

Colossians 1:15-23

After a long introduction, in which Paul greets the Colossians and reminds them of his thankfulness for what the Gospel has done in them and prays for their continued following of God, Paul turns the focus to Christ.

Looking at this section, we can recreate some of the heresy that the Colossian church was struggling with. They come from a mostly pagan background that is related to Gnosticism—a religious system emphasizing: 1. There is special, mysterious knowledge necessary for spiritual enlightenment; and 2. There is a sharp divide between the material and spiritual worlds, and the material world is defiled and evil while the spiritual world is pure.

In this culture, the Colossian church is attempting to discern the place of Jesus. Is he one of many powerful spiritual beings (i.e. angels), even the greatest of these beings? Is Jesus one of many mediators that the Creator of the universe has allowed to announce His truth to humanity? The greatest of these mediators?

Paul answers these questions using what seems to be a hymn used in the early church. Verses 15-18 in particular seem to be a hymn regarding Jesus, while verses 19-23 relate to Jesus's relationship to man. The thrust of his argument is that Jesus—fully God Jesus—enacted God's plan to reconcile everything (including hostile us) to Himself and should be considered with appropriate exclusivity in the believers' worship.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 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. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also the 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.

There is an incredible wealth of theology contained in the above verses, and we should all tread humbly in trying to grasp or explain the inexhaustible riches of Christ, but Christ did come for us to know Him, so let's press on.

Notice that Paul confronts the Colossian heresy head-on. Jesus created the material and the immaterial, so spiritual reality is not exalted over material reality. Jesus himself is the image of the invisible God, and if the divine would take on human flesh then the material cannot be completely evil. Ultimately, as Michael Horton said, the soul is not more holy than the fingernail. Man simply needs to be made new inside and out.

It is perhaps easiest to proceed by grouping Paul's statements into two categories: Jesus' sovereignty and Jesus' divinity.

Jesus as Sovereign: Paul makes clear here that Christ is the supreme authority of the universe. The phrase "firstborn of all creation" does not suggest that there was a time when there was no Jesus (cf. John 1:1, Revelation 1:8.), but rather that he has the rights of the firstborn. Other translations describe Jesus as the firstborn *over* all creation. He receives the inheritance from the Father, and it is up to his goodness and mercy to share with his co-heirs.

In addition, "by Him all things were created." In the ancient world (and still today to some extent), creation implies ownership (cf. Isaiah 64:8, Jeremiah 18:1-6). And not only created by him, but through him and for him. The literal translation is that it was created *to* him, that is, to his glory. All creation—you and me,

giraffes and galaxies, skills and snap peas—was created to honor Christ (cf. Psalm 19:1-6, 1 Corinthians 10:31).

His sovereignty should be most evident over the church. “He is also the head of the body, the church.” The head of the church is never a person, a denomination, or a doctrine, but Christ himself. In light of this reality, obeying Jesus becomes not an option to be considered, but the only just and righteous way to live. After all, the goal of the universe is that “he himself will come to have first place in everything.”

Jesus as Divine: If you put much thought into it, you’ll realize that Jesus should not, would not, be sovereign unless he is also divine. The Old Testament cries out against worshipping idols, and Isaiah 42:8 reads, “I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another.” And yet here in Colossians, the Lord is clearly giving His glory to another, saying he should have first place and all things are created for him. Unless he is divine, Jesus could have none of the attributes Paul ascribes to him.

More specifically, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, describes Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.” One of the Ten Commandments expressly prohibits making images to represent God. Nothing else should be worshipped. But Jesus shows us God, just as a photograph shows us a person who lives far away. That is why Jesus can say, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9).

Finally, note that actions ascribed to God elsewhere in Scripture are ascribed to Christ here. God is the creator, but so is Christ. In Acts 17:28, Paul states “In [God] we live and move and have our being,” but in Colossians, he writes, “in [Christ] all things hold together.”

For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, 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 heaven or things on earth.

Here we see the continuing of the idea that Jesus is divine, for “all the fullness” dwelled in him. In addition to that, we see that the sovereign God is also unbelievably loving, for He has taken it upon Himself to reconcile the world to Himself.

