

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians
(6) The Preeminence of Jesus Christ in All Creation (part 3) (Col. 1:15-20)

Today is the third Sunday on which we are considering this, what may have been, ancient Christological hymn to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It beautifully sets forth our Lord as pre-eminent over all of *creation* and pre-eminent in the matter of our *redemption*. Here once again are these verses:

¹⁵He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

These verses convey two major themes. We see the *pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in creation* in verses 15-17. In verses 18-20 we read of the *pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in redemption* (vs. 18-20). In these verses the apostle set forth a number of specific traits of our Lord Jesus. We covered the first of these last week. Here is the outline of this passage that we began to develop last Lord's Day.

I. The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in creation (vs. 15-17).

1. Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (v. 15a).

The sum of this matter is this: Jesus, the very image of God, became one with His people and lived in obedience to His Father's will, thereby securing for Himself and all His brethren eternal life and glory. It is through Jesus Christ as the image of God that when we are made like Him in holiness, then we become the image bearers of God as He originally created us. This should lead us to have confidence and comfort in knowing that Jesus is one with us. Knowing that Jesus Christ is the very image of the Living God, that He is God incarnate, we should be encouraged and motivated to resort to Him wholly and always.

Today let us begin by considering the statement in verse 15b, which reads that...

2. Jesus Christ is "the firstborn of all creation" (v. 15b).

Paul wrote, "*He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*" The "firstborn" is not speaking of the origin of Jesus Christ but of His exalted position, His pre-eminence above all creation, as we will show.

The cults use this statement to argue for their errant teaching regarding Jesus Christ. **Mormons** claim that this verse teaches that Jesus is not unique from the rest of mankind. They say that Jesus was the "firstborn" son of "Elohim." They teach that Jesus was the physical offspring of a god and goddess, who was born along with his brother, satan. The difference between him and us is not of kind, but of degree. They say that just as Jesus was a spirit being before being born into this world, so all human beings existed as spirit beings before they were born into this world. Mormons believe that they will be

gods one day, procreating sons and daughters who will then become gods and goddesses over their own planets, the same as Jesus Christ has done.

Jehovah's Witnesses also build their errant doctrine of Christ upon this verse. They teach that Jesus Christ was a perfect man, but not the one true God who became incarnate. According to their doctrine, Jesus Christ was the first created being by God. Yes, he is *a* god, but not *the* one true God. By him, then, God created all else that is created. Both these cults, Mormons and Jehovah witnesses, use this verse to argue their positions. They do so wrongly, however, twisting what Paul intended to say into something he never said.

The Greek word for "firstborn" is **πρωτότοκος** (*prōtotokos*). It is an adjective, not a verb. In other words, it does not state that Jesus was "born first", but rather that Jesus Christ is the "firstborn" one, the head of the family who owns and controls the creation on behalf of His Father. **F.F. Bruce**, wrote on how the term was used by Paul:

The context makes it clear that this title is not given to Him as though He Himself were the first of all created beings; it emphasized immediately that, far from being part of creation, He is the One by whom the whole creation came into being. What the title does mean is that Christ, existing as He did before all creation, exercises the privilege of primogeniture as Lord of all creation, the divinely appointed "heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2). He was there when creation began, and it was for Him as well as through Him that the whole work was done.¹

One passage that illustrates quite clearly the idea and meaning of the term, "firstborn", in the biblical world is **Psalm 89:19-29**. This is a psalm that speaks to the coming Messiah as the promised Son of David:

- ¹⁹Then You spoke in a vision to Your holy one,
And said: "I have given help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
²⁰I have found My servant David;
With My holy oil I have anointed him,
²¹With whom My hand shall be established;
Also My arm shall strengthen him.
²²The enemy shall not outwit him,
Nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
²³I will beat down his foes before his face,
And plague those who hate him.
²⁴"But My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him,
And in My name his horn shall be exalted.
²⁵Also I will set his hand over the sea,
And his right hand over the rivers.
²⁶He shall cry to Me, 'You are my Father,
My God, and the rock of my salvation.'
²⁷**Also I will make him My firstborn,
The highest of the kings of the earth.**
²⁸My mercy I will keep for him forever,
And My covenant shall stand firm with him.
²⁹His seed also I will make to endure forever,
And his throne as the days of heaven.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians and Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (William B. Eerdmans, 1957), p. 193.

