

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-23) The Person of the Gospel - Colossians 1:15-17 (Part 1)

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

A.W. Tozer opens the first chapter of his book, “The Knowledge of the Holy” with these words, “*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*”

From this statement Tozer goes on to explain how important and significant a right understanding of God is in order to rightly know and worship Him. And while I am in complete agreement with this idea, I believe that we can take this concept of Tozer’s and become even more specific in order to express this truth in a more precise way. I say to you this morning this, *what comes into our minds when we think about Christ is the most important thing about us.* What comes into your mind when you think about Christ? *What comes into our minds when we think about Christ is the most important thing about us.* Not only does what we think about Christ become the ultimate matter of life and death determining whether we will spend eternity in the blissful delights of heaven in the presence of God or in the horrific horrors of hell totally devoid of God’s blissful presence; but even for those who believe in Christ, what we think about Christ becomes the motivator for how we will live for Him; or to what extent we will live for Him. *The more we come to know about Christ, the more inclined and determined we will be to live in His likeness.* And the reverse is true, the less we know about Christ, the less inclined and the less determined we will be to live in His likeness. This “the less we know about Christ” can take many forms; I don’t need to read my Bible, I don’t need to memorize the Word of God; I don’t need to hear the praises of God’s people; I don’t need to come prepared to praise God before others; I don’t need to see if there are areas in my life that are not being lived fully to the glory of God – the less we know about Christ, the less inclined we will be to live in His likeness. But let me say it again, the more we know about Christ; the more we grow in the grace and in the knowledge of Christ, the more we will long to walk or behave even as Jesus did.

The book of our current series, the book of Colossians, is a book that is all about Christ. Thus far we have considered the opening 14 verses and have seen the power of the gospel at work in the lives of those who believe. The gospel, the good news that Jesus came to save sinners from their self-deluded and self-destructive lives leading them away from God and enabling them by His Spirit to know and live for God; this gospel is powerful; this gospel is transforming. No one who is truly receives the gospel is left unchanged; but is forever marked as those who are being filled with the knowledge of God’s will; who are walking in a manner worthy of the Lord by being fruitful in every good work; increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power according to the glorious might of God, and who are joyously giving thanks to the Father who has qualified them for heaven; who has rescued them from the horrors of the darkness of damnation and who has transferred them into the Kingdom of Jesus; all this being redemption; meaning our sins have been forgiven, have been pardon in Jesus. All that

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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which made us unfit for heaven has been made right for those who believe in Jesus; who believes in this good news and whose lives are being transformed.

This is the power of the gospel. But the power of the gospel is only powerful because it is the outworking of a person. Who is the person of the gospel? Who is the force, the will, the power of this gospel? Who is the author of the gospel? Who is one responsible for all these blessings of salvation? The person of the gospel, the person about whom this letter to the Colossians has been written; indeed the person about whom all of Scripture points us to, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having laid the foundation of the gospel, Paul now wants to communicate truths about the person of this gospel. He wants us to know Christ because what we think about Christ is the most important thing about us. Beginning in our text this morning, Colossians 1:15, Paul speaks about the wonder of the person of Jesus Christ. We see in Colossians 1:15-20 the incomparable Christ; the utter preeminence of Christ; the absolutely supremacy, priority, authority, dominion, predominance, superiority and sovereignty of Jesus Christ; no ifs, ands or buts. In no uncertain terms, our text points us to this truth; that Jesus Christ is God, come to us in the flesh and is to be worship; adored, exalted, and submitted to by all.

Let us not forget that what Paul is doing is setting up his readers to understand where the false teachers of that day had gone wrong in their understanding of Jesus Christ. I think it would be helpful if you would allow me to share with you three key false teachings concerning Christ that Paul was refuting. The first false teaching was that Christ Himself was not absolutely supreme, that there may be other creatures or other things that were of more value and more importance than Christ. In Colossians 2, the chapter where Paul gets after the false teaching, we note Paul teaching specifically that Jesus is both fully God as well as fully man. Let us read Colossians 2:9;

For in Him [Christ] all the fullness of Deity [all that makes God indeed God] dwells in bodily [human] form.

