

## Col. 1:15-23

### I. Jesus is first in His being (15a)

#### He is the image of the invisible God (15a)

- cf. Jn. 14:7-9, 12:44-45, 2 Cor. 4:4-5, Heb. 1:3

The term “image” means an exact duplicate from a prototype. Jesus is not just “like” God, but He is “exactly like” God.

We could not know God, but God made Himself known, not just through words, not through pictures, but through a life. cf. Jn. 1:18

Someone once said of Jesus - “if God is not like this man, then He’d better be.”

This is a clear declaration of the deity of Christ. What is invisible and unknowable to us on our own, has been made known, by God coming to us in human form. Jesus is God incarnate – God having come to us as a human. Jesus is God, and reveals God, because He is God. And because He is God, He is preeminent over all, by virtue of His nature as God Himself. He is inherently better than everything else, because He is God and we are not. He is first because of His divine nature, His very being.

Paul used carefully chosen language here. This is strong language to show that Jesus is God. But it leaves room for the distinctions inherent in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Son is not the Father. But He is equally divine as the Father, having the same nature of deity. God is more than Jesus. But all that God is, Jesus is.

### II. Jesus is first over all creation (15b-17)

#### A. He is superior to all creation because He created all creation (15b-16a)

##### 1. He is the firstborn over all creation (15b)

The term “firstborn” has NO implication that Jesus is a part of creation, i.e. that He is a created being (the next proposition rules this out). Jesus has preeminence over all creation by being the uncreated God, Who has come into His own creation. There never was a time when Jesus did not exist.

Rather, “firstborn” has the connotation, not just of priority in time, but it means preeminence. For example, in that culture, if a king had four sons, only the oldest would become king when the father died. And when any father died in the culture of the New Testament, the firstborn son received a larger share of the inheritance, and was expected to take over responsibility as head of the family and for the family business. There is a status of importance, inheritance, and leadership that was connected with the firstborn in a family. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation.

The point is that Jesus is in the position of responsibility and leadership over all creation, because He is superior to all creation. And, as Paul is about to say, the reason for His preeminence and leadership over creation is that He is the cause of all creation. He is the uncreated Creator, Who has come into His own creation.

##### 2. Reason: Because He created everything (16a)

###### a Because all things in the heavens and upon the earth were created by Him

This is the reason Paul gave why Christ is superior to all creation, because He was the cause and creator of creation. This could be translated “created *by* Him,” or it could be “created *in* Him.” It could mean that Jesus was the One by Whom all things were created, and this is true. All three persons of the Trinity were active in creation. But it may also mean that Jesus was the sphere in which everything was created. As we’ll see later in this passage, everything was created for His sake, for His glory. And everything exists for Him. In that sense, Paul may have intended to say that everything exists in Him.

And He was the cause of the creation of “all things.” This is comprehensive. Everything was created in Him and by Him. Paul added the qualifiers “in the heavens” and “upon the earth.” This is intended to cover all possible things that exist in all parts of creation. There is nothing that is not included under this umbrella of created things except Christ. And if all things were created by Him, then He is not created. He is not a creature, but He is the creator – God Himself.

b Specifically: the things that are seen and the unseen things, either thrones, either lordships, either rulers, either authorities

Not only did Paul say that everything was created in and by Jesus, but he named names. He listed some specific categories of things that were created by Christ. First, he stated that Christ's creating activity covered both the visible reality and the invisible – the things that are seen, and the unseen things. This means, all of physical reality, and all spiritual reality owes its being to Christ. And then Paul listed a series of words that all have a connotation of rule, power, and leadership. This most likely refers to the hierarchy of angels and spiritual beings that the Colossian heresy was tempting this church to rely on in order to get to God. They were all created by Him. In other words, those things that the Colossians were making a big deal about were created by Christ, and therefore inferior to Him. They were all His creation, not His equal. They were inherently less than Christ and dependent on Christ. And therefore, they had nothing to add to Christ, which Christ did not already have. Anything we may be tempted to rely on was created by Christ, and therefore, is inherently inferior to Him.

And so, the obvious point that Paul was making is to no longer rely on these things, but go straight to the source of all good things – to Christ Himself, Who is better than all of them combined. Christ is of superior status to all creation, because all creation was created by Him and in Him.

