30] But what they couldn't explain was what holds the nucleus together. Why didn't it fall apart? Because it doesn't fit this pattern. And so why don't the atoms then that are made up from these nuclei fly apart?

Well, apparently Mr. Chestnut hadn't read Colossians 1.17 whenever he wrote that quote because we could have told him what the answer to that question is. And we do know that one day in the future God will dissolve the strong nuclear force.

Peter describes that as the day when the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the things that are done on it will be exposed.

That comes from 2 Peter 3.10. So with the strong nuclear force no longer operative, Colom's Law will take effect and the nuclei of atoms will fly apart at that time and the universe will explode. But until that time we can be thankful that Christ upholds all things by the word of his power. Jesus Christ must be God because he made the universe, he existed outside of the universe and before it and he's also the one who preserves it.

[31 : 42] The scientific explanations explaining God's existence are good to study but let's talk about why Colossians 1.17 likely was more than just a summary statement for the Colossians.

Back when we first started Colossians several weeks ago we talked about how ancient Colossae was located in the Lycus Valley about 100 miles inland from Ephesus and that area was the center of repeated earthquakes so it was similar in that sense to living in California and we know that a major devastating earthquake hit this area sometime in A.D. 60 or 61 much of the city was destroyed and numerous lives were lost.

Most scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter during his Roman imprisonment sometime around 60 A.D. So because of that either just before or soon after they received this letter the entire city of Colossae was about to be seriously shaken and they were shaken literally there.

Knowing this makes Paul's statement all the more significant because whatever coherence or unity the universe displays it's due to the continual exertion of divine power from the Son of God.

The risen Christ sustains and upholds all things. And Jesus Christ is the sustaining and supportive power by which all that he has conceived and constructed should stay in being.

[33 : 10] He didn't create everything just to skip town later. From the moment of its inception until now and for as long as he wills Jesus sustains all things guides all things and is in the process of providentially bringing all things to the proper consummation in and for him.

So if the earthquake hit Colossae soon after their reception of Paul's letter I suspect that the Colossians would have been encouraged with the reminder that in Jesus their Lord and Savior all things were still being upheld.

They would know that if there was a shaking it was because the Lord had willed it. No matter how widespread the destruction and no matter how disconcerting the loss Jesus had not lost his grip on this world or their lives.

When we think about it in today's terms for us today the shaking may be spiritual or political or economic in nature but still in Christ all things hold together.

The world may be appearing to be swept up and away in moral chaos but in Christ all things still hold together. One crisis may crash upon another like the waves of the ocean but in Christ all things still hold together.

[34 : 29] And here's one more thing to think about. Don't think of Jesus merely as holding up the world like he was Atlas holding aloft the globe on some shrunken shoulders like he was intensely laboring under his incredible rate.

No, the Lord Jesus is bearing the universe toward a consummation. He's moving and managing and orchestrating all things that he sustains so that on the final day his glory will be seen by everyone and his purpose will have been perfectly attained.

But in the meantime remember this every heartbeat every flutter of an eyelid every rustle of every blade of grass every breath you breathe is sustained by the Son of God.

And that's why Paul could say as he did in Acts 17 28 that in him we live and move and have our being.