

Colossians – Lesson 3

The Preeminence of Christ

Read Colossians 1:15-20

- (a) To *whom* is Paul referring with the pronouns “*he*” and “*him*” in vv. 15-20? How do you come to that *conclusion*, given that Paul does not use any *names* in this passage (see vv. 3 and 13-14)?

“*He*” and “*him*” are clear references to Christ Jesus, for several reasons: 1) the immediate context is “*his beloved Son*” in vv. 13-14, an obvious reference to the Second Person of the Trinity (in contrast to the First), who became flesh (v. 19); 2) the characteristics of the person described is of one who is, *by nature*, the very essence of God himself, thus assumed by Paul to be the Incarnate Jesus; and 3) Paul understands Jesus to be the “*head*” of the church (v. 18), given his *own role* as an apostle of Jesus (v. 1).

- (b) Reviewing vv. 3-14, how does Paul reveal himself as a *Trinitarian*, even as a *monotheistic Jew*?

Paul clearly *distinguishes* between the Father and the Son, seeing them as two *distinct Persons*, yet each possessing the fullness of the nature of Yahweh. As a monotheistic Jew, Paul would have recognized *only one God*, and that God had revealed himself in the OT as Yahweh. However, with the advent of Jesus (and his own conversion), Paul *knows* he is the “*Son of God*,” and he is “*forced*” to distinguish the *Person* of Jesus (i.e., the Son of God) from the “*Father*” (see vv. 3; 13). He is able to do this because he recognizes the difference between *nature* and *personhood*: although God consists of the *persons* of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (note v. 8), the *nature* of the three *are the same*, all possessing the fullness of divinity (see 2a below), yet being *distinct* from one another in Personhood.

- (a) What does Paul mean that Christ is “*the image of the invisible God*” in v. 15a? What does this imply about the *divine* nature of Jesus during his earthly life?

To say that Christ is “*the image of the invisible God*” is to say that he possesses the fullness of the divine nature, having the “*image*” of Yahweh in himself. All of the divine attributes (e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, etc.) are found in Jesus the Christ; he is *fully God* since he is like an “*image*” of something else (i.e., the *invisible* God). The *spiritual* (i.e., invisible) nature of Jesus is a *perfect reflection* of the nature of the *spiritual* (i.e., invisible) nature of the Godhead. Paul argues that Jesus possesses this nature *now*, but implies that he has *always* possessed this reality within himself. Meaning, the human Jesus visible to us is *also* fully the divine Godhead invisible to us, *and always has been*; the man Jesus was (and is!) the fullness of God *in human form*, and that during his life on earth *he was fully God and fully man*.

- (b) Compare this phrase to Hebrews 1:3. How does the author of Hebrews *describe* the Son of God?

The author of Hebrews describes the “*Son*” (whom is assumed to be Jesus) in very similar terms: he is the “*radiance of the glory of God*” and “*the exact imprint of his nature*,” the latter being nearly identical to Paul’s statement in Colossians 1:15. Thus, for the Hebrew’s writer, Jesus possesses not only the *nature* of a man, but also the *glory* reserved for God himself.

(c) Compare this phrase to Philippians 2:5-8. What does Paul mean in v. 7a that the Son “*emptied himself?*” How does this retain Paul’s belief that Jesus was *still* fully God, even as human?

Given that Paul believed that Jesus was both fully God and fully man *while on earth*, the phrase “*emptied himself?*” must be understood within that framework. To assume that Jesus “left behind” certain Godly attributes when becoming a man (i.e., in his Incarnation) would be to “forget” Paul’s understanding of Jesus as the God-man. Instead, the phrase is *probably* a reference to the idea that the fullness of the glory of God was “veiled” from view during Jesus’ earthly life, and only fully visible once he had completed his earthly mission and returned to his Father’s side. In other words, Paul believed that, although the *human* Jesus did possess within himself the fullness of divinity, he *veiled* that glory from the world in order to live amongst humans. Note: “peeks” into that glory are revealed to *some* during Jesus’ life, such as when he would perform miracles or at the Transfiguration (Mark 9).

3. (a) In v. 15b, what does Paul mean that the Christ is “*the firstborn of all creation?*” How can this phrase be *twisted* to imply something *erroneous* about Jesus the man?

The term “*firstborn*” is from the Greek word *prototokos*, meaning having a greater birthright or superior to others (as the firstborn son in a family is treated in Jewish reckoning), or existing *before* others (as the firstborn son always does before his siblings). Thus, the word could be used by Paul in at least two (2) different senses: 1) that the Son of God is above all others, “*firstborn*” in the sense that he is *preeminent* above all creatures (see v. 18), and/or 2) that the Son of God possesses, by virtue of his Incarnation, all of the rights and privileges of a firstborn son. In other words, Paul uses the term to imply the *greatness* of the Son, *even as a man*, above all other creatures, having *in himself* the fullness of Godhead and the *preeminence* as God over all creation. The term was twisted explicitly in the Arian controversy of the early church to suggest that Jesus wasn’t *eternally* God, but was (rather!) a man born into this world like all others, but “granted” or “conveyed” with deity during his earthly ministry, by virtue of his obedience. This view *rejects* the eternal Sonship of Jesus, and is clearly *not* the view held by Paul in his understanding of the nature of Jesus as the God-man.

