

The Greatness of Christ

Steve Lewis - www.SpiritAndTruth.org

(Colossians 1:15-23)

In the last session, we saw Paul say that God the Father “rescued 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.” Paul first mentioned the work of God the Father, but he ended by explaining the work of God the Son. In this section of Paul’s letter the focus is exclusively on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the key passages in all of Scripture that describes who Jesus Christ is and what He does. If believers have a clear understanding of the Greatness of Christ, then they will have a firm foundation of spiritual knowledge upon which to build their lives in a way that is pleasing to God.

The Greatness of Christ as the Image of God

Col 1:15a – He is the image of the invisible God,

He is the same one who redeemed us and provided forgiveness of sins. The subject of our study in this passage is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In theological terms, this is the study of Christology.

Christ is **the image of the invisible God**. **Image** is the Greek word *eikōn* which means a visual representation of something. In Greek thought an image shares in reality what it represents, so the word carries the idea of both representation and manifestation.

Why do we need this? Because God the Father by His very nature is **invisible**. In John 4:24 Jesus stated that “God is spirit.” This means that He is not composed of matter and does not have physical substance. That is why the Lord Jesus Christ took on human flesh to show us the nature and character of God. “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18).

Jesus united perfect humanity with perfect deity in a single person. During his earthly incarnation, he did not yet have his glorified resurrection body, so he would get hungry, thirsty, and weary; he felt pain, and ultimately he would experience physical death on the cross. This was necessary in order for Him to pay the price for the sins of the whole world. But the humanity of Jesus was perfect sinless humanity.

The Greatness of Christ as Creator of the Universe

Col 1:15b – the firstborn of all creation,

This same Jesus, the God-Man, who has made the **invisible God** visible to us, is now described in His relationship to the created universe. **Firstborn** is the Greek word *prōtotokos*

which means “first to come forth.” It can indicate either “priority in time or supremacy in rank.” Depending on the context it can relate to physical birth order (Matt 1:25; Luke 2:7), but here the context indicates that he is preeminent over all created things. In relationship to the created universe, Christ is above or over all that has been created.

Some have tried to use this verse to support the idea that Christ was a created being. But in that case Paul would have used the Greek word *prōtoktisis* meaning “first-created.” Instead he gives Christ first place by saying that He is preeminent over all creation. We know that this is the correct idea because in the next verse Paul tells us that Christ is the Creator, so logically He Himself cannot be part of creation.

Col 1:16 – 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.

Here Paul gives the reason Christ is supreme over creation. It is **because all things were created by Him**. **All things** is the Greek phrase *ta panta* (literally, “the all”), and this was a well-known phrase used by the worldly philosophers of Paul’s day. What does this include? Christ’s dominion over all created things includes things **in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible**. The expression “heaven and earth” is all-encompassing. As it says in Genesis 1:1 “God created the heavens and the earth.” There are things that are visible both in the heavens and on earth, but also things that are invisible in both arenas. All things were created by Christ.

Paul next says, “**whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities**.” He includes four words that are typically used to describe rulership or dominion over things either in the heavens and on earth. **Thrones** (*thronos*) means “a seat or chair of authority.” **Dominions** (*kuriotēs*) means “possessing lordship or ruling authority.” **Rulers** (*archē*) means “the first place, chief, or leader.” **Authorities** (*exousia*) means “having the power of rule or government, of privilege or right.” All of these terms were used to refer to both good or bad, as well as both heavenly or earthly authorities. Paul is saying here that, no matter what terminology people may use to describe anything which can have authority over things in the created world, Christ has made them all and is the ultimate authority over all of them.

This verse has three prepositional phrases that encompass Christ’s relationship to His creation. These phrases are **by Him**, **through Him**, and **for Him**. The creation was (literally) **in Him** in that it was His own creative will and design that spawned the creative activity. It was **through Him** in the sense that he was the means through which the creation was produced or came into being. It was **for Him** in that all of creation was intended to serve Him and bring Him glory.

Col 1:17 – He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Christ is **before all things**. From the perspective of creation’s timeline, God the Son existed with the other members of the Trinity from eternity past. He is before all things (John 1:1). And **all things hold together** (*sunistēmi*) in Him. Christ is literally sustaining and holding the entire universe together. He not only created it, but he maintains its stable state. So in this section we have seen the Greatness of Christ as Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

The Greatness of Christ as Head over the Church

Col 1:18 – He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Paul uses the analogy of a physical body, which is a word picture that Paul developed in his letter to the Corinthian church. His main point for that analogy was that the individual members of the Church are each indispensable and work together as a unit, so they should use their God-given gifts and abilities to care for one another (1 Cor 12:25). Since Paul is writing this letter to the Colossians several years later, he expects them to know this previous word picture. The Colossians had been taught well about the basic truths of the faith, and this must also have included the things that Paul and others had already written to the churches.