B. All things were created by/through Him and for Him (16b)

There is again more than one possible translation of the first preposition Paul used here. It could be “created *by* Him,” which would emphasize Christ as the active agent of creation. This is a true statement, and entirely relevant here. But, depending on how we translate 16a, it may be redundant here. The other possibility is “created *through* Him.” This would emphasize the Father's role in creation, but also state that Jesus was the instrumental agent used by the Father to create everything. This also is true. All members of the Trinity were involved in creation. And so, the different possible emphases all describe the same reality. And Paul advances the argument by also emphasizing that all things were created *for* Him.

He is both the cause of all creation and the reason for all creation, and the goal of all creation. “All things are from Him and through Him and to Him” (Rom. 11:36). He is the reason and goal of everything. And so, nothing, including ourselves, has any meaning apart from Him. We can only find our identity and meaning in relation to Him. Because He is the center of the universe, not us. We were created for Him. He was not created for us. We don't define Christ. He defines us. Christ is not a part of our world. We are a part of His world. Because everything, including us, was created through Him and for Him.

C. And He Himself is before all things (17a)

This is a summary of what Paul had said up to this point. This may mean that He existed before creation in time (which is true). But it most likely means “before” in the sense of precedence in importance or rank – He is more important than all other things. He is more important than all creation. He is preeminent. He is greater and more significant than anything else. If we were to line everything up in order of importance and greatness, Jesus would be at the front of the line. Because everything was created only for Him, for His sake. And so, we need to realize this and refuse to treat anything else as if it were more important than Him.

#### D. And all things are holding together by Him (17b)

Everything relies on Him. All things endure and have any sort of coherence and order because of Him. He is the One holding all things together. Physicists tell us about the atomic forces and gravitational forces that keep our universe from falling apart. And that is true as far as it goes. But they can't tell us what powers the atomic forces or gravity or quantum particles. There is so much we don't understand. But Paul gave us the underlying truth, that all these things work because Jesus not only created them, but continues to hold them together moment by moment. Without Him, everything would fail. Those things we are tempted to rely on would cease without Him.

Do we rely on the stock market or some political cause? Without Him they would fail. Do we rely on our health? Without Him it would fail. Do we rely on gravity or chemistry or the fact that the earth will be there to support us, or that the air is there for us to breathe? Without Him, all these things would completely fail.

And everything finds its proper place in Him. If Christ is first, these other things fall into their proper place.

If we say "Jesus and..." then everything is out of order. It is chaos. We neither truly have Jesus or anything else. But if we say "Jesus. Period." Then we have all things in their proper priority and proportion, because we have Jesus, Who has everything else in Him. Jesus holds everything together, giving everything its existence, meaning, and significance.

### III. Jesus is first in the new creation (18-23)

This section describes why and how Christ is superior over all the new creation. Just as Christ is the One Who created and sustains and gives meaning to this current creation and age, Christ is the One Who brought about, sustains, and gives meaning and purpose to all the realities of the next age. He is the King of the Kingdom of God. He is the One Who will bring about the new heavens and the new earth. And He is the One Who creates and sustains the new humanity, the genuine church, to populate the new heavens and the new earth in the next age.

#### A. He is the head of the body, which is the church (18a)

Here Paul uses the metaphor of the church as a body, which he uses elsewhere (e.g. Rom. 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 1:22-23, 4:15).

And Christ is the "head" of the body. This means that He is the One in authoritative control in relation to the body – Christ is the King of the church. The church is nothing without Christ, and only finds its meaning and significance in relationship with Christ, and empowered by Christ. Therefore, it would be folly for the church to look to anyone or anything else than Christ for anything.

And the church is the citizenship of the new creation – the new humanity, with Christ as the new Adam.

#### B. The Reason: He is first in all the church because He is first in all the universe (18b-23)

The reason why Christ is the head of the body is that He is first in the renewed universe, first in the new creation.

And therefore, He is superior over the renewed universe, just as He is superior over the current universe.

##### 1. Christ is superior over all the universe (18b-c)

###### a He is the beginning – the firstborn from the dead (18b)

The term "beginning" can also be translated "ruler." It has the connotation of one who begins a process, and therefore is in control of the process. Jesus started the new creation, and the church, and He is Lord over all. Like we saw earlier, it is true both that Jesus is first in time *and* that Jesus is most important. Jesus was the first One to experience the resurrection life of the next age at His resurrection. Because He Himself is the source of all life, and has now made this new life available to His people. We experience this new life in part in this age, and will experience it fully in the age to come.

