

Colossians 1:15-20

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Paul lays out the far-reaching supremacy of Christ. From beginning to end, in life and death, Jesus is preeminent in all things.

In the previous section, Paul talked about the cosmic plan, importance, and achievement of God, which climaxes in Jesus coming to earth to live and die on behalf of humanity. As he continues, Paul uses this passage to talk about the reality of Jesus and the effect He has on both heaven and earth.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. One of the things that sets Christianity apart from other monotheistic religions is that God came to Earth. Man's righteousness can never be sufficient to reach God's standards. Therefore, Jesus became a physical manifestation of God. He left heaven, and became a man, in order to do the will of His Father (Philippians 2:5-10). The word for *image* is "eikon" which means *visible representative*. It is often used in reference to statues that express the likeness of a person. Jesus became visible. Before Jesus came to earth, *God was invisible*.

Jesus was also *the firstborn of all creation*. Because the reality of God becoming man is (and certainly was in the early years after Jesus' life) such a challenging thing for people to wrap their heads around, many first century skeptics suggested Jesus was a prophet, a man who "represented" God the way Paul does, as a sort of human ambassador. Paul is refuting that here. Jesus was *the firstborn over all creation*. Meaning, He existed before anything else. He is not an ambassador of God. He is God. The word for *creation* here, "ktsis," means "established" or "founded." As John 1:1 says, Jesus Himself is the beginning.

As He was here first, all the rest of the created order came from Him. Paul says, *for by Him all things were created*. He is the maker of all things, *both in the heavens and on earth*. He established the physical realities as we know them. He also established those things beyond our capacity to perceive. He created all things *visible and invisible*. Jesus made the physical realities and the realities beyond physical perception. He made all we can see (sun, moon, trees, etc.) and all we cannot see (feelings, ability to choose, hope, love, etc.).

Paul is stretching the Colossians' perception of God. Jesus did not just create the things that quickly come to mind when you think of creation—trees, planets, etc. He created *all* things. Paul says, *whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*. He is behind it all. The word for *thrones* ("thronos") denotes not just each King who sits on a *throne* but the very role itself, the metaphorical and literal "seat." The word for *dominions* ("kyriotes") means "power" in a structural sense. The word for *rulers* ("arche") is sometimes translated "principalities." And, lastly, the word for *authorities* ("exousia") means "power," in the sense of ability (such as when we say "the power to choose"). It covers everything from capacity to liberty. This means Jesus created the ability for His created beings to make choices.

These *thrones or dominions* would include human governments as well as spiritual dominions and authorities. An example of this might be found in Revelation, where it is said that Satan's throne dwells in Pergamum (Revelation 2:13). Another example is in Daniel, where two angelic beings are said to have engaged in a battle. One is called the "prince of Persia" indicating a spiritual dominion that spans a physical dominion (Daniel 10:13).

Paul says *all things have been created through Him and for Him*. People, institutions, power-dynamics, personal ability, and all aspects of the spiritual world... just to name a few. It all flows out of Jesus and returns to *Him*. It is both from *Him* and *for Him*. He is the source and the object. Beginning and end, alpha and omega (Revelation 21:6). Truly, the Lord of all.

He is before all things, the very first reality. Before anything existed, Jesus was. And *in Him all things hold together*. Jesus is the fabric of the created order. He is reality. All that was made was made by Him and He is the one who continues to hold it all together. Apart from Jesus, creation would cease to exist.

Having laid out the prominence of Christ in all things, Paul now moves from the general to the specific. He zeroes in on the entity to which they belong, namely, the body of Christ (the *church*) in Colossae. Jesus *is also the head of the body, the church*. If God has established all things, obviously that includes the *church*. Christ is the *head* of this *body*. Consider how lost, confused, and quickly irrelevant a *body* is without its *head*. The *head* is the place where knowledge is stored. It is the brain (*head*) that sends messages to the body. It is the location of sight and hearing, and a conductor of sorts that interprets, translates, and triggers the action of the *body*.

The word for *church* (Greek "ekklesia") literally means "assembly." In this instance, the people are gathered under the headship of Christ, as co-laborers and bond-servants. The Bible presents this concept at a macro level, as here, where the *church* is made up of all who have believed and received new birth. It also presents this concept at a micro level, as when Jesus said "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20).

