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Colossians 1:15-20

5th Message

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# THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

The world asks the question, Why Jesus? Why should I believe in Jesus and submit my life to him? Isn't Jesus just one option among many spiritual choices? Believers ask, What do I need to keep me spiritually healthy? What do I need to be spiritually mature? These are critical questions, ones that we begin to take up today in our studies in Colossians. The answer to these questions comes in an understanding of the doctrine of Christ. The Bible makes some extraordinary claims about the nature and person of Jesus. And the gospels make the claim that Jesus was the anticipated Jewish Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ. And so an understanding of the doctrine of Christ is imperative. It is so important that Bernard Bell is going to teach in two weeks to help fill in our understanding of the theology of Christ.

We come this morning to a beautiful text in Colossians. It is one of the great Christological passages in the New Testament, if not the greatest. When you stand before this text you feel like you are on holy ground; taking off your shoes and kneeling seems very appropriate. In order to have an opportunity to reflect on our text we are going to have an extended time for communion. Hopefully an understanding with our mind will lead to adoration in our heart. Here is the text:

**The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 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 and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-20).**

There is an incredible amount of debate as to the origin of the text. Some think that Paul penned these words. Some think that this was an early Christian hymn that existed when Paul wrote this letter. Some think that Paul modified an early creed for his use. One can debate these issues endlessly without any satisfying resolution. We just do not know.

What we do know is that it fits in nicely with the flow of the letter. Paul speaks about the work of the Father and Son applied personally to the Colossians both before and after the hymn. When Paul mentions the Father in verse 12 he reminds the Colossians that the Father qualified them for an inheritance, delivered them from bondage, and transferred them into the kingdom of his beloved Son. With the mention of the Son, Paul tells the Colossians that in the Son they found redemption and forgiveness. Paul then returns to personal application for the Colossians in verses 21-23.

Though difficult to discern in the English translation, the passage is skillfully and carefully worded. There are two main strophes, 15-16 and 18b-20, with a transition in verses 17-18a. (Strophe is a poetic term meaning a rhythmic system composed of two or more lines repeated as a unit.) Each of the two main strophes begins with the same wording, literally "who is," referring to the Son mentioned in verse 13. There

are key words that occur in both strophes: "firstborn," "for in him," "through him," and "all things." The first strophe deals with the role of Christ in creation and the second strophe deals with the role of Christ in the new creation.

The transition in verses 17-18a consists of two lines, each beginning with identical wording, "and he is." The first line sums up the first strophe while the second line introduces the second strophe. The point is that the text is carefully thought out and worded.

## Christ and Creation

**The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.**

The first strophe begins by describing Christ as the image of the invisible God. To quote F. F. Bruce, this means, "that in him the nature and being of God have been perfectly revealed." Peter O'Brien writes: "the very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in him; in him the invisible has become visible."<sup>1</sup>

This is what John says in his gospel: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). The writer of Hebrews tells us: "the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). And Jesus himself told Philip in John 14: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus is a perfect mapping of the invisible God into the visible world.

We are reminded of Genesis 1 where we read that man and woman were created in God's image. God's design was for human beings to be image-bearers of God, a copy or reflection of the Son. But the image of God became tarnished and corrupted through sin. As the second Adam, Jesus manifested the image of God perfectly. And now those who are in Christ are being transformed into the image of Christ, and when sin is finally removed once and for all we will be like him. We might note that the reason why the incarnation was possible is because man was created in the image of God.

We often use the idea of image when we compare people. We refer to someone as the "spitting image" of someone else. We often say "He looks just like his dad" or "She looks just like her mom." The Son is the spitting image of the Father, so much so that their nature, character, and being are the same. To see the Son is to see the Father.

The second thing we read is that Christ is "the firstborn over (before) all creation." The word "firstborn" does not imply that Jesus was a created being. The word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to indicate temporal priority and sovereignty of rank. The point of being firstborn is in relation to creation. Jesus was prior to creation. He is "the preexistent, cosmic Christ."<sup>2</sup>

We hear an echo of what God says about the Davidic king in Psalm 89: “And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth” (Psalms 89:27).

Paul goes on to explain why it is that Christ is superior in time and rank over creation. It is because all things were created “in him,” “through him,” and “for him.” “In him” implies that Christ was the sphere within which creation took place. In the same way that Paul says in Ephesians that we were chosen “in Christ,” all things were created “in Christ.” “Through him” implies that he was the mediator or agent of creation. “For him” implies that Jesus was the goal of creation. As Paul says in Ephesians, it is God’s plan to sum up all things in Christ. The perfect tense of the second occurrence of “create” in the first strophe indicates that the creation continues to exist for the glory of Christ. The repetition of the phrase “all things” implies totality and tells us that nothing was created apart from him. Jesus is “the key to creation.”<sup>3</sup>

As firstborn, “Christ is unique, being distinguished from all creation. He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since he is its Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

John says in his gospel: “He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:2–3).

