

The Preeminent Christ

Colossians 1:15-18

Pastor John Miller

We're going to read verses 15-18 in Colossians 1. I want you to follow with me.

Paul says, "Who is...." I want to explain "Who is" is, and that is Jesus Christ. Everything we read in this passage is about our Lord Jesus Christ. "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature; for by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him; and He..."—that is, Jesus Christ—"...is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence."

A man by the name of Eric Sauer said, "If you wish to be disappointed, look to others. If you wish to be downhearted, look to yourself. If you wish to be encouraged, look upon Jesus Christ." I don't know about you, but I wish to be encouraged. And I want to be encouraged by looking upon Jesus Christ.

This message is all about Jesus. And it's important that we understand who Jesus is and what He came to do. I believe that as we look upon this passage and upon the person of Jesus Christ, we will be encouraged, and our lives will be changed by the power of His Spirit.

This text is one of the greatest—if not the greatest—passage on the person of Jesus Christ in the Bible. There are a few other places in the New Testament where you can read about Jesus. John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:5-11 and Hebrews 1:1-3 are all passages that theologians call "Christological passages"; they're passages that reveal Christ's nature and character, who He is and what He came to do.

Why is this passage about Jesus found in Colossians 1? Because the false teachers gave Jesus a prominent place but not a preeminent place. What do I mean by that? In their false teaching, Jesus was important, but He wasn't the most important. Jesus was prominent, but He wasn't preeminent. There is a big, important difference. A lot of religious systems today teach that Jesus is one of many ways to God. They teach He was a religious leader, a good man and we should follow His teaching. And even that we should believe in Him. But they don't really give to Jesus the place that He should have, and that is preeminence. Notice verse 18. Paul says "...that in all things..."—and the phrase "all things" means all things—"...He might have the preeminence." That means that Jesus is to have first place in all things.

Does He? Does He have first place in your heart? Does He have first place in your marriage? Does He have first place in your family? Does He have first place in your job? In your pleasures? Does He have first place in your hobbies? In every area of your life is Jesus Christ preeminent?

Why should Jesus Christ have preeminence? What makes Jesus so unique? In our passage, Paul gives us three reasons why Jesus is to have preeminence. Preeminence means that He is to have first place. Why? Reason number one is in the first part of verse 15. He, Jesus, is the visible “image of the invisible God.” I have capsulized what this passage is saying. “Who...”—that is, Jesus—“...is the image of the invisible God.” He is the image of the invisible God.

Now how do we know that verse 15—or any of these other verses in this passage—are talking about Jesus Christ? The answer is back up in verse 13. It says, “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son.” That is the reference to Jesus. God the Father has delivered us. God the Father has transferred us into a kingdom; it is the kingdom of His dear Son. In the Greek, that would literally read “the kingdom of the Son of His love.” The Father loves the Son, and it is a kingdom in which there is love. So clearly the reference in verse 13 is to Christ.

Then when you go to verse 14, we see “...in Whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.” That’s talking about Jesus Christ. And then without skipping a beat, verse 15, “Who is...”—that is Jesus; Jesus Christ—“...the image of the invisible God.”

If you go to verse 14 you have, “in Whom;” verse 15, you have “Who is,” referring to Jesus; verse 16, “by Him,” referring to Jesus; verse 17, “He is,” referring to Jesus Christ; verse 18, “He is”; and then one verse further, verse 19, “...in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.” So everything we’re reading about in this passage is about Jesus Christ.

I want you to notice that He is referred to as revealing or “the image of the invisible God.” What does it mean the “invisible God”? It means that God cannot be seen; God is a spirit and you cannot see a spirit. So literally, God cannot be seen with the naked eye. Some people think that because you cannot see God, He doesn’t exist.

I heard the story of a Puritan who was preaching on a street corner, and some atheist began to heckle him. He said, “You believe in God?”

“Yes, I believe in God.”

