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Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
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Colossians 1:15-20 “The Preeminence of Jesus Christ”

Introduction: This passage of Scripture presents the supremacy and importance of Jesus Christ. That’s because some false teachers were telling these Colossian Christians that Christ alone could not meet all their spiritual needs. These gnostic teachers were saying that the Colossian Christians needed the special knowledge that *they* had to offer. They tried to mix Christianity with Greek philosophy that God is good and matter is evil. They could not accept that the Supreme God created the world so they said He did so, not directly, but through a series of aeons or emanations, and the last of the aeons was so distant from God, that it could touch and handle and shape matter, and create the world out of pre-existing matter. Having heard of the power of Jesus, they believed He fit into their scheme of lesser deities. Furthermore, as they adapted to Hebrew and Christian teachings, they believed that angels were included in this series of lesser spirit-beings, and so they also taught that they needed to cultivate relationships with angels and other spirit beings, as Paul mentioned in 2:18.

Since New Testament times, there have continued to arise false teachers who claim to have new truth and new spiritual resources. They claim that Jesus Christ, and the teachings of the New Testament, are not enough. For example, Islam claims to have new and additional truth that men need, and that Jesus was just a prophet. Mormonism has the “new” revelations found in the Book of Mormon, and they elevate Joseph Smith as a prophet over Jesus. The examples could go on and on. Today I see religious teachers try to adapt Christianity to the latest beliefs in worldly morality and philosophy.

In these verses of Colossians chapter one, Paul exalts Jesus to His rightful place in our hearts and in the universe itself. He is not some lesser deity or Spirit-being. He is God, the Creator of all things, the great Redeemer and Head of the Church. And once you see who Jesus Christ really is, you will put your trust in Him, live for Him, and know that He is all-sufficient to meet your every need.

I am thankful that Jesus is so great! After all, faith is no better than the object of your faith. Jesus is so great that my faith in Him will never lead to disappointment. As the author of Hebrews states, “Wherefore, he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him...” (7:25).

Now in this passage of Scripture Paul proves why Jesus is pre-eminent, and why He should be first in our lives. So let’s see what Paul has to say in this passage about our wonderful Savior. First of all, He is pre-eminent because:

I. HE IS THE IMAGE OF GOD

Jesus is not a spirit-being down the chain of aeons of Greek philosophy. Instead, Paul says in v.15 that Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” Likewise, 2 Cor. 4:4 says that “Christ... is the image of God.”¹ In both cases the word translated “image” (*eikon*) is not the word

¹ Hebrews 1:3 also indicates this, “Who, being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person...” There, the word translated “express image” is a different word (*charakter*), which refers to an exact expression or image of any person or thing.

that merely means “likeness.” It is a word that refers to an exact representation. An example would be the image on a coin (Matthew 22:20), or the image in a mirror, or even the image in a portrait that is supposed to be a good representation of someone.

But unlike those illustrations, Paul is not speaking of a physical image. Notice He is the image of the “invisible” [*aoratos*-unseen] God. The connection between the visible and invisible is seen in Romans 1:20, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen... even His eternal power and Godhead....” From the creation we can see some of the attributes of God, such as His great power and profound intellect. And in Jesus Christ we can see the attributes of God more fully, for He is the image of God.

The fact that Christ is the image of God is not that Christ is just an image like a photograph. The fact that He is the image of God means that He is fully God, just like God the Father. The point behind the use of that term is the fact that an image is to show what a person looks like, or even to convey that person’s character or attributes to some degree. The image of Caesar in a coin may show him wearing a victor’s crown, for example. Thus, Paul’s use of this term means that Jesus is also the visible *manifestation* of God. Jesus said in John 14:9, “...He that has seen me has seen the Father....” In Jesus we can “see” God in all His glorious attributes. For example, in Jesus we see the love of God. No one loved like Jesus loved. His love was not in word only, but in deed. He healed the sick and showed compassion to those in need. He died for us as a sacrifice for sin. In Jesus we can see the holiness of God. This was demonstrated when Christ drove out the money changers from the temple in righteous indignation. In Jesus we see the power of God when He calmed the storm or raised the dead. In Jesus we see the wisdom of God from His amazing answers He gave to those who sought to trick him. So Jesus is not a demi-god, as the false teachers claimed. Jesus fully manifested God because He is God! Therefore, He is fully able to save us and help us.

Therefore, since we all need unconditional, sacrificial love, look to Jesus. Since we all need to be right with God, look to Jesus, the Righteous One. Since we need strength to make it through this world of sin and trouble, look to Jesus, who is the Mighty God. Since we need wisdom for the perplexities of life, look to Jesus! Since He is fully God, He can meet the needs of your life!

By the way, the Greek translation (LXX) of Genesis 1:26 uses this same word, “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image....’” God intended that man manifest many of the attributes of God. Even though sin messed things up, *Christian* fathers and mothers should give their children a picture of what God is like.

