

“In All Things Christ Preeminent”
Colossians 1:15-20

January 26, 2014

SI: We’re studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians this winter.
Most of Paul’s letters follow the same pattern.

He has a long, warm, thoughtful greeting.

Then he gets into doctrine—but not just some random doctrine.

He teaches doctrines that give him a foundation
for addressing the problems in that particular church.

The problem might be division and conflict, or false teaching, or ungodly behavior.

Then after teaching the doctrine, he addresses the problem.

He says: Now, based on what we believe, this is how we ought to live.

We finished last Sunday Paul’s extensive and warm greeting.

And now we get to doctrine. I’ve already told you the problem that was on
Paul’s mind—the so-called Colossian heresy.

It was teaching or just ideas going around church that to really have a great life or a
great church you must have the fullness, you have to experience the fullness.

That was the buzz word. We want to be full. We want the fullness.

The way you get it is by something that moves you beyond faith in Christ.

This Colossian heresy did not deny the need for faith in Christ.

But you need to move on to this next thing if you are going to get the fullness—
this deeper spirituality came through different practices they promoted.

Paul doesn’t hit this teaching right away.

He starts by laying a foundation of good doctrine.

And since this teaching said you need more than Christ to get the fullness—
that’s exactly where Paul starts—with the greatness of Jesus Christ.

This passage is one of the mountain-top teachings in the New Testament
about the person and work of Christ.

INTRO: If you've ever been to Stone Mountain, you know how it surprises you with its size. You catch glimpses of it now and again as you are getting closer. Maybe there is a gap in the trees, or you cross an overpass and there it is—this looming gray dome in the distance. Then you turn into the park and with that completely unobstructed view it seems even more massive.

Then you get even closer, maybe you take the cable car to the top—and that's when the greatness of the mountain really strikes you. Those towering sides of granite, 780 feet high, that huge carving of the Confederate generals. If you have any fear of heights at all, it gives you a shiver. If you wanted to get an even better feel for the size of Stone Mountain, you could hike around it—it's five miles in circumference.

But even if you did all that, climbed or took the cable car to the top, hiked all the way around the base—you would still have only the barest glimpse of Stone Mountain. That's because what you see is just the tip of an igneous rock that goes seven miles deep and stretches up to nine miles in all directions under ground.

That's an analogy of what Paul is saying in this passage. Jesus Christ looms over all of life.

Even people who want to keep him at a distance can't shut him out from view. Recently, someone told me about a family member who became very angry when Jesus was mentioned. He said, don't say that name again in my house! But there he is, through that gap in the trees, there on the horizon.

And for those of you who have put your faith in Jesus Christ, you know that as you have come closer and closer to him over the course of life, he's even bigger than he first seemed.

You've marveled at his incarnation at Christmas.

You've sung about the cross and his death.

You've experienced the power of his resurrection.

His blood, his name, his Spirit—those are not just words—they are his mighty working of salvation's plan.

You've seen his hand directing the small things in your life, and the large events in history.

You've prayed to him, you've told your children about him.

You've listened to your children pray to him, and know that he loves them. You've rejoiced in stories about the advance of his kingdom in the hearts of people you know and even people you don't know.

You've come close to the mountain, you've gazed on the magnificence.

You've felt a shiver of awe. You want to see more and explore the beauty.

And for all of that, you have just seen a fraction of Christ's grandeur.

Every analogy or illustration breaks down at some point.

Jesus Christ is not a mountain, he's a person.

His greatness is not impersonal, like this huge rock in Georgia— it's the greatness of a person.

And when you are in the presence of a great person, a person preeminent in his or her field, what happens? It changes you. Even if it's only for a short time.

Suppose you play basketball, you're good at it, even a little cocky, best on team.

And while you are shooting in the gym by yourself, in walks one of the greats in his prime—Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, LeBron James.

He says: Let's play. In the presence of that preeminence you'd be humbled.

You'd be happy. You'd be grinning. But every bit of cockiness would be gone.

Or suppose you had a life-threatening condition requiring surgery.

Someone who knows medicine tells you: Your surgeon is not just the best in the country, he's is recognized worldwide as the foremost expert on this procedure.