“How can you believe in God? I’ve never seen God,” the atheist said. “I have never seen God, and I cannot believe in a god I’ve never seen.”

Then very simply but profoundly, this Puritan preacher said, “Hast thou ever seen thy brains?”

The man said, “No.”

The Puritan said, “And thou thinkest thou has brains?”

You know, I’ve never seen my brains, but I’m hoppin’ I’ve got some brains up there. Just because you haven’t seen God, doesn’t mean that God does not exist. Certainly you can’t see the wind, but you can see its effects and you can feel the wind. Just as you cannot see the

Spirit of God, but you can feel the Spirit of God and see the effects He has in people's lives.

In 1 Timothy 1:17, it says that God is "eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God." In John 1:18, it says, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him"—or revealed Him or the word literally is "exegeid" Him or explained Him. So Jesus came to reveal God to man—God, Who is invisible and cannot be seen.

By the way, the words "invisible God" convey the idea that not only is God not seen, but God is not perceived and God is not understood and God is not comprehended by the physical senses. You can't understand God by your own intellect, and you can't find God by searching. Man, in his own resources and in his own wisdom and in his own strength, cannot find God. God has to reveal Himself to us, because God is infinite and we are finite. Because God dwells in the eternal, and we live in the temporal. We cannot find God by our own resources. God has to reveal Himself.

And one of the greatest revelations of God to man is the person of Jesus Christ. That's what it means when it says that Jesus is the image of God. It means that He is God's representation and God's manifestation. Not only does Jesus represent God, but He actually manifests God, because He is God. Who better to represent you than you? If you want to know John Miller, talk to John Miller. And I can explain who I am and what I believe and what I feel. You want to get to know me? You come to me. You want to get to know God? You come to God through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, then, not only represented God as the image, but He manifested God.

The word was used in Matthew 22:20 when Jesus spoke about a coin and paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus asked, "Whose is this image and superscription?" Caesar had an image on the coin. Jesus held it up and flipped it back and said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's." It speaks of a stamped image. We get our words "picture" and "portrait" and "icon" from the Greek word "image" here.

What it means is that Jesus is a photo or a reflection. When you look in the mirror, you get an image of yourself. So Jesus is the mirrored image or reflection of God the Father. It means that Jesus is the perfect picture of God, because He is God. He is God the Son Who reveals God the Father. If you want to know what God looks like, look at Jesus Christ; He is the manifestation of God the Father.

In John 14:9, Jesus had just promised that He was going to go to heaven and prepare a place and would come again to receive His disciples and us back to Himself. "The way I go you know." And Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you're going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me." Then Phillip says, "You mention the Father. Show us the Father and we'll be satisfied." In John 14:9, Jesus said, "Have I been so long with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father."

What does He mean by that? He doesn't mean that He's the Father. What He means is that He has revealed the Father to you; His love, His mercy, His grace, His power, His compassion, His kindness, His readiness to forgive—all the Father is has been revealed in the person of His Son.

In Hebrews 1:3, the writer of Hebrews says, "Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...." So Jesus Christ is "the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person." In John 1:14, it says, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus is God, manifested in the flesh. And that's what it means when it says He is "the image of God."

So by His incarnation, by His miracles and by His Resurrection, Christ is given the place of preeminence. God became a man; God took on humanity. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

Think about the miracles that Jesus performed. Who but God could raise the dead? Who but God could speak to the wind and the waves and they obeyed Him? Jesus did that. Who but God could turn water into wine instantly? Who could touch blinded eyes and cause them to see immediately? Who could open the ears of the deaf? Who could cause those to speak who couldn't speak? Who could cleanse the leper? Who could heal by the power of His Word? Jesus Christ. And Jesus walked on water. Try that. People do it by trickery, but they don't do it by divine power. Jesus actually walked on water. What a mind-blowing thing that is! When Jesus was with His disciples and He calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, they were scratching their heads and said, "What manner of person is this that even the wind and the waves obey Him?" He's God the Son. He is the master of earth and sea and sky; He created it all.

