

The Preeminence of Christ (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] Tonight, we'll finish looking at Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 through 20.

! Let's go ahead and jump right into those verses before we do some review of what we covered last week.! Starting with verse 15, Paul wrote, He, talking about Jesus, 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. 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.

[1 : 12] We covered the first three verses of this section in our last lesson. In verse 15, we saw that Jesus is the manifestation of the concealed.

We saw in the verse that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. And this terminology is similar to Hebrews 1.3, where the writer of Hebrews stated that Jesus is the exact representation of God. It's also similar to John 1.18, where John said Jesus has made Him, meaning God in that case, known. In Christ, the invisible God became visible.

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

We also spent some time discussing what Paul meant by saying that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. And we'll see that word firstborn come up again tonight.

[2 : 13] Although the word translated as firstborn can mean firstborn chronologically, it refers primarily to position or rank. Firstborn simply means of first importance or first rank.

Jesus Christ, of course, is not a created being. He's eternal God. We talked about how nature reveals the existence, power, and wisdom of God, but nature cannot reveal the very essence of God to us.

It's only in Christ that the invisible God is revealed perfectly. No mere preacher can perfectly reveal God, and so Jesus Christ must be God Himself.

In the second section of the lesson we covered last week, we saw that Jesus is the maker of the creation. And this proves that Jesus Himself has always existed.

Paul said that all things were created by Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus. And if Jesus had been created Himself, creating all things would have been impossible for Him.

[3 : 15] The passage affirms that creation exists for Him, and the literal expression there means unto Him. And that means that Jesus is the goal of all creation. Everything exists to display His glory, and ultimately He will be glorified in His creation.

We talked about how when it comes to creation, Jesus Christ is the primary cause because He planned it. He's the instrumental cause because He produced it.

And He's also the final cause because He did it for His own pleasure. Verse 17 is a summary statement of the verses before it. And in that verse, Paul emphasized again that Jesus is eternally existent because He is before all things.

We also saw that Jesus is the powerful sustainer of the universe. Because of Him, all things hold together, and His power guarantees that the universe is under control and not chaotic.

From the moment of its inception until now, and for as long as Jesus wills, Jesus sustains all things, He guides all things, and He is in the process of bringing all things to their proper consummation.

[4 : 24] And again, that will be His glory. So, so far in this passage, we've seen that Jesus is the manifestation of the concealed and the maker of the creation.

This brings us to the new material that we'll cover tonight. And in verse 18, we see that Jesus is the master of the church. Jesus is the master of the church.

Verse 18 says, And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn.

There's that word again. The firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.

Notice the change in focus with the first sentence. Verse 15 told us that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. Verse 16 said twice that Jesus created all things.

Verse 17 showed that Jesus existed before all things. And it also showed that Jesus holds all things together. From His eternal priority to all things, His unique role in the origin of all things, and His supreme position in the integration of all things and their final destiny, we suddenly see that He is the head of something called the church.

[5 : 44] And the word usually translated church in English Bibles quite simply means an assembly or gathering of people. So imagine, if you will, that you were part of the believers gathered in Philemon's house listening to this letter being read to them by Tychicus.

The gathering was referred to as the church in Philemon's house in Philemon verse 2. So is Paul trying to draw some kind of connection between Christ's relationship to the whole universe and beyond and His relationship to a small gathering of people who have come to faith in Him?

Well, the answer, of course, is yes. That's precisely what Paul is doing there. Jesus is not only the beginning of all things, He's the new beginning as well.

The one who's the firstborn of all creation, we are now told, is the firstborn from the dead. Not only is He prior to all things in every sense, He's been raised from the dead so that in everything He might be preeminent.

A few lines before this passage, Paul spoke of the domain of darkness in verse 13. Then in verse 14, he spoke about the forgiveness of sins.

[6 : 56] In other words, although Christ is the Supreme One in whom all things have their origin and on whom all things depend for their very existence and to whom all things move, He's not now the head of all things as He ought to be.