(b) What does Paul *assert* about Jesus in v. 16? What does it mean that all things were created “*through him and for him*” (see also Romans 11:36)?

Paul asserts that the pre-incarnate Jesus (i.e., the eternal Son of God) was the *creator* of all things, including the angelic sphere (including the *fallen* angels), the world and everything in it, the animal kingdom, human beings, and all of the realities in this world established by humans (i.e., kingdoms, rulers, cultures, etc.). To say that all things were created “*through him*” is to assert that it was the *power* of the Son that brought all things into existence. To say that all things were created “*for him*” (or “*to him*” in Romans 11:36) is to confess that everything that exists *does so for the glory of this Christ*. In other words, the Son of God (in partnership with the Father and the Spirit) was responsible for all things that exist and, because they were created by him, for his glory and to his purposes.

(c) List another *role* of the Christ, as Paul outlines it in v. 17. What does this imply about the nature of the Son as the eternal *God-man* (i.e., in his *incarnation*)?

Not only is the Son of God the *creator*, he is also the *sustainer* of all things; all things in the world created by him are sustained in existence by his sovereign power. All that is created *continues* because the Son “holds them together”; the world continues along the path that the sovereign Son desires because he has *purposed it* to be so, and it’s outcome is determined by his sovereign decree. Paul, therefore, assumes that the *human* Jesus (i.e., the Incarnate Son) *continues* in that role of holding together the universe, sustaining its existence *even while robed in flesh and living within that world*. For example, although it was a manger that held the Christ-child in the stable outside of Bethlehem after his birth, it was the Christ-child that held together the manger below him, *and everything else that had been created*.

4. (a) List the *additional* authorities that the Son of God holds, as Paul lists them in vv. 18-20.

Paul goes on to list a number of additional *authorities* that the Son holds within the Person of Jesus Christ: 1) he is the “*head of the body, the church,*” meaning that Christ Jesus is the living head of the visible and invisible organism of believers throughout the world known as the church; 2) he is the “*firstborn from the dead,*” the first to arise after death in resurrection, the “*beginning*” of the work of redemption in the world (see 4b below); and 3) “*through him*” the work of *reconciliation* was accomplished, bringing (back) together everything created that was corrupted by the Fall (see 5a below). In summary, Jesus is the head of the church because it was *he* that was raised to form it, and it was *he* who reconciled the elect to the Father through his life, death, burial, and resurrection.

(b) What does it mean that the Christ is the “*firstborn from the dead*” (v. 18)? Why does this make him “*preeminent*” before everything?

The resurrection of Jesus makes him the “*firstborn from the dead*” in *anticipation* of a general resurrection of all of the elect reconciled to the Father by his *own* death and new life. Jesus’ resurrection *prefigures* what will (eventually) come as the Spirit raises the elect to new life *in the here-and-now* (in regeneration leading to faith and repentance), and then the resurrection of the elect *to glory* as the kingdom of Christ is established. This makes him “*preeminent*” (i.e., above all others) because it is *his* resurrection upon which all the others are based; the regeneration of dead sinners is *directly* traced to his life (i.e., which he bestows upon his own by the Spirit) and their inclusion in him in the *general* resurrection is to bring them to himself, as the One having returned to life and conquered its power.

5. (a) Define the word “*reconcile*” in v. 20a. Between *whom* does this reconciliation occur?

To reconcile means to bring two warring parties together, to find “*common ground*” between them and *restore* the broken *relationship* between them to one of mutual satisfaction. The reconciliation that Christ wrought was between a holy, perfect God and an unholy, rebellious people; he brings them together in “*bridging*” the infinite gulf between God and man by *satisfying* the holy requirements of God in man, and *atoning* for the sinfulness of man before God. In other words, the reconciliation of Christ is to reestablish the relationship lost in the Garden by virtue of the Fall, bringing man *back to God* in such a way that God’s justice for sin can be fully satisfied while allowing for God to be *merciful* at the same time.

(b) What is the “*peace*” that Jesus has procured (v. 20b)? *How* is it accomplished?

Peace is the restoration of relationship between two parties, in contrast to an earthly concept of a “*truce*”: true peace is to change the relationship such that the two parties *are no longer enemies*, and their relationship now means a sense of harmony between them. Christ accomplishes peace between the elect and God by *taking away* the wrath that naturally exists in God towards rebellious sinners, *propitiating* that wrath to himself such that the Father’s justice is satisfied and he can look upon rebels as true sons and daughters. The peace of Christ is *finished* in his life and death, and *no additional work is needed*. Note: religion brings no *true* peace with God because *it is never finished*; the religious man must *continually* pursue righteousness before God, and attempt to satisfy him, because his *nature as a rebel* is not changed *in any way* by his efforts. Thus, the religious man never has *peace* (or assurance), since his goal is never met.