Here we read a prophecy of a descendant of David, whom God would make His “firstborn.” In other words, God would cause the promised Son of David, the Messiah, to become His firstborn Son, who would rule over His kingdom on His behalf. And so, the term, firstborn, denoted not priority in *time*, but pre-eminence in *rank*. The poetry of Psalm 89 sets forth this truth in parallel lines. And so, verse 27a declares, “***Also I will make him My firstborn***” and the second, parallel line states the same truth in different words, “***The highest of the kings of the earth.***” For Jesus Christ to be God’s “firstborn” means that God has purposed that Jesus Christ would be the King of kings and Lord of lords, even the highest of the kings of the earth.

And so this speaks of our Lord Jesus as the One to whom all of God’s creation belongs, over which He governs. He is the “firstborn” as the eldest son in a household who would assume the position and responsibility of the father in His home. The firstborn would inherit his father’s name and his father’s position. He became the head of his household in place of his father before him. It was the eldest son who received the inheritance of the property from his father. Christ is eternal Second Person of the blessed Holy Trinity. Jesus Christ will inherit all things for it is His birth right as the only begotten Son of God. He is God’s firstborn son, who inherits all things.

3. Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things (v. 16).

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.

This speaks of the pre-incarnate Son of God who was instrumental in creating everything that was created. When we speak of God’s work of creation, we read in the Scriptures that creation was an act of the Triune God. In some places of Scripture the role of each of the persons may be emphasized. Here the role of the Son of God is stressed. The following quote is a good description of the role of the entire trinity in the work of creation:

Creation is an act of the triune God. Scripture teaches us that the triune God is the author of creation, Gen. 1:1; Isa. 40:12; 44:24; 45:12, and this distinguishes Him from the idols, Psa. 96:5; Isa. 37:16; Jer. 10:11, 12. Though the Father is in the foreground in the work of creation, 1 Cor. 8:6, it is also clearly recognized as a work of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Son’s participation in it is indicated in John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17, and the activity of the Spirit in it finds expression in Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psa. 104:30; Isa. 40:12, 13. The second and third persons are not dependent powers or mere intermediaries, but independent authors together with the Father. The work was not divided among the three persons, but the whole work, though from different aspects, is ascribed to each one of the persons. All things are at once *out of* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. In general it may be said that *being* is out of the Father, *thought* or the *idea* is out of the Son, and *life* out of the Holy Spirit. Since the Father takes the initiative in the work of creation, it is often ascribed to Him economically.²

By the word “economically”, he is describing the way the works of God are attributed to, and distributed between, each of the persons of the holy trinity.

This declaration of Paul that the Son of God created all things is consistent with the apostle John in **John 1:1-3**:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³***All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.***

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 129.

This is also what the writer to the Jewish Christians declared in the opening verses of Hebrews:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ²has in these last days spoken to us by *His Son*, whom He has appointed heir of all things, *through whom also He made the worlds...* (Heb. 1:1f)

Now this verse declares that the Son of God created *all* things, both physical and spiritual. But He not only created all things that are good, He was even the Creator of malevolent spiritual forces, although He had not created them evil, but good. Nevertheless, the Son of God created them and is therefore in control of them. And this is all tied to the idea of the redemption that Jesus Christ secured for us. Here is a good word regarding this:

So then, the One through whom (as Paul has said already) the divine work of redemption was accomplished is the One by whom the divine act of creation also took place. Our Lord's mediatorial relation to the created universe provides a setting to the gospel of our salvation which adds greatly to our appreciation of that gospel. For a man redeemed by Christ, the universe has no ultimate terrors; he knows that his Redeemer is also Creator, Ruler and goal of all.