Then in comes your surgeon, and he says—It's going to be fine.

Your knot of worry would relax as you rested in his preeminence.

Put all these illustrations together and you get an idea of what Paul is communicating:

Majestic greatness that can't be fully seen, but what you can see fills you with awe, preeminent honor and excellence of a person whose very presence changes you—that's Jesus Christ.

So fullness in your life, and fullness in our church doesn't come by moving past faith in Christ to the next exciting or novel thing.

It comes by knowing and worshipping and submitting to him.

Drawing closer to him so that you are changed by his preeminence.

Two big headings in this passage: Christ is the Creator, Christ is the Re-Creator.

He's the Lord of creation, and he's the lord of the new creation. Look at both.

MP#1 Jesus Christ is the Creator, he's the Lord of all creation.

Paul starts by saying that Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

The phrase “image of God” brings to mind two important passages of Scripture

Genesis 1, in the Garden of Eden.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

What that tells us is that true humanity is made in the image of God.

Jesus is the true man. He is genuinely human as we are made to be.

So as the perfect man, he is the image of God.

The other important passage that comes to mind is the Second Commandment.

Told there not to make any images of God—no grave image.

The Second Commandment is not a prohibition against worshipping false gods.

That's what the First Commandment forbids. No other gods before me.

The Second Commandment forbids worshipping the true God the wrong way.

Don't make images of God, don't make pictures of God for your worship.

Remember the incident of the golden calf. The Israelites made this calf to worship.

They didn't say: This is a new god or a different god.

They said: We're celebrating a festival to the Lord, to Yahweh who brought us up out of Egypt. We've represented the true God in an image we can worship.

God forbids that. Any attempt to represent me is reductionistic.

It's offensive to me, because it's not me. It's a distortion. It's your image of me.

So there is only one perfect image of God, and that is Jesus Christ.

If you want to know what God is like, then you have to look at him.

There is no other way to know God. He is fully God in a fully human nature.

During World War II, a chaplain in the British army, Thomas Torrance,

found a soldier wounded and dying. This is what happened:

“As I knelt down and bent over him, he said, ‘Padre, is God really like Jesus?’ I assured him that he was—the only God that there is, the God who had come to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Savior. As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away.”

God has shown his face to us in the man Christ Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God.

Then Paul calls him the firstborn over all creation.

This term firstborn has been frequently misunderstood and misused. The Jehovah's Witnesses today and various other groups through the years have claimed that this teaches the Son of God had a beginning. Since he had a beginning, he is not equal with God the Father.

If you've ever argued with Jehovah's Witnesses when they knock on your door—this is bound to be one of the verses they quote.

They say, here it is, plain as day—firstborn.

That means he had a beginning. He was created.

How do you answer that?

Of course “firstborn” can literally mean the first child of parents.

Jesus was Mary and Joseph's firstborn.

But the term firstborn had another meaning in Hebrew culture.

It meant heir. It meant the right to inherit and to receive the very same honor and status and place as the father in the family hierarchy.

Firstborn expresses sovereignty and supremacy of rank, not chronology.

In Psalm 89, the Lord makes a promise to David.

“I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”

David wasn't firstborn in a literal sense. He wasn't the oldest of his brothers.

He was actually the youngest. He wasn't even the first king of Israel.

But God promised to make him firstborn, which means highest in rank.

Heir to all of the glory of his dynasty.

So Christ the firstborn of creation means that he is the heir of creation.

It will come to him. It is his by right.

And that is even made more clear when Paul goes on to say he is the creator.

By him all things were created—then Paul lists all things by categories—

in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, thrones, powers, rulers, authorities.

Then he repeats: All things were created by him and for him.

Now what we have in these first two verses, 15 and 16,

is this grand and fundamental affirmation of our faith.

Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine.

He's a man—the only truly perfect man—and only in him can we see God.

And he is the God who created everything and will inherit all things.

Now, what do you do with this doctrine?

There are so many implications.

I want to focus on just one implication of Christ's lordship over creation that is in tune with the message of Colossians.