And that's because all powers don't presently recognize His preeminence. There's still sin and darkness and death in the world. But that is going to change.

By His resurrection from the dead, Jesus is also the new beginning. And the purpose of this new beginning is that He will become what, in fact, He is, first in every sense.

So with that overview, let's dig deeper into what verse 18 tells us. The verse says that Christ is the head of the body, the church. Many metaphors are used in Scripture to describe the church.

It's called a family, a kingdom, a vineyard, a flock, a building, and also a bride. But the most profound metaphor is that of a body.

[7 : 59] The church is a body, and Christ is the head of the body. When it talks about Christ being head, the concept is not used in the sense of being head of something like a company.

But instead, it looks at the church as a living organism, inseparably tied together by the living Christ. Christ controls every part of it and gives it life and direction.

His life lived out through all the members provides the unity of the body. He energizes and coordinates the diversity within the body, a diversity of spiritual gifts and ministries, that comes together to form the whole church.

He also directs the body's mutuality as individual members serve and support each other. 1 Corinthians 12 is where Paul expands on this concept.

So we're going to take a little bit of a detour and look at several verses in 1 Corinthians 12 for a bit. You might want to turn to that because we're going to look at quite a few. And in these verses, starting with 1 Corinthians 12, verse 4, we're going to see Paul's more detailed explanation about the church.

[9 : 09] Starting with 1 Corinthians 12, verse 4 and all the way through verse 11, Paul talks about the variety of spiritual gifts within the church. He wrote, Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for common good.

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit. To another faith by the same Spirit. To another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.

To another the working of miracles. To another prophecy. To another the ability to distinguish between spirits. To another various kinds of tongues. To another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. Then continuing on in that passage from verse 12 all the way through verse 26, that's where Paul begins to expand on the body analogy that he talked about just briefly in Colossians.

[10:26] So listen to 1 Corinthians 12 verses 12 through 26. Paul wrote, For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member, but of many.

If the foot should say, I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as He chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

[11:42] On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And on those parts of the body that we think less honorable, we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Then the last verse of that section, 1 Corinthians 12, 27, is where Paul emphasizes that Christ is the head of the church, just like he does in our passage in Colossians.

1 Corinthians 12, 27 says, Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. Paul also spoke about Christ being the head of the church in Ephesians.

These verses are Ephesians 4, verses 15 and 16. He said there, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

[13:13] When Paul says that Jesus is the head of the body, the church, he's telling us that Christ is the sovereign ruling authority over his people, as well as the source from which we derive all spiritual sustenance and power.

Because of that, we can rest assured that our Lord will neither prevent or permit his body to drift into utter moral and theological chaos, nor will he let it die of spiritual starvation and thirst.

So that's a reassuring part there. It says he will neither permit his body to drift into utter moral or theological chaos, nor to die of spiritual starvation and thirst.

Some professing Christians behave and minister as if Jesus is the head of the church only in name or title. But that's not the case with Jesus. He exerts a functional authority over his body.

He can be trusted to govern and provide instruction and power for the life of his church. But we need to look to him and draw from the resources that he so generously supplies.

[14:21] Back in Colossians 1.18, look at the verse's second sentence. That says, he, talking about Christ, is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Paul still has the church in view here. The church has its origins in Jesus. We know that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

That comes from Ephesians 1.4. It's Christ who gives life to his church. His sacrificial death and resurrection on our behalf provides our new life.

As head of the body, Jesus holds the chief position or highest rank in the church. He's the beginning of the church. He's the one who originated it. We've mentioned it already, but firstborn again translates the same word as in verse 15.

Of all those who have been raised from the dead or ever will be, Christ is the highest in rank. He's the most important of all who have been raised from the dead. Without his resurrection, there could be no resurrection for others.