With special regard to the Colossian heresy, Paul now goes on to emphasize that if all things were created by Christ, then those spiritual powers which received such prominence in that heresy must have been created by Him. The denizens of the upper realms as well as the inhabitants of the earth owed their being to His creative power--the invisible forces of the spirit world as well as the visible and material order. "Whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers," they all had Christ as their original creator and also as their final dispenser.

The early Christians had the authority of their Lord for believing in angels good and bad. What Paul here points out is that, whether good or bad, all alike are subject to Christ as their Creator. No doubt, in view of the situation at Colossae, it was hostile rather than friendly powers that he had in mind; but the first argument by which he tries to reduce those hostile powers to their proper dimensions in the eyes of Christians is the fact they owe their very existence to the Christians' Saviour. (A second argument, developed in Chapter 2, is that they are vanquished by that same Saviour.)³

The point is this: there should not be undue attention given to these spiritual beings or forces, nor should there be inordinate fear respecting them. Jesus Christ created them, rules over them, and limits their ability to harm His own people or thwart His purposes in their lives.

It would seem in verse 16 that the apostle set forth a hierarchy of spiritual beings. They include these four: "thrones or dominions or principalities or powers."⁴ These perhaps represent the higher ranks of the spiritual hierarchy, but it would be misguided to attempt to determine or establish a precise order or ranking of degrees of power of these spiritual forces. The various lists that we find in Scripture of these forces are varied in order and in name, which suggests that ranking them is not possible or important.

But again, the point that Paul was making was that these Christians should not give undue attention to them or have fear regarding them. Here is another good word regarding Paul's desire for these Christians at Colossae:

Paul is thinking especially of *thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities*. The teachers of error were constantly referring to these angelic beings. The apostle does not deny their teachers existence (Eph. 1:21, 22). Neither does he reject the idea that they are able to exert influence for good, if still unfallen, or for evil, if fallen (Eph. 6:12). The apostle's idea is rather this: angels

³ Bruce, pp. 197f.

⁴ Elsewhere a fifth is mentioned: "authorities" or "powers" (Rom. 8:38).

have no power apart from Christ. In fact, apart from Him they cannot even exist. They are *creatures*, nothing more. To the salvation or perfection of the Colossians they, in and by themselves, can contribute naught whatsoever. They can only *render service* and this always in subjection to Christ and through *his* power. The *good* angels cannot *add* anything to the fullness of riches and resources which believers have in Christ. The *evil* angels cannot separate them from his love (Rom. 8:35-39). In fact, through his death these sinister powers were basically vanquished (Co. 2:15). They are approaching the day when even their ability to do harm in God's universe and in the hearts and lives of earth-dwellers will be ended once and for all (1 Cor. 15:24, 25).⁵

The latter portion of verse 16 reads, "***All things were created through Him and for Him.***" This simple statement answers two very important philosophical questions. First, man has always asked himself, "How did I come to be?" The answer is "through" or "by Him." And second, man has asked, "For what purpose am I here?" The answer is "for Him." The apostle sets forth Jesus Christ as the singular reason and goal of all of life. In Jesus Christ one discovers his purpose in life as well as the way in which to achieve that purpose. Jesus Christ is all and the end of all. In Him we find meaning, purpose, enjoyment, fulfilment, and contentment.

Being created by Him, they were created for Him; being made by His power, they were made according to His pleasure and for His praise. He is the end, as well as the cause of all things. "*To Him are all things*" (Rom. 11:36).⁶

The apostle was setting forth Jesus Christ as the center of all focus and purpose in God's creation. Later he will declare that the Christians in Colossae were "complete in Him" (Col. 2:10). He sought to lead the Colossians to direct all of their attention, all of their desire, all of their effort, all of their lives, on knowing and serving Jesus Christ. He is the reason for living. He is the source of power for all true living before God. He is the One who alone can give one purpose, motivation, and satisfaction.

The Christians in the church at Colossae were having their attention and focus on things other than Jesus Christ. Paul sought to correct them and establish them in Christ. The same danger is before us as it has always been a danger to the spiritual health and well-being of Christians. We may become diverted from Jesus Christ unto other things as the focus and reason for living. We can become diverted from Christ in our duties or to matters other than Christ. Do not let this happen. Do not let your knowledge deceive you, or your gifts or duties divert you. If you are not focused upon Him, Jesus Christ, you need to consider your thinking and ways, and seek recovery by God and before God.