So because of Jesus' death and Resurrection, He is to have preeminence. He is to have the exalted place among us. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, it says, "For God, Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

It's amazing that only 30 years earlier, this same man who wrote these words, Paul, was known as Saul, and he hated Jesus. Paul believed Jesus was a phony, and Paul was persecuting Christians. Now, 30 years later, because he met Jesus on the road to Damascus—this man, Jesus, Who was a peasant carpenter from Nazareth—he refers to Jesus as the very "image of the invisible God." How amazing is that!

We find also, secondly, that He is the sovereign over all creation. So why should Jesus have preeminence? Number one, because He is the very "image of the invisible God"; He reveals God to us. He is God in the flesh. And secondly, He is the sovereign over all creation. This is the heart of the passage, and I want you to see it, beginning at the end of verse 15. It says He is "the firstborn of every creature. For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and

that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers..."—speaking of angelic beings—"...all things were created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist"—or "are held together."

Why does Paul focus on Jesus as Lord of creation? Again, it's because of the false teachers. Number one, they didn't believe Jesus was God, and number two, they believed that matter was evil and only spirit was good. Because of that, they didn't believe that God created the heavens and the earth; they believed that God let out from Himself these emanations—these powerful kind of demigods came out of Him—and eventually a distant emanation from God was evil and created the universe. Obviously, that is not Biblical or Scriptural; it's not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible doesn't teach that matter is evil. The Bible doesn't teach that your physical body is evil. And because they believed that matter was evil, they didn't believe that Jesus was God in the flesh. They didn't believe He was God incarnate. God cannot come into contact with that which is evil, so either Jesus wasn't God—they denied His deity—or He really wasn't man—they denied his humanity. They believed He was just a ghost or a phantom—kind of like Casper the Friendly Ghost. If you reached out to touch Him, your hand would go right through Him; He didn't really have a physical body. So Paul is saying what he is saying here because of the false doctrine the false teachers were bringing into the church about creation—because the false teacher's view of creation was awry.

Now Paul makes it clear, in verse 15, that Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature." You need to understand that term, "firstborn of every creature." It's referring to creation. What does it mean? It doesn't mean that Jesus was created. The Jehovah Witnesses falsely interpret this passage. In their doctrine, they believe that Jesus was created by God the Father as an angel—actually, Michael the Archangel. The Bible doesn't teach that; it's not in Scripture. But that's what the Jehovah Witnesses teach. They claim to be Christian, but their doctrine is not Christian. The Arian heresy adopted by the Jehovah Witnesses today is that Jesus was a created being.

Paul says not so. Jesus is sovereign over all creation. Notice verse 16: "For by Him were all things created." The Jehovah Witnesses have inserted the word "other" in there: "For by Him were all other things created," trying to allude to the fact that Jesus was created. But it doesn't say that. It says "all things." Now if all things were created by Jesus, then He Himself was not created. And the very point of the whole passage is to show us His divine nature and His sovereignty over all of creation.

The word "firstborn" in the English Bible in verse 15 is the Greek word "prototokos." It conveys not first in order, but first in priority or sovereignty. It can have the meaning of first in order, but the idea as it is used as a figure of speech in Bible times is for the favored son or the important son or the one who would get the inheritance. It means that Jesus is the sovereign over creation.

In the Old Testament, Esau was born before Jacob, yet Jacob was called the firstborn, because

he was the chosen son, he was the favored son. Israel was called the firstborn among the nations, even though other nations existed before the nation of Israel. Why? Because Israel was the favored nation; it was the chosen nation. Israel was the one that was given the first priority.

Jesus is basically Lord of all creation. Paul gives us four reasons why He is Lord of all creation and should have preeminence. First of all, Jesus is the creator of all creation, verse 16. “For by Him...”—literally in the Greek it’s “in Him”—“...were all things created.” For in Him—that is, Jesus—all things were created.