The new information Paul provides here is that if the Church is viewed as a body, then Christ would be the head. This fits perfectly with the context, since Christ is pictured as supreme or preeminent over everything in the universe. **Head** is the Greek word *kephalē* and can mean the actual physical head of a body, as well as figuratively meaning the top or “superior chief, the one to whom others are subordinate.” The context indicates that Christ is the master or Lord over the Church. In his letter to the Ephesian church which was written at the same time as Colossians, Paul said: “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church” (Eph 1:22). So here in Colossians Paul is also emphasizing Christ’s headship or rulership over the Church.

He is the beginning (*archē*) which means “the beginning or origin; describing the person or thing that starts or leads something.” In what sense is Christ the beginning of the Church? Paul answers this in the following phrase: “He is the **firstborn from the dead.**” **Firstborn** is again the Greek word *prōtotokos* and in this verse it describes Christ’s resurrection from the dead where it means “the first to come forth.” Jesus was the first person to experience the kind of resurrection which includes a glorified body. How does this relate to the Church?

The church could not have begun until after Christ’s resurrection and ascension, followed by His sending the Holy Spirit to the gathered disciples. It was necessary for Jesus to go away so that He could send the Holy Spirit to them (John 16:7). He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised (Acts 1:4-5). Later Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,” (1 Cor 12:13) and that body is the Church. The Church had its beginning on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4).

Finally Paul says, **so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.** Christ is preeminent over the Church which He began and sustains, just as He is preeminent over all of creation which He originated and sustains.

The Greatness of Christ as Savior of the World

Col 1:19 – For it was the [Father's] good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,

It was the Father's **good pleasure** (*eudokeō*) for it was right and proper for all the fullness to dwell in Christ. **Fullness** is the Greek word *plērōma*. Since Christ is preeminent over everything, Paul explains this by attributing fullness or completeness to Him. Apparently the worldly philosophers had used the word fullness (*plērōma*) as a technical term to express the sum total of the supernatural powers and attributes that they believed were divided among various members of the spirit world. But Paul counters that false teaching: all the fullness of deity is not spread out in portions among a group of spirits, but it fully dwells in Christ alone.

To dwell is the Greek word (*katoikeō*) which means “to house permanently.” The *plērōma* or fullness of deity in Christ was not a partial or transient thing. In Christ the fullness of divine powers and attributes was a permanent aspect of His nature. There is nothing lacking in Christ or His ability to work on our behalf. As we saw in verse 15, Paul reminds us again that Jesus is the God-Man who is able to accomplish our salvation as described in the following verses.

Col 1:20 – and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, [I say,] whether things on earth or things in heaven.

To **reconcile** is the Greek word *apokatalassō* which is a powerful word describing what Christ accomplished on our behalf. Paul's normal word for **reconcile** is *katallassō* which is an intensified form of the word *allassō* that means “to change or exchange one thing for another.” *katallassō* was typically used of two people coming together after a time of hostility, so it carried the idea of changing the state of those who are hostile to a state of peace. But in this verse Paul uses a double compound word: *apokatalassō*. The preposition *apo* on the front of the word implies a restoration to a previous state from which one of the parties had fallen. It also includes the idea of the fullness of the reconciliation.

The reason for this reconciliation goes back to the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve. When they sinned not only were their own lives affected, but their sin was inherited and imputed to the entire race of humanity. But how can sinful humanity ever be reconciled to a holy God? God's holiness does not allow Him to lower His standards, but creatures who are sinful by nature cannot offer God anything that will appease Him. We could never restore our relationship to God, so God took the initiative to restore the relationship.

The penalty that God had explained to Adam before they sinned in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:16-17) must still be paid in full. But God is the only one who has the power to reconcile all things **to Himself**. How did Christ do it? He **made peace through the blood of His cross**. The death penalty still had to be satisfied. The Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man, was the only one who could have reconciled us to God. Twice in this verse Paul used the phrase **through Him** to emphasize that Christ is the channel through which we receive peace with God.