Whatever the false teaching was at the church at Colosse, it communicated that Jesus was less than fully and truly God.

The second false teaching addressed in this letter was concerning the sufficiency of Christ. The teaching was that somehow the works of Jesus were not enough, or not complete enough in themselves to make a person right with God. But if we read the Colossians 2:10 we read;

And in Him [Christ] you have been made complete [or made full]...

There seems to be a play on words between verses 9 and 10. If all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus in bodily form, then what could be missing in His work for us on the cross and at the right hand of God where He makes intercession, where He prays for us? Indeed we have been made full, or complete in Jesus.

The final aspect of false teaching that is addressed is the issue of Christ sovereignty. It was believed that only God had complete control or sovereignty over all things and that Jesus did not possess this control. And so Paul clearly teaches that Jesus has this very authority or sovereignty. Reading again from Colossians 2:10 we read;

† Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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And in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority...

It is important to see that no where are we told that the sovereignty or control of Jesus is over everything but God; but rather that as God, He is over all things. This is the Jesus whom Paul wants his readers to know. This is the Jesus that we read about in the Gospel accounts. This is the Jesus about whom the Old Testament spoke beforehand. This is the Jesus who must be worshipped, adored and submitted to as Lord of lords.

Now to accomplish this purpose of having a right view of this person of the gospel, it would appear that Paul actual did something that we ourselves are doing here in our church during our second hour. We have been blessed the last few weeks to consider hymnody; looking at various hymns of the church and noting what they communicate to us about God, about Jesus Christ, about our salvation and even about ourselves. Colossians 1:15-20 is believed to be a hymn, a written text that had been circulating in the churches for several years that communicated the truth about the Person of Jesus Christ. Why does Paul appeal to such a hymn? Beloved, remember that the false teachers were communicating that Jesus was less than what Paul and Epaphras had taught them. Paul will be writing to show that Jesus is no less than God in the flesh and that such a teaching has been the historic teaching of the church, even though at the time Paul wrote this the history of the church was only about 30 years old. The church, transformed by the gospel; knows the truth about the person of the gospel; and Colossians 1:15-20 is the testimony of the church and it continues to be the testimony of the true church even today.

This passage, in a concise and compact way, reveals to us the supremacy of Christ in both creation and in salvation. In pointed terms, Paul demonstrates with the richest of language, the deity of Jesus Christ. I have always found it interesting that this is the passage that members of cults will take us to in order to try to prove that Jesus Christ is not God; particularly the Jehovah's Witnesses who have to insert a word into the text to change its meaning. What is sad about this, it that this text, both from the language before; as well as by looking at why Paul uses this hymn, teaches just the opposite. A passage that so clearly teaches the deity of Christ has been perverted to try to make it say the opposite.

The question to consider is simply this? Who is Jesus Christ? Because what comes into our minds when we think about Christ is the most important thing about us. Who is Jesus Christ? Paul answers that question in our text, and he does so by show the supremacy of Christ in two areas. First, we are to know that Jesus Christ is supreme over creation; 15-17; and second we are to know that Jesus Christ is supreme over the new creation; over salvation; 18-20. This week we will take up Paul's statements about Christ's supremacy over creation in verses 15-17.

I. The Supremacy of Christ over Creation (Colossians 1:15-17)

If we are rightly understand the beauty and importance of this text, let us go back to verse 13 and see how Paul introduces to us the person of the gospel, Jesus Christ. Paul loves long sentences. Our English versions break these up, but let me show you how it reads in the Greek;

13 For He [the Father] rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom [the Son] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 WHO [He] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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A. Jesus is the Supreme God (1:15a)

He is the image of the invisible God...