Do you know that the source of the entire cosmos—the entire universe, all matter—came from Jesus Christ? Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” What a great statement. The very first verse of the very first chapter of the Bible: “...God created the heaven and the earth.”

By the way, this runs counter to our modern theory of evolution. The Bible doesn’t teach evolution; it teaches special creation. I believe the Bible. God was there before anything else existed. And when it says that “God created the heaven and the earth,” that God is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now if He’s the creator of the entire creation, don’t you think He can take care of your problem? “All I need is \$100.” If He can fling the stars into space—billions of galaxies, billions of stars bigger than our sun...He spoke them into existence by “the word of His power.” Wow! That’s power. That’s amazing. And He gave the universe balance; He pulls it together by “the word of His power.” He is the creator of all things.

Secondly, Jesus is the purpose and the goal of all creation, verse 16. “...all things were created by Him and for Him.” So, number one, He is the source; and number two, He is the goal. He is the goal of all things. He is the purpose of all things.

The Bible says that the trees of the field clap their hands in worship to God. Any time you see the branches of a tree bouncing in the wind, they’re praising God. You don’t praise God but trees do. The stars do. The birds do. When you hear a bird singing, it’s praising God; it’s worshipping God.

Remember when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the Pharisees said, “Be quiet. Stop singing praises”? Jesus said, “If they stop the praise, the rocks are going to cry out.” All creation will begin to cry out. They were going to sing Rock of Ages, by the way. All creation sings His praise and manifests His glory. Creation has meaning only when it points to Christ. All creation gives Him glory. So should we.

The third relationship to creation is that He is before all things and before all creation, verse 17. “And He is before all things.” And “all things” means all things. Before anything else existed, Jesus is the eternal God. He stood before time, before matter; before all things.

John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." So you have the eternal Word, and you have the personal Word—"with God"—meaning God the Son and God the Father—face to face. And then it says, "The Word was God." But it starts with the eternal Word; "In the beginning was the Word."

In John 8:58, Jesus said, "...before Abraham was, I am." Now if you were making a statement like that, you'd say, "Before Abraham was, I was"—Abraham's long gone. But He uses this ego eimi, "I AM that I AM. I am the eternal one, the Covenant-keeping God."

Look at Revelation 1:8, where the Apostle John, recording the words of Jesus, said, "'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending,' saith the Lord, 'which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.'" Jesus Christ calls Himself "the Almighty."

These are great verses to have ready when a Jehovah Witness knocks on your door. Notice it said "when," not "if." If you have a door, a Jehovah Witness will knock on it. These are verses you should be able to share with them. Jesus is "Alpha and Omega." He "was." He "is." He "is to come." He is "the Almighty."

Notice Jesus' fourth aspect of His relationship to creation, verse 17. Jesus is the sustainer of all creation. "...and by Him all things consist." The word "consist" literally means "hold together." How about that old classic song He's Got the Whole World in His Hands. Don't you love that?

He's got the whole world in His hands.

He's got you and me brother in His hands.

He's got you and me sister in His hands.

He's got the whole world in His hands; He's holding it together.

What keeps an atom from exploding? You've got these positive particles around the nucleus of an atom and they should be repelling each other, so what keeps it going? Scientists call it "atomic glue"; they don't know what it is. They don't know what keeps matter together. Why doesn't it explode? The Bible actually says that it's Jesus. He's actually holding you together. Jesus is the one holding all the cosmos in the whole universe. What an awesome thought that is.

Someone said that "Jesus makes the universe a cosmos instead of a chaos." I love that. "Cosmos," speaking of the order of the universe. But Jesus holds it all together; the fine tuning, the balance, the seasons. All the things that are going on in our cosmos are being held together by His hands. Since He holds the universe in His hands, is He not able to take care of your problems?

