

Colossians: In Everything Preeminent

Colossians 1:15-20

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If you brought your Bibles, please turn with me to Colossians 1:15-20. We had had Bibles here in the weeks past but they disappeared tonight, so we'll hopefully have those back next week.

How has your week been? Maybe you've had a long week. Maybe you've been taking care of a sick child or an aging parent. Maybe you've been pushing up against the deadlines at work and you have an unrelenting boss or client that just won't quit. Maybe you've had it out with your husband or your wife or maybe with your child or brother or sister. Maybe someone or several someones in the church have let you down. You can't help but think, "Well at least it's Friday. Wait, it's just Wednesday! What on earth could Thursday and Friday have in store for us?" It's just that kind of moment, just that kind of week that we need this message from Colossians chapter 1 this evening, that Christ is preeminent, that all things are subject to Him and through the cross He has reconciled all things to Himself. That's the message that we need for just such a week. So let's pray and then we'll turn and read this passage together.

Father, we do give You thanks that You've brought us here in the middle of a week, no matter what the week has brought to us, that we can hear Your Word, that we have Your presence, the Holy Spirit, to illumine our hearts and to open our eyes to what You have to say to us. We ask that You would encourage us, that You would grow us, and produce in us the fruits of righteousness, and that we would do it all to Your glory and to the honor of the preeminent Christ. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Colossians 1 verse 15 says:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And 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, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be

preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God endures forever.

From a Prayer to a Hymn: The Fullness and Sufficiency of Christ

This is probably the most famous passage in this letter, in the book of Colossians. And really it's impressive; it's really captivating in the way that it gathers together, it piles up phrase after phrase after phrase describing the supremacy and the praiseworthiness of Christ. Now the context and the structure of this section of Colossians has led many people to believe or to guess that this may have been an early church hymn; maybe it was a confession or a creed that was recited, that was sung in the early church. We don't know whether it was written by Paul or whether it was written by someone else and then incorporated by Paul into this letter to teach the themes and the ideas, the truths that he wants to get across to the Colossian church. Whatever the case, Paul, in these verses, is making a transition. He's making a transition from what we studied last week, what Sean led us through, that prayer, that prayer you remember that was rooted in our great salvation, in our great Savior, rooted in Christ. So he's starting off there and he's leading us through this hymn or through this creed to open up and to introduce several important themes and ideas that will become important in his message to the Colossian church.

You see, the Colossian church faced a problem of false teachers. We've discussed that in the past. But these false teachers promoted aestheticism. They promoted legalism, a worship of angels. They boasted of having seen visions and of having an understanding of these deep elemental principles of the world. And the result of all those things was division; it was disunity. There was judgmentalism in the church. They were diminishing the work and the person of Christ by trying to add to who He was and what He had done. And all these things that they are promoting, all these things that they are teaching were really putting up a barrier to sanctification, to their growth in holiness. The things that they were teaching were powerless; they were ineffective to produce holiness and godliness in the life of these believers. And so in this section, in verses 15 through 20, Paul is getting right at the heart of the problem. And what he's saying to us is that Christ is the firstborn of all creation and that Christ is the firstborn from the dead. So we'll look at this passage in those two headings tonight.

Christ is the Firstborn of All Creation

The first is that Christ is the firstborn of all creation. You see that in verses 15 through 17. And what he's saying is that Christ is preeminent over creation.

Christ is the most supreme of all and over all creation. But before he gets to that he actually goes back prior to creation. He says in verse 15, "he is the image of the invisible God." Our starting point for grasping who Christ is goes back before creation. That's what he's saying to us. He's saying that when we look to Christ we look to God. When we see Christ we see God. One commentator says, describing this verse, "Christ is an exact as well as visible representation of God." If you look down in verse 19 it highlights and re-emphasizes this idea. He says, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." So right from the start, the very beginning of his letter, what he's saying to us is that Christ is God. He's saying this is the root and the foundation of the supremacy of God, of Christ, is that He is God. He's going and doing the same thing that John's doing in John chapter 1 when he says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." That's what he's saying about Christ here in this section.