This is something that Paul is going to bring out later in the letter, but let's have a little appetizer before we get there.

If Jesus Christ is indeed fully God and fully man, if he is the creator and heir of creation, then all creation is holy unto him, and all human endeavors belongs to him.

That means there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular.

A truly spiritual life is not withdrawal from the world or people.

A spiritual life is not focusing on religious activities.

Instead, the spiritual life is one that embraces and enjoys and uses the good things of creation and of human life because they are under Christ's lordship.

That means whatever your work is—whether a butcher, baker, candlestick maker—that work is under Christ's lordship and is dignified by his human nature.

So there is not division between holy work and secular work in serving God.

Martin Luther said:

“The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil . . . The whole world abounds with service to the Lord—not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field.”

Luther was responding to the medieval idea that denigrated any work outside the church as less than spiritual. But think of the ways certain work denigrated today.

Think how feminism, for example, has denigrated work in home and kitchen.

There are always going to be those who look down on certain work.

But the Lordship of Christ over creation and his human nature dignifies all work.

William Perkins, a great English Puritan wrote:

The work of a shepherd tending sheep is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge giving a sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister preaching.

William Tyndale—Bible translator who was burned at the stake for faith, wrote:

“There is a difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching the Word of God, but as touching to please God, none at all.”

Do you need encouragement in your work. Sometimes feel on the treadmill.

Take the Lordship of Jesus Christ over Creation and apply it to your work.

The eternal Son of God is also the carpenter's son.

But Paul doesn't stop with the lordship of Christ over creation—
because that's not the whole picture.

You could go out of here with the glorious thought of how your work belongs to Jesus—and Monday morning it might seem like your work belongs to the devil.

Things going wrong, maybe very wrong. People causing all sorts of problems. Jesus might have created the world, but things are not right.

The world is full of terrible things—tornados, cancer, accidents, birth defects. And people—mean, cruel, greedy, unfaithful.

That brings us to the second point.

MP#2 Jesus Christ is the Re-Creator, he's the Lord of the new creation

When we read this passage, did you notice some repetition in words and phrases?

That's because verses 15-20 are an early hymn of the church.

Most scholars say there are two stanzas with a short bridge between them.

In the first stanza says:

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

The second stanza says:

He is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead.

The first stanza stresses his creation and rule over all things—
the word all is repeated three times.

The second stanza stresses his reconciliation of all things—
and the word all is repeated again three times.

There are several other parallels that show this is a two-stanza hymn.

The point of the first stanza is that Christ has created everything, belongs to him.

The point of the second stanza is that Christ is restoring and reconciling
and rescuing and redeeming everything broken and estranged by the fall.

His work is described as a re-creation.

It starts: "He is the beginning." What does that bring to mind?

Genesis 1 again. "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth."

But the first stanza of the hymn has already talked about that first creation.

So what is this? It's the reference to a new beginning, a new creation.

And the very next line tells us how Jesus has brought about this new creation.

He is the firstborn from among the dead. There's that title firstborn again.

Remember it means heir, first in place and honor.

So what does firstborn from among the dead mean?

It's referring to Christ's resurrection.

Since the time of Adam, death has reigned over humanity because of sin. But when Jesus rose on Easter morning, he broke the chain of death, and in doing that began the restoration of all things. He became the re-creator of all things broken by the fall.

The hymn says that by his resurrection he is supreme or preeminent over all things. That means he is not only Lord of the good things of creation—he's also Lord of all the bad things that happen. He rules over those things too, and he is redeeming those situations, and pushing back the effects of the fall.

The prototype for that is the cross. Making peace with his blood, shed on cross. He took a terrible act of injustice and cruelty, the murder of the Son of God and the hands of men—and through his re-creative power, he turned the cross into a doorway for forgiveness and life. And he is at work right now, doing that with every broken thing.

But you may say: That sounds great, but I don't see it.

I watch the news every day, and it's always bad news. My grandmother lived in Atlanta for decades, whenever I would call her: Mama Fay, How are things in Atlanta? She would always say—just a bunch of raping and killing. Where is the new creation? Where is Christ making all things new?