[15:30] The phrase from the dead in that sentence sets the direction for the new phase of the lordship of Christ. Clearly, the phrase notes the supremacy of Jesus in his resurrection.

Sometimes in the Bible, the dead may be used spiritually, like in Ephesians 2.1, or it may be used physically, like 1 Thessalonians 4.15. Here in Colossians, the real sense of the word is conveyed. Christ actually died but rose from the realm of the dead into a new life. Even so, though, we still have spiritual connotations there because death infected humanity because of sin.

And death depicts the plight of sinners who bear the consequences of sin. It recalls the fact that Jesus entered the world of sinners, endured their punishment, and rose victorious by the power of the Spirit.

In Christ, there's a new order of existence. It's a resurrection existence. It's an after-death existence that is guaranteed by the fact that Jesus, who died as any die, rose in resurrection to redeem those who trust him.

[16:42] The glorious truth for us is this. Because of his resurrection, we are assured of our own resurrection. Going back to 1 Corinthians, again, listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 20 through 23.

Paul said, But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has also come the resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive, but each in his own order, Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

And this takes us into the theme of the entire Colossians letter. The end of Colossians 1.18 says that in everything he, talking about Christ again, might be preeminent.

The word translated preeminent is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It's the word related to firstborn, but it magnifies the unique position of Jesus Christ.

[17:55] Christ is all and in all. We'll see that when we get to Colossians 3.11. And we will get to Colossians 3.11 at some point. But God raised Jesus from the dead and placed him in authority over the church so that he and only he might be seen and savored, recognized and relished, exalted and enjoyed as the sovereign Lord, the one for whom all things were made and to whom all praise should be given.

Paul's summary statement here in Colossians is similar to what he wrote in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians. Listen to Ephesians 1 verses 22 and 23.

Paul wrote there, and he, talking about God, put all things under his, meaning Christ's feet, and gave him his head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

So you see there another reference to the church being the body of Christ. And then back in 1 Corinthians one more time, verses 27 and 28 of chapter 15 say this, they say, for God has put all things in subjection under his feet, talking about Christ's feet there.

But when it says all things are put in subjection, it is plain that he is accepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

[19:28] That takes us through verse 18, but we have two more verses to cover in our look at verses 15 through 20. So we've seen that Christ is the manifestation of the concealed, the maker of the creation, and the master of the church.

In the last two verses, verses 19 and 20, we see that Christ also is the mediator through the cross. The mediator through the cross.

Listen to verses 19 and 20 again. They say, 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.

We talked last week about three prepositions in verse 16, and we see those same three prepositions again in these verses. It says, In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Then, they say, Through him all things were reconciled to him. That comes from verse 20. So, in the death of Jesus, God was doing something comparable to the creation of all things.

[20 : 42] It was as big as that, and it's as purposeful as that. He's creating again the new order of believers in Christ. There's nothing that can be added to Christ to make him a better or a greater Savior.

It says, In him all the fullness should dwell, and the Greek word translated fullness there is one of the words which the false teachers in Colossae used. The original word translated fullness means the sum total of all the divine power and attributes, and the false teachers believed that these divine power and attributes were divided among various spirits that came from God.

They didn't believe they could be centered in one place. Paul, though, very clearly counters that false teaching by stating that all the fullness of deity is not spread out in small doses among a group of spirits.

Instead, it dwells fully in Christ alone. There's nothing lacking in Christ because the fullness of deity, power, and grace are his.

He's able to save to the uttermost all who come to God by him, and it is out of his fullness that believers receive constant grace. That's something we should be very thankful for.

[21 : 59] It's out of his fullness that we receive constant grace, not just grace for salvation, but grace to continue living every day. Verse 19 tells us more than that Christ is the fullness of God.

The verse says that the fullness of God was pleased and is pleased to dwell in Christ. The word dwell there means much more than to simply reside.