And then he goes on and he says he's "the firstborn of all creation." He's the firstborn. What does that expression mean? What he's saying there, he's using an expression that represents the position of Christ in relationship to all of creation. He's not saying that Christ was created or that at some point Christ came into being, that He was the first thing that happened in creation. He's saying that He is supreme and preeminent and above, in a position of prominence over all things that were created. He is to be regarded with utmost honor and priority. And he says he's "the firstborn of all creation." And he goes on and we look in our passage to elaborate on Christ's prominence in creation. He says, "By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him." And then he goes on to say in verse 17, "And he is before all things and in him all things hold together." What he's saying is that everything in creation has its beginning, middle, and end in Christ, that all things were made through Him, that all things are held together by Him, and all things have their ultimate purpose in Christ. Again he's highlighting, emphasizing, pounding it out to us the supremacy of Christ in relation to creation.

Christ: Supreme over Creation

Think about all in creation that elicits your wonder and your awe. Whether it's the view of the ocean or of the mountains, the animals that scurry around outside, the sunsets, whatever it may be in creation that elicits your wonder and awe, what Paul is using here in this hymn is he's saying that Christ is so much better. He's so much more supreme and preeminent than all those things. Think about all the unseen spiritual forces and battles that rage around us, the invisible things that we cannot see but we know that are there. What Paul is saying is that Christ is greater than them all. Think of all the daunting world powers, the governments and the businesses and the cultural movements that we see threaten our way of life and our freedoms and the liberty of those around the world. What Paul is saying is that in creation Christ is greater than them all and all of those things

ultimately will serve to proclaim and to further His glory.

Do you see why that's important for the Colossian church? Here they were being taught to focus on the flesh, think about food and drink and festival days. The false teachers were saying, "Set your minds on things of the earth." And then on the other hand they were also saying to them, "Regard visions and worship angels, discover the elemental spirits of the world. These are the things that are needed in addition to Christ. Christ is not sufficient. Christ alone will not satisfy. True wisdom requires an adherence to these regulations that we are teaching to you." That's what the false teachers are saying to them. And what is Paul saying? He's saying that Christ is greater than all these things, that He is sufficient, that Christ alone can satisfy. They can't settle for a way of life which detracts from Christ by depending on fleshly techniques and regulations and methods.

Christ: Supremely Worthy of Worship

That's an important thing for us to remember as well, I believe. It's easy to be enamored with the things of this world. It's easy to be enamored with earthly comforts, with material pleasures. You can think just of, as you see on the internet and in the media and advertisements, we're always being promoted with the next advancement in technology. What's the newest and the latest mobile device? And they're being broken down for us and they're showing us the smooth edges and the thin lines and how small and compact and how fast and better than what you had before. All of those things are being promoted to us and we can think we need that, we need that in order to be able to operate, to function, and to be satisfied, to find joy. We could make that distinction and application to anything that is material that promotes a material comfort and earthly pleasure. And C. S. Lewis says it so well. He says that so oftentimes when we're enamored and attracted by those things we think that we've made it, we've really made a place for ourselves in the world; we're a success. And yet, he says, what's really happening is that the world has made a place in your life. We're not finding a place in the world; the world's finding a place in us. That's a temptation when we think about earthly pleasures and material comforts.

What about being discouraged by the weakness of the flesh? As Christ told His disciples, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," and so often we're dragged down and we've made a mess out of the temptations that we face each day. We've done something to hurt someone else, to cause trouble in our family, in our friendships, in our community, in our church, and we struggle with those things, with the weakness of the flesh. We've been burdened with the groans of creation as Paul talks about in Romans chapter 8. We see sickness. We come here together and we open up our prayer bulletins and what do we read about? What do we pray about? We pray about those who are in the hospital, those who have died. We see the groans of the flesh, the groans of creation. We're constantly surrounded by those things and we can be discouraged and distracted

by that. We see a disregard for authority and a breakdown of the family around us. We see a culture which has dismissed religion and doesn't know what to do and how to handle ultimate concerns. There was an article in *The Atlantic* magazine this past week talking about a tattoo parlor in Hawaii and their niche is to give tattoos which mix ink with the ashes of a loved one. So instead of saving the ashes or spreading the ashes you can actually wear the ashes. A professor at Baylor wrote a book commenting on those things and she says that as a society becomes more secular and people are more and more turning to that "spiritual but not religious" category, they're forming their own do-it-yourself ways of remembering the dead."

