

The Preeminent Christ

Colossians 1:14-18

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I want to read the text that comes before and after our focus text. Whenever you interpret a passage, it's always important to set it in context. So we'll start in verse 12 of Colossians 1.

Paul says, we are “giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom...”—referring to Jesus Christ—“... we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in 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 may have...”—here's our theme—“...the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him...”—that is, “Christ”—“...all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

There is an old song that was going through my mind as I was meditating on this passage. It's the song Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Look full in His wonderful face,

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,

In the light of His glory and grace.”

This passage is turning your eyes upon Jesus. And when you turn your eyes upon Jesus, all the things of earth grow strangely dim.

The theologian Eric Sauer said that “If you wish to be disappointed, look at others; if you wish to be downhearted, look at yourself; but if you wish to be encouraged, look upon Jesus Christ.” I don't know about you, but I want to be encouraged, so in this passage we're going to look together upon Jesus Christ.

Our text, Colossians 1:15-18, is one of the greatest theological passages of the Bible, meaning that it is a passage about Christ. When we preach the Word, it should be Christ centered. When we worship, we worship Jesus Christ. When we serve God, we're serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me give you the three other classic passages about Jesus Christ, so you can spend some time looking at them. John 1:1-18 is the second, great passage you need to read and meditate on and understand about Jesus Christ. It is the prologue to the Gospel of John. It is one of the greatest pieces of literature in the world. The next one is Philippians 2:5-11. The next section of the New Testament that speaks about Christ is Hebrews 1:1-3. These first three verses of Hebrews 1 speak about Christ so wonderfully and so marvelously.

Why do we find this passage here in Colossians? Why in Colossians does Paul speak so elevated in his language about Jesus Christ? It was simply because false teachers had come into the church at Colosse and were giving Jesus a prominent place but not the preeminent place. In other words, they said that Jesus is important, but He's not of supreme importance. They said He wasn't God in the flesh.

A lot of cult groups and "isms" today teach the same. A lot of new-agers believe that Jesus is good but He's not supreme. He's not God in the flesh. Jesus is one of many paths to God, or God is one of many "ascended masters" or great spiritual leaders, but He is not God come to visit us in the form of a man.

But it's not about giving Jesus prominence. The Bible says that Jesus Christ should have "preeminence" in all things. Verse 18 says, "That in all things He..."—that is, "Christ"—"...may have the preeminence." So that means that Jesus is to have first place in all things. By the way, "all things" means all things: in your life and in your marriage and in your thoughts and in your home and in your work and in your play and in your finances—everything about you—Christ is to be number one. He is to have preeminence.

Why should Jesus have preeminence? What makes Jesus so unique? Paul gives us three reasons why Jesus Christ should have preeminence. Reason number one is that "He is the image of the invisible God." Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God, verse 15. Who is the image of the invisible God? How do we know that the "He" in verse 15 is referring to Jesus? The answer is back in verses 13-14. Verse 13 says, "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." So Paul is telling us that God the Father delivered us and God the Father translated us into the kingdom of His Son. Verse 14 says, "...in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." Then, without skipping a beat, verse 15 says, "He is...." So "He" refers to "the Son of His love," Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, in verse 14, you have "in whom"; verse 15, "He is"; verse 16, "by Him"; verse 17, "He is"; verse 18, "He is"; and in verse 19, "in Him." So this is all about Jesus Christ. It's all about who He is and what He has done in His glory. So that God, who is invisible, has been made clear, as well, in this passage. In Christ, we have "the image of the invisible God."

God is invisible because God is a spirit. John 4:24 says, "Those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." So God is a spirit, and we worship Him "in spirit and in truth." God cannot be seen with our naked eye or understood with our human intellect. God can only be known by revelation, and God has revealed Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 1:17 describes God as “the King eternal, immortal, invisible.” There again you have another statement about God being invisible.

In John 1:18, John says in the prologue I referred to earlier that “No one has seen God at any time.” The idea there is that God is invisible. We see manifestations of God; we see in Christ the Incarnation of God. But we don’t see God in His essence, because God is invisible. So this is the point: Jesus came to reveal God to man.

Jesus is the image of God. What does that mean? The word “image” carries the idea of “representation” and “manifestation.” So He represents or manifests God. The word was used in Matthew 22:20 where Jesus was asked by His attackers, “Is it okay to pay tribute to Caesar? Should we pay taxes?” Jesus asked for a coin, held up the coin and asked, “Whose image...”—there’s our word—“...and inscription is this?” They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then He flipped the coin back and said, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The same word “image” here is used for the picture on the coin. So we get our word “picture” or “portrait” from “image.” We also get our word “icon” from this Greek word that is translated “image of the invisible God.”