This term was also used in ancient Greek philosophy to designate the most basic element behind all of nature – the most fundamental reality in the universe. If Paul has this use of the word in mind, it would reinforce the idea that Jesus is most fundamental and important.

However, the emphasis is probably that Jesus is the first one resurrected to the new humanity that all His people will eventually share. This is demonstrated by elaborating on "beginning" with the phrase "firstborn from the dead."

The term "firstborn" is the same word used above in v. 15. In this verse it is modified by the phrase "from the dead," thereby emphasizing that Jesus is the first participant in the new

humanity. He is the pioneer and made a way, by His resurrection, to the new humanity that all the church will someday experience. The church will experience the new creation because Jesus made a way by leading the way (1 Cor. 15:20) and by being the way (Jn. 14:1-7),

b Purpose: so that He Himself may be preeminent in everything (18c)

The term “preeminent” means to have the highest place, the highest rank and status – to be in first place, recognized as most important, and honored as such. Paul had been belaboring the fact of Christ’s preeminence through all this passage, and will continue to do so. But here, he emphasized that this is the purpose for the creation and new creation of all the universe. Jesus is the most important, because He is God Himself. This proposition emphasizes that the entire universe is created for the purpose that, not only will Jesus be most important, but will also be seen to be most important, to be recognized and acknowledged as most important. Every knee will bow and everything in the universe will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:10-11)

2. Reason: This was God’s predetermined plan for all the universe (19-23)

Here Paul taught that the preeminence of Christ was not an afterthought. Rather, the purpose of Christ being preeminent in everything was predetermined and planned by God as the purpose and reason for the existence of all the universe and for all of human history.

a He [God] was pleased/determined (19a)

Paul wrote that God “was pleased” and then he went on to describe two things that God was pleased to have happen, which will be described in the following propositions. This term “pleased” has the connotation of choice and resolve toward some action because it is the best, the most pleasing option in God’s sight. So, this does *not* mean that some things happened by accident and God was then pleased by the way it turned out. Rather, it means that God considered and decided what would be most pleasing to Him, and so determined, and therefore, caused these things to happen.

b Specifically: God determined to reconcile everything through Christ (19b-23)

Then Paul described two things in particular that God determined to do, and accomplish in Christ, in order to show His preeminence in the new creation. God’s choice of action plans was (and is) through Christ. There is no plan B, because the plan is for Christ to be preeminent in everything.

1) All the fulness to dwell in Him (19b)

This is the first of the two things mentioned here by Paul that God determined to happen – that All His fullness would dwell in Christ. The term “dwell” means to take up residence, to be fully present (cf. 2:9). God was tangibly present with His people in Jesus, and is now present by His Spirit because of Jesus.

And the word “fulness” means the sum total – not just part of God, but everything that God is. All that God is, is present in Christ. When you interact with Jesus, you interact with the God of the universe. This is another proof of the deity of Christ. Jesus is all that God is. That is why Jesus is preeminent (cf. 2:9-10, Jn. 14:10-11). This has the same sense as “the full measure of deity” in Eph. 3:19.

And not only did Paul say His “fulness” (as opposed to His “halfness” or His “partialness”), but he wrote that *all* His fullness dwells in Christ. God’s fullness is not spread among the cosmic powers that the Colossians were relying on. God’s fullness is not spread among various fads or pastimes. God’s fullness is not spread among all the world religions or worldviews, or human intellectual pursuits and philosophies. God’s fullness is not spread among various pleasures or dreams or accomplishments separate from Christ. All of God’s fullness is in Christ, and therefore Jesus is the *only* way to the Father, not “Jesus and...”