There is an interesting connection in our text to Proverbs 8, where wisdom is identified with creation: “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be.” (Proverbs 8:22–23). For the Jew, Torah was also identified with wisdom. Paul is saying that Jesus is the incarnate Wisdom of God. Since the source of at least some of the heresy in Colossae was Jewish in nature, Paul is making an important point.

The “all things” of the created order are described as things in heaven and earth, things visible and invisible. Notice the A-B-B-A pattern. Things in heaven are invisible while things upon the earth are visible. “All things” also includes four classes of angelic or heavenly powers: thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities. Some, if not all, of these angelic powers are hostile to God and his kingdom. Nonetheless, all heavenly powers owe their existence to Christ and are subject to his authority.

Why would this be important to the Colossians? First, the heresy in Colossae included some kind of angel worship. Paul is reminding the Colossians that all angelic powers are subject to Christ and therefore they are to worship him. Second, the heresy was offering some sort of deeper “wisdom.” Paul is reminding the Colossians that Jesus is the Wisdom of God and they do not have to search elsewhere. Third, the Colossians had worshipped pagan gods. Paul wants to remind them that Jesus is the supreme Ruler and Lord of creation and therefore there is no reason to return to pagan gods. There are no destructive forces in the universe that are not subject to the rule of Christ. These are good reminders to us as well. Everything created was created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. He is the Lord of creation.

We are often enamored with famous people – politicians, movie stars, and athletes. We read about them in magazines and follow their lives on television. If we chance to see a celebrity we seek an autograph or a picture. In reality the one we should be enamored with is Jesus. Christ stands way above them all.

## Lord of the Universe and Head of the Church

The transition or bridge between the two major strophes consists of two statements, each beginning with the same wording in the Greek text, “and he is.”

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (v. 17).

“And he is the head of the body, the church” (v. 18).

The first statement reiterates Christ’s superiority over creation in time and rank. There was never a time when Jesus did not exist. But an additional item is added: in him all things hold together or cohere. This means that the creation not only came into being “in,” “through” and “for” Christ but is also maintained by Christ. Christ is the “sustainer of the universe and the unifying principle of its life.”<sup>5</sup> Without the ongoing involvement of Christ in creation the world would disintegrate and fall apart.

The second statement turns us towards the second strophe and the new creation. Christ is not only the ruler and sustainer of the universe; he is head of the body, the church, the new, redeemed humanity. Some think that the words “the church” were added later, but Paul uses the metaphor of body and head elsewhere in his writings. God’s people now consist of one body, Jews and Gentiles alike. The idea of head and body means that the people of God have an organic relationship with the resurrected Jesus.

The church is the limbs and organs of Christ doing his work in the world. The body of Christ is dependent on the head. Christ supplies life and energy to the body, direction and guidance. The people of God are no longer in Adam, but in Christ. It is also true that the risen Christ is in the church animating his people with life. The new creation has begun.

## Christ and New Creation

Now Paul turns to Christ’s role in the new creation:

“... he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (vv 18b–20).

Christ is the beginning, another reference to wisdom in Prov. 8:23. The word means “source,” or “first principle.” And he is also the firstborn from the dead. Not only is Jesus the firstborn of creation, he is the firstborn of the new creation. The new creation began with the resurrection when Christ defeated death and sin. The fact that Christ was the firstborn means that many would follow and be joined with him. As the firstborn of the new creation Christ has first place or preeminence. Christ has primacy over the new creation as well as the old. “That which he was by right he became in fact. God’s plan is not merely to sum up the old creation, but inaugurate the new creation, in and through him.”<sup>6</sup>

The reason Jesus has preeminence in the new creation is because God’s fullness was in Christ and through Christ he brought about reconciliation. There is much debate as to what is the subject of the verb “to please.” Is the subject God or is it the fullness? Either God was well pleased or the fullness was well pleased. What Paul says about fullness in chapter 2 brings clarity: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). If the fullness is thus defined as the fullness of deity or fullness of God then there is no difference between God and the fullness being the subject. They are saying the same thing. The fullness of deity resides in Christ.

In the Old Testament there is an interesting connection between the two verbs in our text, “be pleased” and “dwell.” In the Psalms we learn that God was pleased to dwell on Zion (Ps. 67:17). In Deuteronomy we read repeatedly that the God of Israel wanted to choose a place for his name to dwell (Deut. 12:5, 11; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2). God was pleased for his fullness to take up permanent residency in Christ. Christ “is the one, all-sufficient intermediary between God and the world of

humanity, and all the attributes of God – his spirit, word, wisdom and glory – are disclosed in him.”<sup>7</sup>

Again this truth would come to bear on the Colossian heresy. If the false teachers were teaching that there are intermediate powers between God and the world of humanity then one had to acknowledge these powers and pay them respect. But if all the fullness of deity resides in Christ, then he is the only intermediary necessary.