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. What does God look like? Look at Jesus. Jesus said to Phillip, “Have I been with you for so long, and yet you have not known Me, Phillip?” Phillip had actually said, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” That doesn’t mean that Jesus is the Father; it means that Jesus reveals the Father. Jesus is a revelation of the Father and a manifestation of God in the flesh. Hebrews 1:3, that other passage I told you to study, says, “Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image...”—there’s the same word—“...of His person.” So He is a picture.

On our trip to Monterey with all our kids, there were 13 of us. Have you ever tried to get 13 people together for a picture? All the kids and grandkids. “Let’s all get together for a picture.” It takes four hours to get everybody in place. You take a picture, and it’s a representation of the group that was there.

Jesus is the picture. He’s the “photo” or the icon. The reason He can represent God is because He is God manifested in the flesh. So Jesus is God manifested in the flesh as seen by His Incarnation, by His miracles and by His Resurrection, revealing God the Father. What a glorious truth that is.

So Christ should have preeminence not only because He reveals God, but He is indeed God. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul said, “For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” I love that. The glory of God is seen “in the face of Jesus Christ.” So Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

Here is the second reason that Christ is to have preeminence: He is the sovereign one over creation. This is a larger section of our text, and it begins in verse 15. It says, “He is...the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” or “are held together.”

Why does Paul focus on Jesus as Lord of all creation? Because of the false teachers and their view of Jesus. This is where you become equipped to answer the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ doctrine is that Jesus was created, and then Jesus created the universe. That’s not what the Bible teaches. The Bible doesn’t teach that Jesus was created, that He was a creature. The Bible teaches that He coexisted with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit for all eternity. They never, ever was a time when Jesus did not exist. He is the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Triune Godhead.

This Jehovah’s Witnesses doctrine is from an ancient heresy known as Arianism. A man by the name of Arius promulgated this idea that Jesus wasn’t eternal, that He was created by God and that He was lesser than and inferior to God the Father. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have picked up on this Arian heresy and promulgate it today. They actually teach that Jesus was first made as Michael the archangel. There is no Scriptural basis for that, but that is what they believe. But this passage teaches that all things were created by Him. So that would preclude Jesus being a creature or being created.

Paul made it clear in verse 15 that Jesus is “the firstborn over all creation.” A lot of times people misunderstand the word “firstborn.” They think it conveys the idea of chronology or order in time—the first born or the first one. But that’s not what it means at all. It’s interesting that Paul even makes that clear in verse 16: “For by Him all things were created.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses falsely translate that “all other things.” That’s not in the Bible. They insert that, but it’s not in the Scriptures. All things were created by Him.

The word “firstborn” is the Greek word “prototokos.” What it means is “most important” or “supreme one.” It means “the first in importance, priority or sovereignty.” It means that Jesus is sovereign over all of the creation.

Let me give you some examples. Esau and Jacob were twins, and Esau was born first, yet Jacob was called “the firstborn.” So Esau’s brother was older—he was born first—but Jacob was called the firstborn, because he was the important one. He was the one to get the inheritance. Normally, the one born first, chronologically, would be the one to be called the firstborn. But in this case, God said that Jacob would be the firstborn.

Then Israel, as a nation, is called “the firstborn among nations.” It is the same concept. There were other nations that existed long before Israel, yet Israel is the chosen nation; it’s the supreme or sovereign nation in God’s purpose and in God’s program. So the word “prototokos” does not mean first in chronology but first in superiority, and Jesus is first over the whole

universe.

Paul gives us four reasons from our text as to why Jesus is first over the whole universe. Number one, in verse 16, He is the creator of all creation. “For by Him...”—or literally, “in Him”—“...all things were created.” So when you read in Genesis 1:1 that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” it’s talking about Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke by His word, and all was created. How marvelous is that! Paul makes it clear that He created all things.

Now if Jesus created all things, He created you, and He can take care of you. Whatever the situation you’re in, He can take care of you. You can trust Him.

Then, secondly, He is the purpose or the goal of all creation. Notice it in verse 16: “All things were created through Him and for Him.” So Jesus is the source of all things, and He is the goal of all things. All creation is pointing to Jesus Christ. The Bible actually says that “All the trees of the field shall clap their hands” in worshipping God. When you see the trees blowing in the wind, they’re actually worshipping God.

Oh—and the birds! Yesterday we stopped at In-N-Out on the way home, and my grandson was giving all his French fries to the birds. I’m thinkin’, Share with your grandpa! Don’t give ‘em all to the birds! Those birds don’t need your French fries. They have a heavenly Father. He’ll take care of them! But I think God created fast food to feed the birds out there. But when the birds sing, they’re singing worship and praise. They’re praising the Lord.

It’s interesting that the trees clap their hands and the birds worship, but we don’t. How sad that is.

So all creation actually points to Jesus. Creation has meaning only when it points to Jesus Christ. The only way that creation can have a purpose and meaning is to understand that it is pointing to Jesus Christ. All creation gives glory to God. And so should we.