Paul further exalts Christ in the next sentence.

4. Jesus Christ is before all things. (1:17a)

This speaks of His importance, His pre-eminence above all created things, for Jesus Christ is the Pre-existent One. Jesus Christ in His divine nature is eternal. There never was a time when there was not the glorious Son of God. He is from eternity, for He is eternal God.

The divine nature of Jesus Christ is commonly said to have been due to the "eternal generation of the Son" by the Father. The Son of God is begotten of the Father from eternity. This is not to say that in the distant past God the Father caused the Son to be begotten, to come into existence. For this would render the Son of God as finite, not infinite. Rather, the Son is *eternally* begotten of the Father as an eternal act of the Father. There never was a time when the Son of God was not begotten of the Father.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. New Testament Commentary (Bakker Academic, 1964), pp. 73f.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6 (Fleming H. Revell), p. 752.

Here is **Louis Berkhof's** explanation of how we should understand this important matter of Son being eternally begotten of the Father:

This does not mean, however, that it is an act that was completed in the far distant past, but rather that it is a timeless act, the act of an eternal present, and act always continuing and yet never completed. Its eternity follows not only from the eternity of God, but also from the divine immutability and from the true deity of the Son.⁷

Now here has been an error regarding the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the Son of God that from time to time is seen among evangelicals. This is the errant teaching that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity did not become the Son of God until the incarnation, when Jesus Christ came into the world. They argue that before the incarnation the Second Person of the Trinity should be understood as the eternal Word of God, but that Word only became the Son of God in the incarnation. This is wrong. They tend to use a verse that is found in several places of the Bible. It was original to Psalm 2:7, which reads, "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" It is also quoted in three places in the New Testament, including Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5, and Hebrews 5:5. They will sometimes use Romans 1 also to argue their point, which reads,

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God² which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, ³concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, ⁴and ***declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness***, by the resurrection from the dead. (Rom. 1:1-4)

But these verses speak of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in which Jesus Christ was exalted to assume His promised role as the Promised Son of David, the King of Israel. These verses do not speak of Christ's essential nature--He is God-- but rather of His office as King--Jesus is Lord.

The Son of God has existed from eternity as the glorious second person of the Blessed Holy Trinity. In the incarnation He assumed a human nature and body, the Creator becoming one of His creatures, fully God and fully man. Here is the early church's declaration of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ that was issued at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀχωρίστως – *in duabus naturis inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter*) the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one Subsistence (*hypostasis*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God (μονογενῆ Θεόν), the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

5. Jesus Christ is the Sustainer of all things.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 93.

We read in Colossians 1:17a, “*And in Him all things hold together.*” All power *was* evident in Christ when He created all things. His power is *now* evident in His sustaining or keeping all things existing. He maintains the existence of all things that He created. This speaks of the Son of God as in charge of the events of the world. He governs the world in His providence. By Him all things continue and cohere. He gives meaning, purpose, direction, and completion of all that is.

This suggests that in nature and history there is unity, order, and purpose. The world may appear to be characterized by chaos and confusion, but this is not so. God has a plan and purpose for all that He has created. And He has given to the Son of God the role and responsibility to carry these matters through unto their completed end. There is coherence in the plan and purpose of God.