The form of the verb means to be at home permanently. The late Kenneth West, a noted Greek expert, pointed out in his commentary on Colossians that the verb indicates that this fullness was not something added to Christ's being, but was part of his essential being permanently.

In other words, he always had the fullness of God dwelling with him. The Father would not permanently give his fullness to some created being, so the fact that it pleased the Father to have his fullness dwelling in Christ is another proof that Jesus Christ is himself God.

Because Jesus is God, he's able to do what no mere man could ever do. He's able to reconcile sinners to a holy God. The natural mind of the unsaved sinner is at war with God.

[23 : 14] The sinner may be sincere, religious, and even moral, but he's still at war with God. If there's to be reconciliation between man and God, the initiative and the action has to come from God.

It's in Christ that God was reconciled to man, but it was not the incarnation of Christ that accomplished the reconciliation, nor was it the example that he lived among men.

It was through his death that peace was made between God and man. Colossians 1:20 says that he made peace through the blood of his cross. The word reconcile is one of the most significant and descriptive terms in all of Scripture.

It's one of the five key words used in the New Testament to describe the riches of salvation in Christ. The other four are justification, redemption, forgiveness, and adoption.

And here's a quick summary of what those mean. In justification, the sinner stands before God guilty and condemned, but is declared righteous. In redemption, the sinner stands before God as a slave, but is granted his freedom.

[24 : 27] In forgiveness, the sinner stands before God as a debtor, but the debt is paid and forgotten. In reconciliation, the sinner stands before God as an enemy, but becomes his friend.

And in adoption, the sinner stands before God as a stranger, but is made a son. The verb normally used for reconcile means to change or to exchange.

In New Testament usage, it speaks of a change in relationship. 1 Corinthians 7-11 refers to a woman being reconciled to her husband. And in two other New Testament usages, Romans 5-10 and 2 Corinthians 5 verses 18-20, the same word speaks of God and man being reconciled.

When people change from being at odds with each other to being at peace, they are said to be reconciled. And when the Bible speaks of reconciliation, it refers to restoration of a right relationship between God and man.

There's another term for reconcile, though, that's used in Colossians 1-20 and 1-22. It's a compound word made up the basic word for reconcile that we just discussed with a preposition added to intensify its meaning even more.

[25 : 44] So with that addition, it means that we are thoroughly, completely, and totally reconciled. Paul no doubt used this stronger term in Colossians as a counterattack against the false teachers.

Because they held that Christ was merely another spirit being coming from God, they also denied the possibility of man being reconciled to God by Christ alone. In refuting that belief, Paul emphasizes that there is total, complete, and full reconciliation through the Lord Jesus.

And that's because Jesus possesses all the fullness of deity. Jesus is able to fully reconcile sinful men and women to God. God delighted in Jesus' central role of redemption.

Jesus' person, which is truly and fully God, and his work, which is reconciliation, occur in complete harmony with God the Father, and they fulfill the divine plan precisely.

The scope of reconciliation includes the material creation, the animal world, humanity, and spiritual beings. It may be tempting to think of reconciliation as affecting humanity alone, but the text goes far beyond that.

[27 : 01] It says he reconciled all things, whether on earth or in heaven. All of creation was touched by sin. The world was out of order and needed a correction, and this correction was provided in Christ.

Verse 20 says that Christ reconciles all things to himself, and this is an important point here. The text does not teach that because of the reconciliation, all will believe.

Instead, it's teaching that all will ultimately submit. Philippians 2, verses 6-11 is a cross-reference that explains how all will ultimately submit.

Speaking of Christ, Paul says in Philippians 2, verses 6-11, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[28 : 24] Even fallen angels and unredeemed men will be reconciled to God for judgment, but only in the sense of submitting to him for final sentencing. Their relationship to him will change from that of enemies to that of the judge.