Paul loves the subject of Christ. After mentioning Him as the beloved Son in verse 13 and the source of salvation in verse 14, he is now moved to tell us something about the beauty and wonder of Christ. What came to Paul’s mind when he thought about Christ? He knows Jesus to be the image, the *icon* of the invisible God. The word “image” or *icon* in the Greek is something we are familiar with. An icon is simple a picture or an image of something. Many of you know I love photography, especially close ups of flowers or plants. Any such capture is an image. As you look at it you can notice colors and textures and sometimes even things about that flower that you might not otherwise had noticed. It is an image. But it is an imperfect image. The picture might give you a good idea about the flower, but it can’t reproduce how the flower smells or how the flower feels. This is generally our concept of an image. But the idea of an icon in the Greek carries a bit more meaning to it. In the way that Paul uses the word here, the idea behind image is not that Jesus is merely some partial copy, an imperfect replica of the original God, but rather the idea is this, that the image or icon truly and visibly represents the fullness character or nature of the object.

Jesus is not being called a picture of God, but rather is being called the physical manifestation of the invisible God. In other words, in Jesus we have revealed to us that which was previously invisible. According to the words of Jesus in John 4, “God is Spirit...” God is invisible. In John 1:18 we read the words, “no one has seen God at any time...” That is, no one has seen in a physical form the embodiment of God because God is Spirit and Spirit is invisible to human eyes. But notice what else is said in John 1:18, “*the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.*” We learn some wonderful truths here. First, that Jesus is God. He is called the begotten God, which does not mean he became God, for Jesus has always been God and was with the Father from the beginning (John 1:1-2). The idea behind begotten God is that Jesus took His deity and became man, took on human form. In Jesus then we learn this truth, that the invisible God became visible.

This is outstanding. For if the invisible God, the perfect being that is Spirit and immaterial could ever stamp the physical, the material, with all His perfection, He has done so perfectly and completely in the person of Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God. Not only was Jesus completely and fully human as evidence in the truth of John 1:14 that the Word who became flesh dwelt among, lived among, ate among, slept among, talked among and even died among other men; but Jesus was also fully and completely God. The false teachers at Colossae had taught that Jesus was not God; that he was simply an emanation from God, one of many other such lesser revelations of God. In effect our text screams out...”Jesus is the physical, the visible manifestation of God! He is God with us, Emmanuel. Jesus is of the same substance as God in His nature, His character, and His attributes. As one writer has put it, “When Christ is called the image of God...all the emphasis is on the equality of the image with the original.” (G. Kittel quoted by Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 259). John Calvin noted, “*The sum is this – that God in Himself, that is in His naked majesty, is invisible, and that not to the eyes of the body merely, but also to the understandings of men, and that He is revealed to us in Christ alone...for in Christ He shows us His righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, His entire self.*” (Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. XXI, pg 149-150). This is why Jesus responded to Philips request to show the disciples the Father with the statement found in John 14:9 saying, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father...” Jesus is visible manifestation of the invisible God, lacking in nothing

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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that makes God, God. Why is this important? Because what comes into our minds when we think about Christ is the most important thing about us.

Look at how relentless Paul is about communicating that Jesus lacked in nothing as God, that He was in no way a lesser God, or diminished in any way. In Colossians 1:19 we read, **“For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.”** And as we already read Colossians 2:9, **“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”** Truly Jesus is God in the flesh.

B. Jesus Is the Creator (1:15b-16)

...the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him.

But Paul is just warming up with his descriptions of this Beloved Son in whom we have redemption and salvation. Not only is He the image of the invisible God, but He is also called **“the firstborn of all creation.”** This is yet another beautiful description of the wonders of Jesus that has been misused by many to try to paint the exact opposite picture of Christ than what Paul was communicating.