It was also God’s pleasure to reconcile all things to himself through Christ. This is an amazing truth. The phrase, “things on earth or things in heaven,” speaks to the totality of creation, including fallen angels and creation itself that has been subject to decay. This means that all things have been estranged from God and need reconciliation.

This statement of universal reconciliation does not imply that even those forces and people hostile to God will experience eternal bliss and not face the consequences of unbelief. It means that at the end of this age all things will be summed up in Christ and even hostile forces and unbelieving people will not be able to resist. Every knee will bow and acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ and Lord. In the end there will be nothing outside the kingdom where Christ reigns.

Reconciliation is accomplished through the cross, the perfect sacrifice of Christ’s blood. It is the cross of Christ that allows for peace to be restored between God and man, between God and the old creation. The work of reconciliation required a death and God was pleased for the Son to die in order to bring harmony and peace. Here we see the incredible love of God and the faithfulness of God to bring about his original design for humanity. Not only was God willing for his son to die, the text indicates that God was pleased to bring about reconciliation through the death of the son. That is an amazing thought. It pleased God to sacrifice his son so that the broken creation, including us, could be united with him. The Son, in whom, through whom, and for whom we were created, is the one who died for us and through whom we are reconciled to God. There is no other god to compare to this God. The world has never known a god or a lord to die for his people except for the God of the Bible.

## Conclusion

The Colossian church was encountering teachings and spiritual practices that would not have any benefit for their spiritual life and would lead them astray from growing into maturity. Paul knew what was needed, an understanding of the doctrine of Christ. “The doctrine of Christ is the best safeguard against most forms of heretical teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

Why Jesus? Why are there not other spiritual options? The answer is the supremacy of Christ. Jesus is Lord over creation and he is Lord over the new creation. He has first place in everything. He is the source of true wisdom and salvation. He is the supreme one before whom every knee will bow.

What will keep us on track as God’s people? The answer is to keep centered on Christ lest we become consumed with other matters. All the fullness of deity dwells in Christ. We need look no further than Christ for spiritual health and vitality. We do not need to pay attention to new, nifty spiritual gurus or the latest spiritual book advertising a cure for your soul. Jesus is the beginning and he will be the end. Jesus is what we need and all that we need.

A few weeks ago my daughter and I climbed a mountain in Colorado, just outside of Estes Park called Long’s Peak. Thirty or forty years ago I would have been consumed by making it to the top and how fast I was going compared to everyone else. I might have pondered the geological history and studied the formation of the mountains. But that is not what happened. As the sun rose over the Rockies I was drawn into the beauty of creation. As we climbed higher and higher the majesty of

God’s creation became overwhelming. When we reached our highest point somewhere above 13,000 ft I was out of breath, both physically and figuratively. It didn’t matter if I made it all the way to the top. Rather I was filled with a sense of awe and wonder and humility. I simply wanted to worship — not the creation, but the God behind the creation.

## Communion

The text before us this morning is a mountainous text. It is so meaty that we can be consumed with understanding all the theology. But there is also a time and place to rest on the heights, survey the majestic scenery, and move theology to worship and adoration. Our monthly time for communion could not have been timelier. As I said at the outset, we are going to create a space to mediate on what we have talked about and adore our Lord and Savior. Communion is a time for God’s reconciled people to remember Christ, to be reminded of the body that was broken and blood that was shed. I invite you to come and simply receive from Christ what you need today. We can come freely and openly without guilt, without shame. But we do come with a deep sense of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. He has given us life for both this world and the next.

We come, O Christ, to you,  
true Son of God and man,  
by whom all things consist,  
in whom all life began.  
In you alone we live and move  
and have our being in your love.  
We worship you, Lord Christ,  
our Savior and our King;  
to you our youth and strength  
adoringly we bring:  
so fill our hearts that all may view  
your life in us and turn to you!<sup>9</sup>

*Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:11–12)*

1 Peter O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 43.

2 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 60.

3 Bruce, 61.

4 O’Brien, 45.

5 Bruce, 66.

6 N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Colossians and Philemon*, (IVP Press, Downers Grove, IL. 1986), 79.

7 Bruce, 73-74.

8 Bruce, 55.

9 Margaret Clarkson and John Darwall, “We Come O Christ To You”, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, (Word Music, Waco, Texas 1986,) 117.