Paul says that He reconciled **all things** to Himself, **whether things on earth or things in heaven**. While it is true that the Fall of mankind did affect creation (Rom 8:22), we also know

that it is only human beings who require reconciliation to God (2 Cor 5:18-20). Here we see Christ's selfless act on the cross which procured our reconciliation to God.

Col 1:21 – And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, [engaged] in evil deeds,

The first two words of verse 21 are literally, “**And you.**” Here Paul shifts the focus directly onto the Colossians. **Formerly**, before they put their faith in Christ, they were alienated from God, and it was a deliberate estrangement. The Greek word **alienated** is *apallotrioō* and the tense indicates something that took place in the past with ongoing or continuing effect – we were in a continuing state of alienation from God.

But the news gets worse. Each of us was **hostile in mind**. **Hostile** is the Greek word *echthros* which means “hating and opposing God.” The word **mind** (*dianoia*) denotes our “deep thoughts; our ability to think and understand.” Our mindset was actively contrary to God and hating His standards and authority over us.

Finally, not only was our thinking set against God, but this expressed itself in **evil deeds**. This is a very grim description of the status of unbelieving humanity. But this is the truth of God's Word concerning our condition apart from the reconciliation that Christ provides.

Col 1:22 – yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach

This verse forms a sharp contrast to the previous verse. It literally begins with **But now**. The focus of attention is now back on Christ and what He accomplished for us. Here Paul amplifies what he had said in verse 20. **He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death**. In verse 20 Paul had expressed Jesus' death with the words “the blood of His cross,” which means that Jesus physically died on that cross. Here in verse 22 Paul is more specific so that there will be no confusion about what happened. First of all, Jesus had a **fleshly body** – he was fully human, although without sin. Paul then makes it clear that Jesus did in fact die. The Greek word for **death** is *thanatos* which means “the separation of the soul and the body by which a person's life on earth is ended.” The death penalty was actually paid in full by Jesus when He died.

In contrast to what Paul had said in verse 21 about the abysmal condition of unsaved humanity, the reconciliation provided by Christ's death now allows Him to **present you before God**. The Greek word **present** (*paristēmi*) means to “place beside or to bring close.” And the word **before** is the Greek word *katenōpion* which means “in the presence of or directly in front of something.” It would have been impossible, apart from the reconciliation Christ accomplished on our behalf, for a sinful person to come into the presence of a holy God, but Christ made this possible.

Paul now uses three important words to describe a believer's new position because of his reconciliation to God. **Holy** is the Greek word *hagios* which means “consecrated or separated unto God.” **Blameless** is the word *amōmos* which means “without blemish or fault.” Finally, **beyond reproach** is the Greek word *anegklētos* which means “that which cannot be called into

account or accused.” This is a legal term which means that no judicial accusation can be brought against a person. These three things are available to anyone who puts their faith in Christ’s work on our behalf.

Col 1:23 – if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

If indeed you continue in the faith states the condition for gaining all of the benefits that Paul had just listed. In the Greek language there were several classes of conditional sentences, and this is called a “First Class Conditional Clause.” First Class Conditional sentences are saying that if something is true, and we assume for the sake of argument that it is true, then the result will occur. Sometimes it can be translated, “**Since** you are continuing in the faith.” Paul puts their continued faithfulness in a positive light. **Continue** is the Greek verb *epimenō* which is an intensified form of the word “to continue or persevere.” The tense of the verb indicates present continuous action, so we might say, “If you keep on continuing on in your faith.”

Paul then gives three descriptive terms that explain how to accomplish this. First, he says **firmly established** which is the Greek word *themelioō*. This was a term from architecture or construction which pictured laying a firm foundation for a building. It means to remain well-grounded or unwavering on the base of their faith in and knowledge of God. The perfect tense indicates the completed state of the foundation; there is nothing more or different that they require. **Steadfast** is the word *hedraios* which means firmly seated and unmovable. **Not moved away** uses the word *metakineō* which means “not moved away and placed somewhere else.” So they are to “keep on continuing on in faith” by standing firm in the **hope of the gospel they have heard**. Paul is saying, “Stay put. Stick to the truth. You need nothing more than what you already have.”

Paul’s final point in this section will provide a transition into the next section of his letter, and it has to do with the gospel message. He says this gospel is being **proclaimed in all creation under heaven**. Previously in verse 6 Paul had said the gospel was **bearing fruit in all the world**. Paul’s hyperbole expresses how widely the message was being disseminated across the known world of his day. Then Paul states his final point: **I, Paul, have been made a minister** of this gospel message to the world. This is where we will pick up our study of the letter to the Colossians in the next session.