He is the beginning. Interesting that the word for *beginning* here, (Greek "arche"), is the same word translated *rulers* in the list of things Jesus created (verse 16). It is a word that can often be translated "corner," referencing the cornerstone of a building—the first stone laid and the weight-bearer of the structure. Another translation of "arche" might be "origin." All apply. Jesus is God, and God is existence itself. The cornerstone of reality.

Paul further describes Jesus as *the firstborn from the dead*. This, at first glance, might seem like an unenviable title. But it alludes to Jesus' mastery over all of existence, life and death. Jesus' resurrection has defeated death, and will redeem creation from the futility it has suffered through the Fall of Man. He is the beginning of what was, is, and will be. The *firstborn* is the one who inherits the birthright, which is the right to rule the family. Jesus, being the first to rise from the dead, has been given the right to reign over the entire human family (Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:9). *Firstborn among the dead* is a reference to prominence; it is Jesus who will reign over the earth (Revelation 19:6).

The “hope” Paul references earlier in this chapter includes the cosmic story of the world, which ends with the resurrection of the dead, when all saints will follow Jesus, and also be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). When we think of heaven, we might think of imagery like angels with harps sitting on the clouds. However, the Bible speaks of a new earth, and God will dwell among humanity upon that new earth (Revelation 21:3). Jesus is the *first* of those resurrected, a precursor to what is to come, which is an entire earth populated with those who have followed Jesus, been resurrected, and passed from mortality to immortality.

This is *so that He Himself will come to have the first place in everything*. The word for *the first place* (often translated “preeminence”) is “*proteuo*.” This is the only time it is used in all of Scripture. Jesus is the standard bearer of the resurrected. He has conquered death and rules over all of life and death. He is first place in all areas of existence and, when the bodily resurrection comes, it is He who has paved the way, making the Kingdom of light accessible to all. Jesus has already been given authority over all things, in heaven and upon earth (Matthew 28:18). However, we still await the time when He will physically take the throne, when He comes to Earth a second time (Acts 1:6-8).

Paul concludes this section by connecting the two ends of eternity, beginning and completion. Jesus reigns over each, standing between the two as a sort of bridge. Not just in a cosmic sense, but for each of us as individuals: *For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him*. The *fullness* of life on earth. The *fullness* of eternity. The completeness, the purpose, of all life *dwells in Him*. It is settled *in Him*.

This is somewhat mind-blowing, since the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell within all who believe (Romans 8:9). That means that through Christ, we become a part of this cosmic reality. Paul is seeking to expand our perspective, so we may see Jesus for who He actually is. When we do this, it should alter our perspective of our own lives and our own reality. As believers, we become part of something much greater than ourselves.

Paul elaborates: *and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself*. *Reconcile* means to return to a state of harmony. Humans, as imperfect beings, entered the domain of darkness on account of their imperfection, through the Fall (Genesis 3). Our sin separates us from God. Only the act of Jesus’s death on the cross and resurrection from the dead brings us into a state of harmony with *Himself*. He alone can bring people back to Him. Only perfection can heal imperfection. Jesus did this by *having made peace through the blood of His cross*. He restored the harmony (*made peace*) of all created things by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for humanity’s sin. *His blood* was shed, and it paved a way for humanity to enter into a familial relationship with Him as His children. This is an incredible gift, freely given to all who believe (Romans 5:15-17, 6:23).

For emphasis, Paul repeats: *through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven*. Paul’s agenda in these verses is to develop the majesty and scope of his purpose. How silly squabbling will seem when held up to the reconciliation of all things from creation to eternity. How small and absurd is the fleeting pleasure sought from sin compared with the opportunity to act as the body of He who reigns preeminently over all of heaven and earth?

When we adopt this perspective of Christ, what doubt can we have that He knows what is best and always seeks our best? If the creator of all things has given His life that we might be redeemed, then what sense would it make to think His instructions would not lead us to the best possible outcomes? Jesus created all, holds all together, redeemed all, and is over all. This same Jesus has instructed us in the way we can order our lives. If we believe in the perspective that Jesus is all in all, it would be absurd to not listen to his instructions and follow where they lead.

This section is one of the great Christological passages in Scripture: Others include John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:5-11, Hebrews 1:2-4 and Jude 1:24-25. Instead of jumping immediately into the issues that need attention, Paul is working to set the foundation for proper appreciation and wonder for the purpose at hand—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Biblical Text

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