

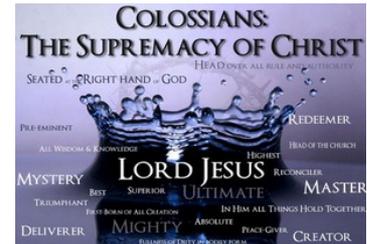
A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS
Part Four

Introduction

“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” (Colossians 1:15-17).

1. In the previous lesson, we completed our study of Paul’s prayer for the Colossians. Paul’s great concern and desire was for their spiritual growth and that they might walk worthy of the Lord. A greater understanding of the redemption is a motivation for all Christians to walk worthily of the Lord.
2. Paul now begins a discussion of the glory of Christ in His relation to deity (1:15a), to the creation (1:15b-17), and to the church (1:18-23). There are two purposes for this discourse: (i) So that the Colossians might have a greater understanding of Him who redeemed them, and (ii) to present Christ in truth in contrast to the misconceptions of the false teachers.

The Preeminence Of Christ In Relation To God And Creation – 1:15-17



VI. THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST IN RELATION TO GOD

“He is the image of the invisible God...” (Colossians 1:15a).

1. Paul says that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God”. This is really a startling statement! In order to understand why he makes such a statement, let us consider the background in which it is made:
 - a. “Prevalent in the early Church was the false teaching known as Gnosticism. Gnostics were dissatisfied with the simplicity of Christianity and thought to turn it into a philosophy that aligned with others of the day. The Gnostics began with the basic assumption that spirit was good and matter was evil, and that it was out of this evil matter that the universe was created. Christians believe that God created the universe out of nothing, but the Gnostic believe the universe was created out of evil matter. The Gnostics argued that, since God was spirit, it followed that He could not touch matter and, therefore, could not have created the universe. The Gnostics contend that God put forth a series of *emanations*, each a little further away from Himself. It was the most distant emanation from God that was able to handle matter and create the universe. The Gnostics said of these emanations that, as they went further from God, they became more ignorant of Him, and that the very distant emanations were not only ignorant of God, but also hostile toward Him. The Gnostics concluded that, the emanation who created the world was both ignorant of and hostile to God; and sometimes they identified that emanation with the God of the Old Testament. This has certain logical consequences. (i) the world did not belong to God, but to an emanation that is hostile toward Him, (ii) that Jesus Christ was by no means unique. They insisted that He was merely one of these emanations” (This is an edited and reworded version of Barclay’s comments).
 - b. It is with this background in view that we begin to understand why Paul embarks on this topic of the preeminence of Christ – the false teaching of the Gnostics must be refuted, and the best way to refute error is to teach the truth.
2. In spite of the fact that no man has seen or can see God (1 Timothy 6:16), Paul says that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God”, and Jesus Himself said to Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
 - a. The word “image” as applied to Christ conveys two ideas:
 - 1) Representation. Jesus, being the very nature of God - or more precisely, God Himself - perfectly represents the Father to all mankind. Jesus has always been the image of the invisible God. As the image of God He had always perfectly represented the life and character of God, in heaven and on earth. The Hebrew writer describes Him as “the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3).

- 2) Manifestation. John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became 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” (**John 1:1, 14**). While it is true that “No one has seen God at any time”, it is also true that “The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (**John 1:18**). It is in the Son that the invisible made Himself known in the visible. Jesus was God manifest in the flesh (**1 Timothy 3:16**).

VII. THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST IN RELATION TO CREATION

“... 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” (**Colossians 1:15b-17**).