That's what we see going on in the church in Colossae. It's a do-it-yourself way of doing religion and of doing spiritual things and it doesn't work. It can't produce holiness. It can't comfort God's people. It detracts from Christ. And what Paul is using this hymn or this poem that maybe he himself has penned, he's saying that Christ is preeminent, Christ is supreme. He is sufficient; He can satisfy. All creation is through Him. It's held together for Him. It finds its ultimate purpose in Him. And I was reminded talking to Ralph Kelley earlier today, he was, in application I think even to our vocations, into our workplaces, into our positions as husbands or wives, brothers or sisters, whatever our calling is in life, Ralph was reminding me of when he went to Covenant College in Chattanooga that just about everywhere you went some of the main, prominent buildings that had the banner across it said, "In Christ All Things Preeminent." That's the motto for Covenant College. And what they're trying to promote and what they're trying to share to their students is that whether you're studying science or accounting or economics or whether you're on the sports field or you're leaving to become a husband or a wife, "in all things Christ preeminent." And that's, wherever we are engaged in creation, that Christ is firstborn of all creation and He is to be preeminent in all that we do.

Christ is the Firstborn from the Dead

And then what Paul goes on to say, to teach us in this hymn in verses 18 to 20, is that Christ's purpose in creation is actually wrapped up in His purpose for His people. Here Paul, in verses 18 to 20, we see the firstborn from the dead. Paul is stressing Christ's preeminence in salvation. He's saying that Christ's supremacy is over the church. Look there at verse 18. "He is the head of the body, the church." One commentator explains that in the ancient world the head was conceived to be the governing member of the body. He says, "It was that which both controlled it and provided for its life and sustenance. It was the source of life for the body." So that's what Paul's saying here, it's that Christ is the head of the church, He's the head of the body, the church. He's the source of the life of the church. He says He's the beginning; He's "the firstborn from the dead."

We can see a parallel, can't we, with what he was saying in the first couple of

verses, that creation has its beginning, middle, and end in Christ. He's saying that the church has its beginning, middle, and end in Christ, connected to Christ. And he says, "the firstborn from the dead." That's an interesting description of the church, isn't it? That we are those that are from the dead; we are resurrection, raised to new life. We have new life in Christ. But we are dead in many senses. And he would go on to elaborate in this throughout this letter that we are dead to the world, that we're not to set our mind on the world but to set our mind above. It says we are dead to sin. We're not to live any longer to the sinful patterns of this age but to live in holiness and righteousness. He says we're dead to self, that we've been given a new self and we're to renew that in Christ for His glory.

A Reconciliation of Cosmic Proportions

And he says here in this passage that Christ's work in salvation is much bigger than even our personal experience. He's reconciling the entire universe to Himself. Look what he says there in verse 20 - "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." We're getting echoes from Romans chapter 8 that "the creation also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." God's plans and purposes for creation is wrapped up in His plans and purposes for His people in their salvation, based on the work of Christ on the cross.

A Message for Paul

Paul would have needed this message, wouldn't he? He would have needed this message as much as anyone. Here he is, again, another problem in the church; he's got another church where there's a problem - false teachers going around making a mess. Where is Paul? He's in prison, struggling with the thorn in the flesh. What would have been going on in his mind? What questions would he have been asking himself? "Is this worth it? Should I just stick to making tents and give this all up? Is Epaphras up to the task?" You know Epaphras is the faithful minister that's sent to the church. "Could he really carry this out? Am I able to delegate this task to him for him to lead the church and direct the church and guide the church and protect the church? Will this letter even be effective? Will they pay attention to it?" All these questions could have been going on in his head as he sits there in prison, writes this letter, concerned for the church. And yet what is it that keeps him going, keeps him bold and courageous and stable and rooted in his task as a minister of the Gospel? It's that Christ is preeminent, that Christ is the head of the church, that Christ is working out His purposes in the church.