When we hear the word “firstborn” our immediate thought might be to think of a first child born into a family. In my family, Luke is the firstborn, meaning that he was born before Elizabeth. In this context “firstborn” has to do with two things, first that Luke came into existence and that he did so before Elizabeth. This is the meaning that so many cults seek to apply to this word, trying to prove that Jesus was born, or came into existence (and if He came into existence then He could not be true God) and that He came into existence before God created the world. There is just one problem applying this meaning to our text...it doesn’t make any sense. Here we have a case where a whole theology has been built off one aspect of the dual meaning of this word. It is true that “firstborn” could mean the one brought into existence before another. But this is not what Paul was communicating. To call Jesus the one who was brought into existence before creation contradicts not only other Scriptures, but even this passage where in verse 16 it emphatically states in the text that Jesus was the creator of all, each and everything. It does not say all “other” things except Himself. It says all things were created by Him. Again in verse 17 Paul says that Jesus is before all things created, meaning that nothing that has ever been created existed without Jesus. If this is true, then how could Jesus be a created being and therefore less than God? Our text tells us that anything that was created was created by Jesus and therefore Jesus could not be a created being, but rather is God. If “firstborn” spoke of Jesus as being the first of creation, rather than of being in place of most importance, then we would have to understand verse 18 as meaning that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead before any others, but we know that others were raised from the dead before Jesus; but certainly none with such importance, such glory and also never to die again.

I alluded to another meaning of “firstborn”. The meaning of firstborn that Paul intended here was not one of being created first, but rather of having all preeminence over all other things. In the Old Testament, the first born son was also the son of the most prominence in the family. He had the right of inheritance, possessing the highest position in the family. He received a double portion of all that his father owned and was in a position of highest honor. That is the idea here, that Jesus, as the Son of God, is in the position of highest honor. Again we will study this idea more in verse 18 where it is said that Jesus is to come to have first place in everything.

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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Nothing in all creation or even in heaven itself has more honor than Jesus. And consider this well....God does not share His glory, His honor, His position with anyone we are told repeatedly in the Old Testament. So how could Jesus come to have first place in everything, over all things in heaven and on earth, over things invisible or visible, upon any throne (it does not exclude the throne of God), unless Jesus is in fact God, the fullness of deity in bodily form. So to be called “firstborn of all creation” does not mean Jesus is part of creation, but rather that He is supreme over all creation. If Paul had intended to communicate that Jesus was part of creation, there was another word that he would have used.

And here is the point, Jesus, not some angels, not some men who are teaching secret knowledge, but Jesus is the greatest, most glorious, most to be honored being in all creation as well as in heaven itself. Notice how Paul starts piling up these ideas. In verse 16 we read, **“For by Him [in Him – in His purview, in His realm – nothing exists apart from God] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him [by His divine power] and for Him [for His glory].** Here we have an explanation as to why Jesus is given this title of “firstborn over all creation” – because He created all things. This is what makes Him supreme. This is why He is to have priority over all things, especially in our lives. He created us by His power and for His purposes.

C. Jesus is the Sustainer (1:17)

He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

The final picture we see Paul paint for us of Christ in these verses is found in verse 17 where we note that Jesus is supreme because He is the Sustainer of all things. Our text says, **“He is before all things...”** This statement itself communicates that Jesus is separate and distinct from anything that could be called created, for before there was anything other than God, Jesus was! This is the testimony of John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Jesus was in the beginning with God because He is God. How much more plain could it be? It couldn't be any clearer. Because Jesus is God, He is before and superior to all things.

But our text makes another incredible statement here saying, **“...and in Him all things hold together.”** Jesus is the Sustainer. What a great comfort this ought to be to us whenever there is chaos in our lives (which seems to be most of the time). If I could say this another way, *whatever Jesus has created, Jesus also maintains.* Beloved, Jesus is in control; Jesus is the sustainer. One of the big concerns among scientist today is whether or not some comet or asteroid is going to smash into the earth and annihilate life? Now, I can't tell you that there will never be some object from space that does serious damage to the earth. But I can tell you that life on earth will not be annihilated by such an object. How can I say that? Because I know the one who is holding all things together and His word tells us how all things will end and it doesn't contain a life as we know it ending comet. Jesus will sustain this creation until the end.