Answering that question is the biggest challenge of the Christian life. It takes eyes of faith to see Christ's resurrection power at work in a world that is still fallen and enslaved to sin.

We get World magazine. If you've never heard of World, it's a weekly news magazine, written from a Christian perspective. It is excellent. The most recent issue marked the 41st anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, and there were several articles pertaining to abortion in America.

One of them was an interview with a man named Ryan Bomberger. He lives in Atlanta where he and his wife run a pro-life organization called the Radiance Foundation. They have a number of different focuses. One is to call attention to the huge number of black babies that are aborted.

Ryan's personal story is compelling.

He is a mixed-race man conceived through a rape.

One factor that compelled him to be in pro-life work is how rape is used as an argument for abortion. Even many pro-life politicians will concede that point.

In the interview, Ryan says:

“Out of 1.2 million abortions every year, fewer than 1% of them are due to rape. I'm the 1% always used to justify 100% of abortions . . . it's easy to dehumanize (a child conceived by rape).”

The interview deals with his and his wife's work in the pro-life movement, but I want to read you some things he says about his life.

Want you to listen for the way Jesus Christ has redeemed that violent, evil act of a man, and by his resurrection power made something good.

The interviewer Marvin Olasky asks:

What do you know about your birth mom's decision not to abort you?

I know she made a really good choice. I'm here. Thank God. Seeing my wife and my four children reminds me every day of her courageous decision.

When did you find out about the circumstances of your conception?

My mom (his adoptive mother) had thought she explained it enough to me at a much younger age, but I didn't understand my story until I was 13. In a conversation she said she could understand where my anger came from, so through that I found out the story of how I came to be. That could have been devastating, but I had an incredible foundation of love from my parents, the Bombergers.

You grew up in a farm family of 15?

The Bombergers loved all 13 of their kids, three homemade ones and 10 imported. We had Native American Black, Black-White, just Black, Vietnamese and Black. I milked cows, rode horses, and had to clean up after pigs—which is the nastiest thing in the world.

I suspect each of you did not have your own bedroom.

I have six sisters and six brothers. Four boys in one room, originally only 1½ bathrooms. Sisters take up a little bit of time in the bathroom, so we added another one and had 2½. The water often ran out because we had a well, so my sisters didn't have a whole lot of time in the bathroom anyway, but it worked. People would think our house was complete pandemonium, but it really wasn't: At times a controlled chaos, but van trips were always fun. A ton of singing. A little fighting, but my parents somehow maintained their sanity through all these years.

When you hear politicians say, “I'm opposed to abortion except in cases of rape,” do you grit your teeth?

I don't, because most of them have never talked to someone who was born as a result of rape, and they don't realize what they're saying. I'm a child of God, and Psalm 139 applies to all of us, whether we were planned or unplanned. It's easy when it's just rhetoric and statistics, but when you have real flesh and blood before you and someone with a story like mine, it transforms hearts. We've seen it happen.

The Lord Jesus Christ is at work in this fallen world,
bringing life where there is death, reconciling all things through his blood.
We are living in this strange, in-between time.
His resurrection power is at work in the world, and we can see flashes of it
in places like the Bomberger home. But we are still waiting for Christ's return
when he makes all things right.

But until that time, how do we live? One more detail in this passage.
I told you, it's a hymn, two stanzas with a short bridge between them.
The bridge is the first part of verse 18.
“And he is the head of the body, the church.”

We are the body through which Christ brings his re-creative power to fallen world.
Yes, it's the invisible work of the Holy Spirit, but we are the instruments,
we are the conduit through which Christ works as we cooperate with Spirit.
Where is God calling you to be that conduit of his Son's resurrection power?

You might not be called to adopt 10 children like the Bombergers—
but you know a person who is hurting. You can speak to him or her, encourage.
There are situations in your family, school, workplace where the sin and ugliness
of the fall can be pushed back by your prayers and kindness.
You might think people don't change, some situations are hopeless—
but Jesus Christ is the firstborn from among the dead.

You get the strength, and the courage, and the compassion to speak and act,
by gazing on him and worshipping him.