Next, we see another reason why Jesus is pre-imminent, and that is because:

II. HE IS THE FIRSTBORN OVER ALL CREATION

Notice what Paul says concerning the relationship of Jesus Christ to creation. The last of v.15 says that Christ is “the firstborn of every creature.” Paul chooses the term “firstborn” (*prototokos*) to describe Jesus in His relationship to creation. Some, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, say this means that Jesus was the first created being. But that interpretation is incorrect for the following reasons: 1) Paul clearly teaches that Jesus is separate from creation. In v.17 he says that Christ was living before creation came into existence. Jesus claimed this truth, for in John 17:5 Jesus spoke of the glory He had with the Father before the world came into being. In v.16 Paul says that He created all things. He could do this for He is fully God (v.15b, 19). God has no beginning. 2) “Firstborn” in Old Testament times, as well as New Testament times was primarily a term of authority, rank, and privilege. The Psalmist said, “I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth.” So Paul’s use of this term is just another way of asserting the pre-

imminence of Jesus, but this time in relation to creation.

Remember what I said about these false teachers. They may have been willing to say that Jesus was involved in creation, but only as a created being down the line of other created beings. Yet Paul will not stand by and let them diminish the position of Jesus to that of a demi-god. He has the position of authority and honor as God's firstborn, and as such is head over all creation!

Why is it that Jesus has such a lofty position over creation? It is:

A. Because He Created All Things – Paul says in v.16, “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.” Though we often think of God the Father being the creator of the world, actually Jesus was the agent of creation. Note also that v.16 begins, “for...” or “because” (*hoti*). Certainly, He who creates has authority over that which he has created (cf. Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:1-6; Rom. 9:21). Since Jesus is our Creator, He is in the pre-eminent position of firstborn. He should be preeminent in our lives.

Now notice how completely Christ was involved in creation:

1. He Created the Material World (v.16a) - When we think of the creation, we probably first think of the material creation. Indeed, Paul says that He created all things “that are ...on earth, visible....” He created the stars, planets, plants and animals. Mankind was no doubt God's highest creation on earth.

But Paul seems to emphasize the fact that:

2. He Created the Spiritual World (v.16a) – He also created what is “invisible” including what is “in heaven.” Jesus is not just another spirit-being among angels, aeons, and other beings down the line from God. He is the Creator of the angels and any other spirit beings, including the “principalities, or powers” mentioned in the last of v.16. Thus, angels are far inferior to their Creator, Jesus Christ. They do not serve as mediators and there is not point praying to them or worshipping them (cf. 2:18). V.16 also includes the fact the Jesus is Creator of the angels who later rebelled. Even though Jesus did not create them as sinful, the main point is that they, too, are under His sovereign control (cf. I John 4:4).

Jesus is also Lord over creation:

B. Because All Was Created for Him – Notice in the last of v.16 that “All things were created ... for Him.” All things were created for the benefit of Jesus Christ, including the fact that they were created for His glory (Psa. 19:1).

Illustration: My great-great uncle Thomas Felker built this house in Dalton, GA in 1892 after he inherited a sizable amount of money from his father. It was built for his use and enjoyment, and that of his family. It had the latest plumbing for his day, and a beautiful staircase, parlor, and library. You could even say it was built for his glory. It was one of the finest homes in Dalton when it was built, and he even had his name inscribed above the front window.



Even so, Jesus created all things for His enjoyment and for His glory. Doesn't the creator have the right to enjoy what He created? He created the angels that they might serve Him, and glorify Him. He created man that we likewise might serve Him, worship Him, and glorify Him. Thus, the very purpose of our existence is to glorify Christ and to serve Christ. We must seek to please Him in every way (1:10). It is wrong

to say, “It is *my* life, I can do with it any way I choose.” The thrust of the whole passage is that we are to live for Christ as absolute Lord. What do you believe is the purpose for *your* existence?

Finally, Jesus is preeminent over creation:

C. Because He Sustains All Things – In the last of v.17 Paul says, “in Him all things consist.” Not only is Jesus the Creator of all things, but He is also the sustainer of all things.

What is it that causes gravity to be such an important force in the universe? What is it that keeps the protons, neutrons, and electrons all together in the atom? The answer is the sustaining power of Jesus. He is the One who keeps the cosmos from becoming utter chaos!

This partly explains why Jesus had such power over creation when He was on earth. He calmed the storm by the word of His power.

If Christ can sustain creation, He can sustain you. He can keep you from falling apart!

It is amazing that such a great Creator would become a man and even die on a Roman cross!

Furthermore, Jesus is preeminent because:

III. HE IS THE GREAT REDEEMER

Jesus created a perfect world. The angels were perfect, but sin entered the heart of Lucifer and 1/3 of the angels fell in rebellion against God. Adam and Eve were innocent and pure. But sin entered their hearts and thus they and their world fell under the curse of suffering and death.

Ah, but Paul says of Jesus in v.20, “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.” Not only did God create “through Him,” but He also reconciled “through Him.” “To reconcile” has a basic meaning in the Greek of “to change” i.e. from enmity to friendship, resulting in peace as the last of the verse clearly indicates. Paul uses an emphatic form of the word, perhaps to insist on the completeness of Christ’s reconciliation and to exclude all thought that reconciliation is also brought about by angels or anyone else.