Then notice, thirdly, in His relationship to creation that He is before all creation. What this teaches is that Jesus preexisted, Genesis 1:1. That’s why John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” So He is two things: He preexisted creation, and He is eternal. He is eternal and preexistent. He was existing before creation and before Bethlehem. John 8:58 says, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” And here’s a good one for the cultist who knocks on your door: Revelation 1:8, where Jesus is speaking and says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Those are the very words of Jesus Christ. Some say He’s just a mighty God and not the Almighty God, but Jesus says that He is “the Almighty.”

Notice, fourthly, in His relationship to creation, He sustains creation. He is the sustainer and keeper of all creation, verse 17. “In Him all things consist.” The word “consist” means “to hold together.” Have you ever wondered what keeps the sun at the right distance from the earth? Or what keeps the galaxies and the stars hanging in the heavens? Or what keeps everything in motion? Or what keeps the positive particles in an atom from blowing up? The Bible says that

Jesus is holding it all together. Another great song is 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 got your health in His hands. He's got your finances in His hands. He's got your family in His hands. He's got your job and your occupation in His hands. He's got your marriage in His hands. What we need to do is trust Him. When you understand who Jesus is, who wouldn't want to trust Him, and believe in Him, and live for Him and honor and serve Him?

The fine tuning of the universe and the holding together of all things is what Jesus does. What a glorious truth that is. Jesus makes the universe a cosmos instead of chaos. The word "cosmos" means "order." We also get our word "cosmetics" from it. When you women do your makeup, make sure there is cosmos and not chaos. (I can't believe I'm sharing this.) But it does mean order, so put yourself in order. (Let's get back to the text.) So Jesus puts the whole universe in order. The cosmos is not in chaos. What a glorious truth that is.

So number one, He is the visible image of the invisible God. When you look at Jesus you are actually seeing God in the flesh. Number two, He is sovereign over all creation. He made it. He sustains it. It came from Him and is going to Him. Now number three, He is head of the church. Verse 18 says, "And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." So He is the head over all creation, and He is head over the church. He is the Lord of the cosmos as well as Lord of the church. He is the head of nature as well as 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.

The three categories of Christ's preeminence are revelation, creation and exaltation. Notice the clear statement in verse 18. "He is the head of the body, the church." Now how did Jesus become head of the church, which is the body of Christ? The answer is His Incarnation, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection and His exaltation. Jesus was God in the flesh, crucified in His substitutionary death on the Cross, was buried and rose from the dead. Notice verse 18 says, "the firstborn from the dead." It's that same Greek word "prototokos." It doesn't mean first in order but rather first in importance.

In 1 Corinthians 15, I pointed out that there were others who came back from the dead before Jesus Christ. But He is the most important. That's because He came out of the grave in an immortal, eternal body, never to die again. Everyone else who came back from the dead had a mortal body and they would have to die again. So Jesus Christ is the "prototokos" from the dead; He is the most important one. He is the prototype or pattern. He is the picture of our resurrection bodies. So Jesus rose from the dead, and then He ascended back into heaven and is exalted at the right hand of God the Father.

This is why, again, that the passage in Philippians 2 is a great passage on Christ. It said that He thought it was not “robbery to be equal with God” yet not something to hold on to, so He emptied Himself, “taking the form of a bondservant...became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

So if you bow your knee now, it's means your salvation. If you reject Jesus Christ, you will bow your knee then, on Judgment Day, and it will result in your condemnation. You either submit right now and you're saved, or you reject Jesus Christ and one day you will acknowledge Him as Lord of all but it brings your condemnation. Jesus is the head of the church.

One of the most important things a pastor can understand is that he's not the head of the church. Christ is the head of the church. The Pope is not the head of the church. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. He is the foundation of the church. He is the chief cornerstone of the church. Jesus said that when Peter confessed, “Thou art the Lord, the Son of the living God,” He said, “Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” So we need to understand that the church belongs to Christ; He is the head and we are His body.

In this church, Revival Christian Fellowship, and in the church universal, Christ is to have preeminence. We are to love Him and serve Him and worship Him and sing to Him and follow Him and sacrifice for Him and even suffer for His name sake, because Jesus is the revealer, the creator, and the exalted head of the church.

He must have preeminence in all things. He must have preeminence in your life, in your marriage, in your profession, in your pleasures, in your ministry in the church, in your conversations and in your worship.

I challenge you today that when you have lunch or get together with the family, talk about Jesus. Isn't it funny some of the inane chatter we get into when we talk? Let's skip that and talk about Jesus. Just inject that into the conversation when you're with a group or having lunch or dinner. Say, “Hey, let's spend the next 30 minutes talking about Jesus. I'll tell you about the sermon I heard today.” Then open your Bible to Colossians and share what you learned about who Christ is: He is the revealer, the creator and the head of the church; we should give Him preeminence in all things; He is God, He is the creator and He died on the Cross for your sins.

So we need to love Jesus and serve Him and live for Him.