2) To reconcile all to Himself through Him (20-23)

The second thing God was pleased to have happen is for Christ to reconcile all things to Himself. Jesus is able to reconcile everything to God because all God's fullness dwells in Him, as seen in the previous proposition.

a) He reconciled all to Himself (20)

(1) He restored all things to Himself by making peace through the cross (20a-b)

(a) And through Him, to reconcile all things to Himself (20a)

The phrase "all things" is the same phrase used in v. 16b. However, caution is needed here, and we need to take into account the context and the rest of the New Testament. In v. 16, "all things" was not only comprehensive in scope, but comprehensive in depth as well. Absolutely everything was created through Christ. But in this verse, "all things" is probably comprehensive in scope, but not necessarily comprehensive in depth. This means, as we see from the rest of the New Testament, that not absolutely everything will be reconciled to God. The devil will not be reconciled. Not all people will be reconciled. There are some things that will forever be under God's wrath. So, when Paul wrote that God reconciled "all things" in Christ, he probably intended to say all categories of things, not necessarily every item in every category. Christ reconciled all creation, but not necessarily every created thing. He reconciled all categories of humanity, but not necessarily every human. He reconciled Jews and Gentiles, short people and tall, blondes, brunettes, redheads, greyheads and baldheads, but not every person in these categories. Remember that in this context, Paul is concentrating on the new creation. So, everything that is or will be part of the new creation is reconciled to God by Christ. But some things, and some people will be excluded from the new creation. We need to keep this distinction in mind, so that we don't misunderstand what Paul was saying here.

And "reconcile" is a very important theological word in the NT. It occurs in Rom. 5:10-11, 11:15, 2 Cor. 5:18-20, Eph. 2:16, here and v. 22 of this chapter. It means to restore interpersonal relations after they have been broken. It includes the following ideas: 1. Friendly relations have been broken. 2. Steps have been taken to remove and/or heal the problem/offense that caused the relationship to break, and 3. Restoration of the relationship. In the context of human relationship with God, reconciliation involves: 1. our broken relationship with God because of sin, making us subject to God's righteous wrath. 2. Christ paid the penalty for our sin, thus removing the judicial penalty against us, and the cause of enmity, and 3. A restoration of the relationship between God and humans who are in Christ.

Here, Paul expanded this concept to include, not just humanity, but all parts of creation. Just as creation is experiencing death and decay because of the presence of sin in the world, so, Christ is bringing, and will soon complete, the restoration of creation, and will make it even better in the new creation (Rom. 8:19-21).

(b) By making peace through the blood of His cross (20b)

With this proposition, Paul made clear the means by which God removes the enmity between God and humanity and thereby makes reconciliation.

The phrase “making peace” is synonymous to “reconciling.” It speaks of restoring broken relationship by removing the cause of enmity. The term “reconciliation” concentrates more on the *process* of restoring the relationship. And “making peace” concentrates more on the *resulting fact* of the restored, peaceful relationship.

And Paul emphasized that it is through Christ’s violent death on the cross. “Blood” is figurative for the totality of violent sacrificial death as the judicial penalty for sin. Christ stands in as a substitute, paying the judicial penalty instead of the person deserving death, as prefigured in the Old Testament sacrificial system.

(2) Through Him He reconciled both the things on the earth and the things in the heavens (20c)

And Paul clarified, that through Him, He reconciled both the things on the earth, and the things in heaven. The point of this proposition is partly to speak of the comprehensiveness of the reconciliation – it includes spiritual beings as well, though not necessarily all spiritual beings. But the primary point is that even the thrones and authorities and spiritual beings, and any other thing that the Colossians were tempted to add to Christ, all these things were only connected to God, and even had the possibility of being useful, because they were reconciled by Christ. These other heavenly, spiritual powers were dependent on Christ, because Christ is preeminent. And so, those other things are unnecessary at best. So, we should not put our hope and trust in them. But we should hope and trust only in Christ, Who is sufficient, because He is preeminent.

b) He reconciled us through His death (21-23)

Paul then specifically applied this reconciliation to his readers. We also were reconciled through Christ’s death. This section is a before/after contrast in order to highlight the greatness of what Christ has done for us.

(1) Even though you were then estranged and enemies in your attitude by evil deeds (21)

Before Christ, we were estranged from God and enemies of God. We were hateful and defiant toward God. This is true about the past of all of Paul’s readers. We were estranged – we were like strangers or foreigners to God. We did not know Him. And not only that, we were hostile to Him, and He was wrathful toward us because of our sin. We hated and feared God. And Paul elaborated what that meant, and the reasons for our hatred toward God.

First is our mindset – we were enemies in our minds. Our disposition, our way of thinking and attitude was hostile to God. Our thinking was “how dare God tell me what to do, or hold me accountable for what I do! If God doesn’t approve of everything about me, He must be hateful and intolerant, and I’m not going to put up with that!