Some believe that God may have created all things but that He then withdrew and just left it alone. But our text tells us that Jesus purposely and actively holds all things together. Notice how intimate Jesus is with His creation. Our text says “in Him” – that is that He personally holds all things together. The author of Hebrews says it this way, that He “...upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3).

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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The sustaining power of Jesus should give us courage, hope and security. Nothing will happen to this world that Jesus has not determined. Jesus is sovereign over it all. And so, even on the small scale, when that job is lost, or the car breaks down, you learn the kids need expensive dental work, or the news from the doctor is not what you wanted to hear, you, if you believe in Christ, must know that Jesus is sustaining you and whatever comes to pass is all part of His sovereign purpose. What you have control over is your response to such things. Will you say with Job, that even if God Himself should **“slay me, I will hope in Him”** (Job 13:15). Beloved, Jesus is all about the details. Nothing escapes His notice; nothing captures Him by surprise. On this you can rest assured. Do you think that such thoughts could change your response to circumstances? Do you believe that what comes into your mind when you think about Christ is the most important thing about you?

Beloved, we must hold tightly to the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is God; He is the Creator; He is our Sustainer. Learn more about Him in these roles, for the more we know Christ, the more inclined and the more determined we will be to live for Him and His glory. Our circumstances our not to be our god. Our jobs are not to be our god. Our children our not to be our god. Our flesh is not to be our god. We let so many other thoughts get into way of having increasingly high thoughts about Christ. We let so many other things, generally our feelings, or our preferences, or our jobs, or our circumstance, or even our children determine how we will live for Christ. I can't do this for God because.... To often our Christianity is nothing but the product of our feelings, preferences and circumstances. We tend not to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Jesus, but rather we tend to deny Jesus of being fully and practically Lord of all our lives. We hide ourselves behind secondary or even pseudo-responsibilities and therefore justify our disobedience to God. We allow good things, jobs, family, recreation and the like to hijack the best that God intends for us. We fail Jesus because we do not continually entertain the highest of thoughts concerning Him. What would Jesus want me to do, to say, to think right now in this circumstance. Beloved, we need to repent of justifying our disobedience to full and utter devotion of knowing Jesus by the study of His Word; of meaningful fellowship with other believers in times of worship and Bible study, of remembering and thanking Jesus for His death for us on the cross that we might have life by celebrating with other saints the Lord's Table; and of praying for and with other believers that His kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. This was the attitude of the early church and it was this thinking about Christ that said to the rest of the world that Christianity was real, that the gospel was powerful and really changed lives.

Acts 2:42

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

May Jesus Christ be so supreme in our lives. May Jesus Christ as our God, our Creator and our Sustainer motivate us more and more; day by day to walk more fully and more closely with Him. Let us pray:

Father, we thank You for the wonder of the work that has been accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. We confess we know so little about You, for You are indescribable. You exist eternally in three persons, and yet You are one God. Lord, our minds cannot comprehend all of this and we thank You that we don't need to. What we need to do is simply believe that You are God and we are Your created beings. We thank You for the absolute supremacy of Christ over

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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all. We ask that you would enable us to make it the joy of our hearts to bow before Him, to worship Him, to exalt Him and to hold tightly to Him as the One who is not only supreme over creation, but who is also supreme in our redemption. Lord, You are the God who knows all. You know us as we are, gathered here today. Lord, if any do not know the Savior of whom we have been speaking, by Your grace may they turn to Him today. Lord, for those are here and profess to know Him but are not honoring Him by their walk and who perhaps have been confused and unsettled, Lord, may they find that confident assurance that comes from laying hold of the truth with a firm, unshakable gift. We give You the praise, in Christ's name, amen. ^(adapted prayer)

Soli Deo Gloria

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