Now note with me:

A. The Scope of this Reconciliation – Again, Paul says in v.20, “and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven...” This work of reconciliation is on the widest possible scale, having to do with “all things.” Sin ruined the universe. It destroyed the harmony between one creature and the other (cf. Rom. 8:19-23). Then Paul also speaks of reconciliation “in the heavens.” That is more difficult to interpret, but we can say that the coming domination of evil spirits will result in peace at last in the universe (cf. Phil. 2:11).

How was such reconciliation accomplished? Well, notice also:

B. The Price of this Reconciliation – Paul says in the last of v.20, “having made peace through the blood of His cross.” Here, as against the Colossian heresy, Paul declares that the universal reconciliation has been affected through something done in history, in a human body of flesh, and on a cross of shame. They denied that the Christ had a real human body. But only a flesh and blood human could die in the place of other humans by shedding His life’s blood.

Stephen Olford's parents were missionaries to South Africa. One time they were observing the Lord's Supper and one of the converted natives stood up and testified that when he was just a boy he was auctioned as a slave. The winning bid was a chicken. Imagine that! That boy had no

more value to the people gathered there than the price of the chicken. But he heard the story of how Jesus shed His blood to save him from his sins and he realized that God valued him even at the price of the blood of His Son. Now that converted South African native never lived the same in light of such a great sacrifice that was made for him (retold by Vines).

This work of making peace is already accomplished (aor.); it remains only for us to accept it and ultimately for Christ to enforce it upon the universe.

C. The Agent of this Reconciliation - In v.19 Paul says, "For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell." Likewise, Paul said in Col. 2:9, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." The particular force of "fullness" here lies in the probability that it was employed in a technical sense by the heretical teachers at Colossae to denote the totality of divine emanations, those supernatural powers under whose control men were supposed to live. Paul undermines the whole of this theosophical apparatus in one simple, direct affirmation: the fullness or totality of divine essence and power has taken up its residence in Christ. In other words, He is the one mediator between God and the world of mankind.

Now the fact that the fullness of God dwells in Jesus certainly qualifies Him as Mediator and Redeemer. Whatever the believer needs from the moment of redemption to the moment when we stand in His presence we find in Him an inexhaustible abundance. In Christ all fullness dwells. Note that this fullness is not a temporary endowment. "Dwell" (*katoikeo*) translates a verb that suggests permanent residence as opposed to a temporary sojourn.

Finally, Jesus is preeminent because:

IV. HE IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

In v.18 Paul says, "And He is the head of the body, the church...." No angel, or human leader, or human organization is the head of the church. It is Jesus. This is emphasized in the fact the "He" is emphatic in Greek, "He Himself is the head."

The fact that Jesus is likened to a head of a body is a fitting illustration. First, the head is absolutely vital to the life of the body. Thus, we are absolutely dependent upon Christ, and Him alone for our salvation and sanctification. Secondly, the pituitary gland is inside the head, connected to the brain, which controls growth. Even so, Jesus causes the growth of the body. Thirdly, the head directs and controls the body. Therefore, we are to carry out His will for our church.

Argumentation: Christ is truly the head of the Church for the following reasons:

A. Because He Is the Originator of the Church – Notice in the middle of v.18 that Paul says Christ "is the beginning." The Greek word for beginning is *arche*. It means first in the sense of originating power; it means the source from which something came. He is the One who caused the church to come into existence. Whereas the world is the creation of Christ; and the Church is the new creation of Christ.

He is also Head of the church:

B. Because He Is the Risen Lord of the Church – In the middle of v.18 Paul says He is "the firstborn from the dead...." There's that word "firstborn" again. Rom. 1:4 says that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead." By virtue of His resurrection, Jesus is worthy of the title and privileges of "firstborn."

The fact that He is “firstborn” indicates that the resurrection of His brothers and sisters is guaranteed.² Only through His resurrection is our resurrection possible.

Now in the last of v.18 Paul sums up what all of this means, “...that in all things He may have the preeminence.” This word (*proteuo*) means “to be first, hold the first place.” Christ is to be absolutely first in our lives and in the life of His Church.

Conclusion: Paul has proven the absolute preeminence of Jesus Christ. He is preeminent because He is God, because He is Creator, because He is the Great Redeemer, and because He is the Sovereign Head of His redeemed people, the Church. Since that is the case, what does that mean for us today? Is He your Lord in all things? Do you accept that you were created and redeemed to worship Him, to glorify Him, and to serve Him? Also, notice what Paul himself said in the last of v.22. The redeeming work of Christ is “to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight.” Are you living a holy life, separate from sin and dedicated to God? Are you obeying His will as He sends us forth on mission for Him?

For some here today is to surrender your life to Jesus in repentance of sin and faith in Jesus. Others who are already believers need to recommit your life to Jesus as Lord. Will you do that today? Some are not well-connected to a local church. How can you truly be under the Headship of Jesus if you are not truly a part of His earthly Body? Will you present yourself for membership today?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959); F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1963); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Dr. Jerry Vines (a few notes from his sermon on 1:15-23); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, inc. Colossians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

² However, the term is the same as in v.15.