They will be sentenced to hell, unable to any longer pollute God's creation. They will be stripped of their power and forced to bow in submission to God. Fallen angels and unredeemed men participate in the reconciliation because they will be subjugated, pacified, and rendered incapable of disrupting the harmony and beauty of God's creative handiwork.

According to Scripture, all evil will be excluded from heaven, all wickedness will be banished from heaven's boundaries, and all unbelief will be combined in hell.

You can see that in Revelation chapter 21 verses 8 and 27 and also Revelation 22 15. So the point is this.

The point is that peace can be achieved in one of two ways, either by the removal of hostility through grace or by the pacification and subjugation of enemies through power and judgment.

[29 : 36] And here is a real-life illustration to show how that can actually work. At the close of World War II, hostility ceased. The battles came to an end and the threat of Nazi domination was terminated.

The Axis powers were all defeated, subjugated, and compelled to submit to the oversight and authority of their conquerors. Undoubtedly, they still had some lingering hatred and disdain toward the allies, but the allies were still victorious.

Harmony and order and peace, as much as is possible in this side of heaven, were restored, and so there was, in a word, reconciliation there, even though not all were happy with the results of that reconciliation.

So, in the sacrifice of Christ, God made provision for the world. However, all persons will not be reconciled to God in the saving sense of being redeemed. The benefits of Christ's atonement are applied only to the elect who alone come to saving faith in Him.

We'll look at the benefits of the atonement that are applied to the elect when we look at verses 21 through 23 next week. But to wrap up the passage on the chapter of Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 through 20, these verses belong to Paul's report of praying for the Colossian believers that

began in verse 9.

[31 : 04] What he says in verses 15 through 20, in other words, is related to what he was praying for in verses 9 through 12. Remember, he was praying that his readers will be giving thanks to the Father, but also that they'll be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

Paul was showing those Colossian believers the astonishing significance of their faith in Christ Jesus. God has acted so that the nations like these Gentiles in Colossae and like us here in Bartlesville were qualified to share in the inheritance of God's people.

After 2,000 years, it's too easy for us sometimes to take this marvel for granted. We don't often easily see how utterly astonishing it is.

We think about Christianity as a world religion, but when this letter was written in about AD 60, it was little more than an energetic Jewish sect apparently attracting some interest from a number of non-Jewish people in some places around the Mediterranean world.

The claim made by Paul in this letter is as astounding today as it was on the day when this letter was first read to the people in Philemon's house. The light has dawned for the whole world.

[32 : 18] We saw that in verse 6 of chapter 1. That's the news about Jesus Christ and the word of truth. We saw that in verse 5 of chapter 1. The gospel is the word of truth too, and it's now the most important force in world history.

And now, God's purpose for the whole human race is being realized as the gospel of Christ bears fruit and grows throughout the world in the lives of those who come to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw that in verses 6 through 10 when we looked at those verses a few weeks ago. Now the time has come in the sorry history of the world for the darkness to give way to the light, for hostility to give way to peace, and for ignorance to give way to knowledge, and for evil to give way to good. It's also time for lies to give way to the truth, for foolishness to give way to wisdom everywhere, in every nation, in every city, in every village, in the whole world.

That is what is happening as the gospel spreads across the world. So tonight, we've explored, among other things, how the fullness of God dwells in Christ.

[33 : 28] And the apostle John's words in John 1.16 remind us why true believers can be so thankful for that. John wrote in John 1.16 for from his, talking about Christ's fullness, we have all received grace upon grace, and we continue to receive that grace upon grace.

With that thought in mind, let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we thank you for the reminder that we have and continue to receive grace upon grace from you.

Help us always keep that in mind. help us look at it with a sense of marvel and wonder like the people in Colossae must have heard it when they heard it for the very first time many thousands of years ago.

Let us always remember the sacrifice that it took to give us that grace. And let us be thankful for your son, Jesus Christ, who made that sacrifice for us and through whom, who we have reconciliation to you.

Let us be even more willing to share that with our friends and neighbors. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Thank you.