1. Firstborn:

- a. The word “firstborn” is from the Greek word *prototokos* and it appears ten times in the New Testament. It is translated into English as “firstborn” 7 times (**Matthew 1:25; Luke 2:7; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15, 18; Hebrews 11:28; 12:23**), “begotten” 1 time (**Revelation 1:5**), “first” 1 time (**Revelation 1:5**), and “first-begotten” 1 time (**Hebrews 1:5-6**). Where it is translated “firstborn” it is meant in a literal sense only one time (**Luke 2:7**), and the remaining times it is used in a figurative sense.
- b. In the Septuagint, the term *prototokos* was often used in the literal sense, but it was occasionally used to describe a special relationship of privilege: (i) Of Israel (**Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 3:19**), (ii) Of David (**Psalms 89:27**). The word “firstborn” is used figuratively in this section – Paul is describing Jesus’ relationship to creation, and his point is, not that Jesus is a part of creation, but that He is before it (priority) and above it (primacy).
- c. The fact of Jesus’ priority and primacy means He holds the most supreme rank over creation – He is the principle and the cause of creation. And in relation to every creature, He is the firstborn, in that He occupies the rank and preeminence of the firstborn (cp. **Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:18**). This is because “all things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made” (**John 1:3**).

2. Creator:

- a. Jesus is the “firstborn”, i.e., preeminent over all creation “because...” (this is meaning of the word “for”) “... by Him all things were created” (**1:16**). The creative power that is required to bring into existence all things (i.e., out of nothing preexisting – **Hebrews 11:3**) necessitates Him being more than a created being Himself; it requires Him to have all the power and wisdom equal to the Father. And let us not overlook the fact that Jesus created **all** things – whether things 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 (**1:16**).
- b. As one reads through Colossians it becomes clear that Paul is combating the false teaching prevalent in Asia Minor at that time. Walton Weaver says that the false teachers in Colosse [the following relates to what the false teachers believed regarding angels]:
 - 1) Very likely attributed creative powers to these angels.
 - 2) Saw them as filling the space between God and men and acknowledged them as “lords of the planetary spheres, sharers in the plenitude of the divine essence” (Bruce 167) – as such, they were mediums of communication with God.
 - 3) Probably even worshipped them (**2:18**).

3. Eternal:

- a. Paul has just demonstrated that Christ is supreme in relation to the creation by right of *rank*, and he now shows that He is preeminent by *priority of time*. While this may be inferred from verse sixteen, it is specifically stated here. To say He is “before all things” is not only stating His preexistence, it is stating that He is eternal. John affirms the same: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (**John 1:1**).
- b. In addition it is in this eternal being that “all things consist”. The Hebrew writer tells us that Christ is “upholding all things by the word of His power” (**Hebrews 1:3**), i.e., He is the strength and stay that continues to uphold all things. Here, Paul takes us beyond this and says that He is also *preserving* and *holding them together* as a whole. In other words, Christ is both the unifying principle and the personal sustainer of all creation.

Applications

1. Who is Jesus? This is a question that Jesus asked His apostles: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” Among men Jesus was regarded as a mere man, but then He asked His disciples, saying, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (**Matthew 16:13-16**). The Jews understood the term “Son of God” as being equal to calling Jesus God (**John 10:22-36**). Here, Paul says that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (**Colossians 1:15**). The question of Christ’s identity is no mystery because He was clearly identified in the Old Testament as the “everlasting Father” (**Isaiah 9:6**) and in the New Testament as our “great God” (**Titus 2:13**). What you believe depends on to whom you listen: if you listen to the scriptures He is God in the flesh, but if you listen to false teachers, then He is a creature created by God.
2. Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, and the eternal God. Is He not, then, worthy of all our honor, praise, glory, and devotion? Let us be sure that we acknowledge Jesus as Lord with our lips and through our obedience. To exalt anything or anyone above Jesus is idolatry.
3. In refuting the errors of the false teachers, Paul does not enter into a debate, he simply teaches the truth, and it is teaching the truth which is often sufficient to expose error.
4. One of the great doctrines of the Bible is the oneness of God in three persons. This is difficult for human beings to understand and many ask, “How can three persons be one God?” and “Why three persons, why not four or five?” Indeed, there are many things about God that we are unable to comprehend, and in such cases we must simply believe and trust. Further, we must be careful that such questions do not become an obsession that distract us from fulfilling the works of the Lord in our lives.
5. Somebody once asked me, “Why did God create people?” The passage we have been studying today gives the answer: “All things were created through Him and for Him” (**Colossians 1:16**). We were created for Jesus Christ – people were created for Jesus. True, we sin and fall short of God’s will, but Christ Himself died for us and redeemed us. Jesus wants to have fellowship with you!