A Message for The Colossians

The Colossians would have needed this as well. The Colossians would definitely have needed this reminder. Here they are, they're struggling with judgmentalism;

people were passing judgment on one another based on their false teaching. It led to disunity or division within the church. And how much do they need it here again, that they are the body of Christ, that they're to be unified and together in love, that not only has Christ reconciled them to Himself but He's reconciled them to one another, that this peace that He's extended to them with Himself that He's extended this peace among the body. That they're to grow in love and unity together with one another. What about their need to grow in sanctification? They're struggling with different sins, they're coming out of a sinful way of life into a new way of life, the life of the Gospel. How do they grow in sanctification? How do they change?

There was a letter that went viral, an email that went viral about a year and a half ago by this guy, I think his name was [Nick] Crews, they called it "The Crews Missile." He wrote to his grown children. He was disappointed with how they had turned out, what they had become, and the wrecks that they had made of their families, and he just berated them. He said, "You need to pull yourself up, get it together, get your act right. Start doing things the right way or we're just not going to have a relationship together." It was totally ineffective for bringing about change in the life of his children. Paul, maybe Paul could have been tempted to do the same thing to these churches that he was struggling with but what does he do? He goes back to the Gospel. He goes back to what Christ had done, to who Christ is - that He is preeminent, He is supreme, He is the head of the church. And it's by starting there and reminding them of that and proclaiming that to them, that's how they change. It's that by being in Christ and looking to Christ and remembering the Gospel that was first preached to them, that is how they are to change and to put off their sinful way of life and to put on holiness and to put on godliness and to walk with Christ, to walk in love.

A Message for Us

And finally, we need this lesson as well, don't we? As we fellowship together with one another, we serve in the church, we come here together to pray, what's the first thing that we are to strive to do as we pray together? It is to make Christ preeminent, to uphold Him and to uplift Him and to see, as we pray for our RUF ministers and our missionaries and we pray for the ministries of the church, we're not praying for numerical growth alone, we're not praying for it to look like a successful thing, but we're praying that Christ will be preeminent, that His glory will be promoted and expanded not only in our body, in our group, but also throughout our city and throughout our country and throughout the world, that Christ would be preeminent.

Creation and Salvation

The last thing is that, notice that we see in these verses that creation and salvation are paired with one another in this passage. This is something that we see over and over. We see it in the psalms. We see it in 2 Corinthians - "For it is

God who calls light to shine out of darkness as shone into our hearts with the light of the knowledge of the glory of Christ.” It’s this pairing of creation and salvation. And we see that over and over in the Scripture. And what does it tell us? It shows us that the God who made us, the one who made us is the one who saves us, and the one who made all things can do all things. He is sufficient. He is sufficient to deliver us and to provide for us and to care for us and to tend to our needs. But He’s also sufficient to satisfy us and to bring about joy, to bring about kindness and compassion and love for one another. Only Christ can do that and He’s the one who made all things and He’s the one who saved us and He can do that in our lives and in our midst.

Let’s close in prayer.

Father, we do thank You for Your Word and we pause to just meditate on who Christ is. Would You expand our minds and our hearts, even our imaginations, that we would grasp Christ in all His greatness and His beauty and His majesty? That we would see what He has done for us and that He has given us salvation and raised us from the dead to give us life, to join us together with Him and reconcile us to Himself and with all things. And so we ask that You would encourage us by that and strengthen us. Grow our faith. Comfort us and lead us in our time of prayer that we would do so with confidence and with a desire to promote Your glory. We pray these things in Jesus’ name, amen.

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