So, number one, He is "the visible image of the invisible God"—the revealer; number two, He is the sovereign over all creation—the creator; and number three, verse 18, He is the head of the

church, His body. And He is the head of the body, His church, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...”—so at the end of verse 18 you have the reason He is the body, the head of the church—“... that in all things He might have the preeminence.” So Jesus is the revealer, He’s the creator and He is the head of the church. Jesus is Lord of the cosmos and Lord of the church.

The head of nature is the head of grace. Paul changes the focus from Christ’s preeminence over natural creation to Christ’s preeminence over the new spiritual creation, the church. Christ’s preeminence is seen in Revelation, in creation and, now, in exaltation. What a picture this is of Jesus Christ.

In verse 18 Paul says Jesus is “the head of the church, His body.” Paul uses the metaphor for the church—the ekklesia, the called-out assembly, the believers in Christ—of a body. The church is a building. The church is the bride. The church is the family of God. The church is the flock of God. The church is also a body; likened unto a physical body. That’s a metaphor using an imagery that we’re the body, and Christ is the head.

I think it’s pretty easy to understand that the head is very important to the body. You don’t want to give somebody your head. If someone takes off your head, you’re in big trouble. You know how important your head is. It’s so important. My brain tells my body what to do. It doesn’t always work properly. I mean that literally; because of the stroke I had several years ago, my brain doesn’t always function properly. But I’ve learned a lot about my brain. My brain tells my body everything; it tells me how to feel, it tells my emotions what to do, it tells my eyes to see, it tells my eyes what I’m seeing, it tells me to feel pain, it tells me to feel cold, it tells me to feel hot. Everything comes from my head; it all comes from my brain. That’s why we talk about protecting the head at all cost. You don’t want to suffer head injuries. It’s so crucial. The master computer, the signal for everything in your body comes from the brain.

So Christ is the head of the church. And no man, no human being, no pope, no bishop, no cardinal, no pastor is the head of the church. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. It’s so sad to me when I hear someone say, “Oh, he’s the head of the church,” or “He represents Christ on earth.” We all are to represent Christ on earth.

Now man is the image of God, too, by the way, but he’s made in the image of God. But Jesus Christ is the image of God. We were created in God’s image; Jesus has always been and always will be the image of God, because He is God.

Jesus is the head of this church, and He is the head of the church universal. He is the head of the body. Jesus is Lord and head of the church. Why? Because “in all things...”—I love it—“... He might have the preeminence” through His incarnation, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, being “the firstborn from the dead.” The word “firstborn” is the same word, prototokos, meaning the most important one ever raised from the dead. Everyone else came out of the tomb when they were saved with a mortal body and had to die again. Jesus’ resurrected body was an immortal, eternal body, never to die again. He was crucified and resurrected, and after

appearing to His disciples for 40 days in that body—now a glorified body—He ascended back into heaven and is now exalted and sits at the right hand of God the Father. He ever lives to save. There is salvation in no other name than the name of Jesus Christ. Through His incarnation, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, His Ascension and His exaltation, Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul says, “Let this mind...”—this attitude, this outlook—“...be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form...”—morphe, essence—“...of God, thought equality with God not something to hold onto.” He emptied Himself—not of His deity—but of the outward display and manifestation of His deity, “and He took upon Himself the form of a servant...and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.”

Paul, in Philippians 2, is teaching the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ and that He went to the Cross and He suffered and died. What does Paul say in Philippians 2? “Wherefore...”—“because of this”—“...God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Jesus is God, He is creator and He is head of the church by His death and Resurrection and exaltation. He comes to redeem us and to save us from our sins. And then he says, “...that in all things He might have the preeminence.” I can’t resist pushing it into verse 19: “For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell.”

Jesus is the revealer, the creator and the head of the church. He must have preeminence in all things. Does Jesus have first place in your life? In your marriage? In your profession? In your pleasures? In your ministry? In your conversation? In your worship? Jesus is God. Jesus created you. And Jesus died to save you. Won’t you give Him your heart? Won’t you give Him first place?

Let’s pray.