And right along with that hateful, selfish attitude, Paul wrote, was our wicked deeds. Not only were our deeds morally and socially worthless (not contributing positively to the universe), but they were also wicked and vicious (taking away from the peace and goodness of God’s universe), and dishonoring toward God Himself.

(2) He has now reconciled us to God (22-23)

Even though that horrific picture (from the previous proposition) was true of all of us, thankfully, that is not the end of the story. This is the “after” portion of the contrast. Even though those things were true of us, Christ reconciled us to God. This was against expectations based on what we deserved, but it is the truth, because of God’s gracious nature.

(a) He has now reconciled in His physical body through death (22a)

The reconciliation which Christ accomplished, was done by means of the death of His physical body. This obviously is referring to the cross and all that He accomplished as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins, thus freeing us from our deserved punishment.

(b) To present you to God as faithful and holy (22b-23)

(i) Purpose: in order to present/make you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable before Him (22b)

God’s purpose, as far as we are concerned, in reconciling us to Himself in Christ, is to present us as faithful and holy (cf. Eph. 1:4, Col. 1:28). Christ did this in order to make us holy, to cause us to be blameless before Him.

The word “holy” has connotations of being dedicated and consecrated to God. But it also means that, because of this dedication, we take on the moral purity and blameless actions that conform to God’s character. And this is reinforced by the next two terms.

“Blameless” means to be without moral fault, to be morally perfect.

None of us has yet arrived at perfection, but that is Christ’s purpose for us. And He will eventually bring it about.

And “irreproachable” also means morally perfect. But the emphasis is on the inability of anyone to make a credible accusation against us. If we are irreproachable, no matter what bad thing we are accused of, our lives would be so upright that the accusation would be proved false.

Again, we are not there yet, but this is where Christ is bringing us. And we should continuously be striving toward this goal.

And we are to be holy, blameless, and irreproachable “before Him.”

God is the One Who judges these things – the One Whose opinion matters. No matter how blameless we become, someone may still try to blame us. But their opinion does not matter, only God’s does.

(ii) Condition: If you remain secure in the faith (23)

((a)) If you remain in the faith (23a)

Paul included a conditional statement near the end of this passage, that we remain in the faith. The overall purpose of this letter is to encourage the Colossian church to not give in to the Colossian heresy. They were risking all they had received by believing the heresy of “Christ and...” And Paul used the greatness and preeminence of Christ to challenge them to reject this heresy and trust in Christ only. This phrase is specifically applying this challenge - they should remain faithful to Christ and reject the heresy.

((b)) Remaining firm and faithful (23b-d)

Paul described what it meant to remain in the faith, using a few phrases:

((1)) being well founded (23b)

They were to be established, that is, secured on a firm foundation – referring to Christ and His Gospel.

((2)) being firm/steadfast (23c)

They were to be steadfast, that is, firm and not moved and wavering in their convictions or actions.

((3)) and not shifted/shaken from the hope of the gospel (23d)

They were not to be shifted from their hope, to not cease to hope. They were not to let any bad arguments or circumstances shake them from the truth and hope they had in Christ. Genuine faith is persevering faith. And if we truly grasp Who Jesus is, that He is preeminent over all, then we will tenaciously hold on to Him, and trust that He will hold on to us when we are not strong enough. And Paul specifically stated that this hope is the hope of the Gospel.

((4)) Elaboration of the Gospel in which they were to hope:

((a)) which you heard

As Paul wrote in Galatians (1:8-9), if someone preaches another Gospel, don't listen. There is only one Good News of Christ, the one that was proclaimed to you.

((b)) which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven

This again emphasized the unity and exclusivity of the one true Gospel. It is the one and only good news proclaimed by the faithful church. And this good news was sufficient for every place and every situation in the entire world.

((c)) of which I, Paul, became a servant

Of course, Paul delighted in the fact that he was a preacher of the Gospel, and he was not shy about rejoicing in this fact. But the emphasis here is that this same Gospel, *not* the Colossian heresy of "Christ and..." but rather the only true Gospel of Christ crucified, Christ preeminent, Christ alone, "Christ period" is what Paul proclaimed. And this is what the Colossians should believe and follow.