Often Confusion seems to be rampant. A Guiding Hand is nowhere visible. Instead we hear the cry of battle, the shriek of anguish. The newspapers, moreover, are filled with accounts of burglary, murder, rape, and race-clash. If we compare the wheel of the universe to a machine, we might say that its gear-teeth seem not to mesh. To be sure, one day in the far-flung future, all will be harmony: the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.... They shall not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:6-9). But the time has not yet arrived. All is chaos now. But is it really? Should we not rather compare our world to a weaving, whose underside forms no intelligible pattern, but whose upper side reveals beauty and design? Or to an international airfield? Though its planes, constantly coming and going, make us dizzy, so that we expect a collision any moment, we need not really hold our breath, for the man in the control-tower directs each take-off and landing. Thus, too, all creatures in all their movements throughout history are being *held together*. And that which holds them together is not Chance or Fate or the laws of Nature or even the “nine orbs, or rather globes” of *Scripto’s Dream*. On the contrary, “all things hold together *in him*.” It is the Son of God’s love who holds in his almighty hands the reigns of the universe and never even for one moment lets them slip out of his grasp (cf. Rev. 4 and 5). Though the man of flesh regards this as so much pious twaddle, the man of faith proclaims with the inspired author of the Hebrews, “Now we see not yet all things subjected to him. But we behold ... Jesus... crowned with glory and honor” (2:9). The believer knows that while the rule of Christ has not been established in every human heart, the overrule is an actual fact even now (Rom. 8:28). And at the crystal sea of the Church Triumphant will forever praise and glorify God for his mighty works and ways (Rev. 15:1-4).⁸

We now arrive to the second section of this ancient Christological hymn of Colossians 1:15 through 20. In verses 15 through 17 we considered the *pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in creation*. We now may consider...

II. The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ in redemption (vs. 18-20).

¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

6. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. (1:18a)

⁸ Hendriksen, pp. 75f.

We read, ***“And He is the head of the body, the church”*** (v. 18a). There are several ways in which Jesus Christ is “head.” First, Christ is head in that He represents us before the Father. God is pleased to deal with us corporately with one person as our representative, our federal head. Adam was our federal head or representative before God in the garden. And so, when he sinned, we sinned in him. But Jesus Christ is the Head, or representative of the church. Second, Jesus Christ is Head in the sense that He gives life to the church, His body. He is indispensable to the life of the body. Third, Jesus Christ is head in the sense that He rules over His people. He is their leader. He is their King over Zion, the people of God, the church of God. God’s eternal decree has established Him in that place in which He has occupied since His resurrection. Fourth, Jesus Christ is Head in the sense that He is the husband to His bride, the Church. Because He is our head, the church can be assured of His love, devotion, commitment, concern, care, and in giving direction to His church.

7. Jesus Christ has precedence over all things.

We read in **verse 18b**, ***“He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.”*** All things began with the eternally begotten Son of God when He created all things. He is the Creator. Moreover, He was the first human being to be raised from the dead--He was the firstborn of the dead. This also speaks of His pre-eminence. He is the first of a vast multitude who will one day come forth from the dead.

8. Jesus Christ is God incarnate.

Verse 19 reads, ***“For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”*** It was to the end that the Father would have Jesus Christ have precedence over all things that it pleased the Father that in Jesus all the Fullness of the Godhead would dwell. Now God is Spirit, and there is no place in His universe where God is not fully present and manifest. God is also in His fullness in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Blessed Holy Trinity, who took upon Himself our human nature, thereby becoming fully God and fully man. In Jesus Christ we have the transcendent God coming among us as the immanent God. Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us.

9. He is the Reconciler of fallen creation.

“And through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross” (v. 20). When Adam sinned in the Garden, all of creation “fell.” Nothing was willingly submitted to God even though God continued to manifest His Sovereign Rule through history. But through Jesus Christ, God is returning His creation into willing subjection to God. Jesus Christ is reconciling all things unto His Father’s will. This will be realized at the end of history, when the Lord Jesus returns, the resurrection of the dead takes place, and the Final Judgment transpires. May that day come soon.

And so we see and read of the centrality of Jesus Christ to our existence and experience, as human beings, even as Christians. Jesus Christ is to us:

- the source of life
- the purpose for life
- the way of this life
- the greatest blessing of life
- the possession of life
- the source of meaning for life
- the source of power for this life
- the assurance of present life

-- the promise of future life

Jesus Christ is to us life itself. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the *Life*. He is our peace. He is our hope. He is our very life. Let us all who believe on Him, confess that we are in Him, seek to be satisfied in Him, even as we confess that we are complete in Him, being content with Him, all to the glory of God.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20f)