The phrase “things on heaven or things on earth” suggests that when man sinned in Adam, not only man, but all the universe was separated from God (cf. Romans 8:20-22). But just as sin separated the entire creation from God, Christ’s sacrifice reconciles the entire creation to God. Not that all will be saved, of course (the rest of Scripture makes that abundantly clear), but that Christ’s blood is sufficient to reconcile even the vilest offender. And even those who continue to rebel against the Lord will be given their just reward. In that sense, all creation is reconciled to its proper relationship with the Creator.

Clearly, it is God who initiated this plan of reconciliation and Christ who enacts it. Man has not even shown up yet. That is where Paul turns his attention next.

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 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—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.

Here Paul goes from doctrinal statements to application. “And *you*,” he booms. The picture he paints is ugly, but in doing so, the contrast becomes all the more astounding. You, Colossians, students, adults, children, whoever you are, you were alienated, hostile, and evil. But now, you are (or will be) holy, blameless, and beyond reproach.

And how did this happen? Christ. It took Jesus’ fleshly body (note the direct challenge to Gnostics who considered the body evil) to reconcile you to the Father. But, oh how sufficiently, how wondrously, Christ’s body did the task! That an alien, hostile, evil individual might be able to stand before a righteous God with complete confidence, knowing he has “beyond approach.” We were not even seeking

reconciliation, fought against it, and yet Christ reconciled us. We cannot be amazed enough by this reality.

Note how “easily” we are presented “holy and blameless and beyond reproach.” There is no secret knowledge needed, no mystical experience required. In Paul’s day and in ours, many preach that salvation requires that we do this or that or know this or that or experience this or that. It is a lie. Paul makes very clear that Christ has already reconciled us to God. We can add nothing to his work, but need only put our faith in it and call upon the name of the Lord. Do not add anything of man’s to the sufficiency of Christ.

Finally, questions often come up regarding verse 23, which seems to suggest that we have to remain established in the Gospel or that we could lose our reconciliation to God. This is a passage worth wrestling with, but one must read this passage in light of the fact that Paul has already stated, “The Gospel is constantly bearing fruit and increasing” and that the tools needed to please God come from God and not ourselves. In this light, it seems rather like a parent telling his child, “Never step off the edge of the roof, or you’ll die” when the parent knows he will always be within an arm’s reach and thus could never slip through the parent’s grasp and fall off the edge.

Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. Define "reconciliation." How about "peacemaking?"
 - e. Let's figure out what each of these statements mean (or get through the ones they're curious about)
 - i. Image of the invisible God
 - ii. Firstborn of all creation
 - iii. Creator of all things
 - iv. "Goal" of all created things
 - v. Before all things
 - vi. Holds together all things
 - vii. Head of the body (the church)
 - viii. The beginning, the firstborn from the dead
 - f. Do you see through here that Jesus is divine? Are you convinced of that? Why does that matter?
- V. Application Questions
 - a. Is Jesus sovereign in your life? What would that look like?
 - b. When you worship, do you worship because of how you feel or because of who Christ is?
 - c. What do people in our culture or in your life offer instead of or in addition to Jesus? (i.e. "In order to please God, to know God, you need _____ or you need Jesus and _____")
 - i. Be spiritually sensitive here. Discern whether students are placing trust in anything other than Christ for salvation. Consider asking the question, "In light of Jesus' rightful place as Lord/authority and the truth that salvation comes from his work alone, do you need to throw yourself on God's grace and Christ's work for the first time?"
 - d. Do you worry about losing your salvation? How does this passage speak to that?
 - e. Why does this matter? Why does what we think of Jesus and whether we add anything to him matter? You may have already discussed this, but I want to make sure you do at some point.
 - f. In light of who Jesus is, how should we deal with personal problems? Get specific here. What about our own pride?
 - g. What action does God call you to this week through this passage?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is...
 - a. Jesus
 - i. Is authoritative over all creation and over us. We cannot do him favors; everything we are and have is rightfully his. We are usurpers when we try to take control.
 - ii. Is divine. God shares His glory with Jesus and calls us to worship Him.
 - b. Nothing we offer to salvation
 - i. God sought us out to reconcile us. We were hostile, in fact.
 - ii. Christ alone is our salvation. Everything else is periphery and does not make us acceptable to God.
- VIII. Pray