

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Jesus: Supreme Over Creation
Colossians 1:15-16

Mark Vroegop

15 **He is** the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
16 For 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.
17 And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
18 And 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.
19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
making peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1:15-20)¹

Every once in a while someone will ask me what is my favorite hymn. Do you have one? My favorite hymn is *Fairest Lord Jesus* because it captures some of the central passions of my heart.

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son,
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown.

Beautiful Savior! Lord of all the nations!
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,
Now and forever more be Thine.

¹ I am indebted to Peter O'Brien in the Word Biblical Commentary on Colossians for this helpful layout.

I love this hymn because of the diversity of its exaltation of Christ and for its focus on delight and joy. In eight lines it captures what my heart longs to say. It succinctly summarizes the heart beat of my soul.

Colossians 1:15-20 captures the heart of the apostle Paul. He distills the message of the book into six verses with clarity and power. You could think of these verses as the core of the core.

A Historic Hymn or Creed – 1:15-20

Remember that Paul is battling against a teaching (The Colossian Heresy) that was minimizing the centrality and importance of Christ. The essential problem in the church was a drift away from Christ, and the entire book is written to combat that problem.

The structure, wording, and language of these verses are unique to the rest of the book, and it appears that this some kind of hymn or creed that celebrates the preeminence of Jesus. There is some debate as to whether or not this was a hymn that was sung or whether it was a creed meant to be recited. There is also some question as to whether or not it was an existing hymn, a creed that was changed, or if Paul authored it previously. There is really no way to know clearly, and I'm not sure it really matters although it is rather interesting to investigate.

Regardless, it is clear that these verses capture very important themes regarding the doctrine of Christ. Now there is so much material in these verses that we are going to spend three weeks unpacking it. This week we will look at the supremacy of Jesus (vv 15-16), then we will see Jesus as the source of all things (vv 17-18), and, finally, we will review Jesus' role as savior (vv 19-20). Jesus is supreme, the source, and the savior.

This is one of the most Christ-centered, doctrinally loaded passages in all the Bible, and it was helpful to me to see it organized around two stanzas, both which begin with "He is..." and "the firstborn." It was also very interesting to note that the first stanza ends with a focus on Christ as the head of the *church* and the second stanza ends with a focus on the *cross*. So both stanzas begin with who Jesus is and then they describe what he does.

This creed was a helpful summary of what the core of the core, and it was a useful tool to bring clarity in the midst of doctrinal confusion. By the way, doctrinal error and the need for clarity was often the reason that confessions or creeds were written. So let me ask you another question: What is your favorite creed or confession?

In our present anti-theological culture, reading or knowing a confession or creed is certainly not prized or cherished. And I just want to warn you where that will lead. A church of theologically ignorant people is more prone to embrace heresy. You don't fight heresy or guard against it by learning all about the nature of what the heresy teaches. The safest guardrails when it comes to heresy is to know what you believe really with clarity and precision.

But this also means that we had better be sure that what we sing reflects what we really believe. Our present day creeds are our songs, and that is why I was so grateful when Eric took up the challenge that I gave him to write a College Park Hymn around the theme of Colossians 1. It makes me feel very safe singing words written by someone whose heart I trust.

Verses 15-20 were meant to be some sort of distillation of the core of the core. Perhaps Paul even hoped that this great summary would be memorized. We'll never know. However, there is great material here that teaches us much about Christ.

Two Key Questions

There are two very foundational questions that are answered for us in Colossians 1:15-16. There are few more important questions in life than these: Who is Jesus? What did Jesus do?

Who is Jesus?

Verse 15 identifies two things about Jesus. First, he is the image of the invisible God. Second, he is the firstborn of all creation. Both of these are enormously powerful statements regarding the substance and person of Jesus.

What does it mean that Jesus is the image of the invisible God? To understand the answer to that question we must begin with a rather obvious observation: God is invisible. The Bible tells us that no one has or is able to see God (John 1:18, 1 John 4:12). God even told Moses that "no one can see me and live" (Exodus 33:20), and this is because of God's infinite holiness. So invisible doesn't mean that he doesn't exist or that he isn't real. It means that God is not seen by us, because he lives and operates in realms of existence that we know nothing about. We only know a three dimensional world (length, width, and depth). Those categories are laughable to God. So it is not that he cannot be seen. Rather, it is that God operates in categories of space and time that don't even exist in our minds.

That is where Jesus as the image of God comes in. In the incarnation (when he became a man), He entered our limited, finite, created world. He was humbled in becoming human, living on the earth with limitations, and experiencing death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8). Now if I ask you, "Why did Jesus become man?" many of you will say answer that he did so to provide a sacrifice for sins. That would be correct, but not complete.

Jesus became a man so that he could fully reveal the Father to mankind. So his death is extremely important but so is his life. Jesus is the very image of the invisible God. In other words, he showed us what God is like. He made the invisible visible. He is as close as we will ever get in this life to seeing what God is like.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:14-18).

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. John 14:9

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6)

Who is Jesus? He is the image of the invisible God. He shows us what the glory of God looks like. He is the image of God to man. Therefore, if you want to know God or know what God is like, you have to know and understand His son.

Secondly, he is the firstborn of creation. Now some people get confused when they hear this term because it sounds to them like the Bible is saying that Jesus was the first thing or person created. This is not the meaning of the word, nor the intent of Paul.

To be firstborn means that you are first in rank, honor, and power. The word has roots in the Old Testament in passages like Psalm 89:27 where God says about David, "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Therefore, to be the firstborn of all creation means the he is exalted based upon two things: 1) He exists prior to creation, and 2) He is the rightful heir of creation. Hebrews 1:2-3 gives us an amazing cross-reference here.²

2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb 1:2-3)

Who is Jesus? Put this together. He is the full disclosure of God to man. He is the image of the invisible. And he does so as the One who exists prior to creation and who is the rightful heir to everything that is created. Verse 15 explodes with the power and supremacy of Christ! Thirteen words that make the hearts of those who know him leap for joy. Thirteen words that strike bone-chilling fear into the hearts of those in rebellion.

Jesus is supreme. He is the communication of God to man – "This is what I'm like." And he is sovereign over all creation. That is who Jesus is.

What did Jesus do?

A second question is answered in verse 16. The question is "What did Jesus do?" The stunning answer is that not only is Jesus the full disclosure of God and existed before creation as rightful heir, but he was the one creating everything that we see and know.

² See also 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil 2:6-7; Heb 10:5-9; John 8:58; Rev 1:17, 2:8, 22:13-16

We learn that Jesus is the creator. The text says “for by him all things were created.” If you skip ahead to the end of the verse you will see this thought repeated – “all things were created through him...” However the nuance between the two statements is a bit different.

- “By him” likely means that everything was created within his realm or sphere of influence. You could render the sentence as “by him” or “in him.” We saw this usage in 1:4 with the phrase “faith in Christ Jesus.”³ The faith is not just toward Jesus, but it is a faith captured in the realm of everything that Jesus is. As it relates to creation this means that everything created was under the banner of “in Christ.” In other words, nothing falls outside of him. Jesus says “mine” over everything.
- “Through him” indicates that Jesus was the agent and the means by which creation took place. Not only was creation all within the bounds of Christ’s authority, but everything that is created owes its very existence to Jesus. Everything was created through him.

Therefore, there is nothing that exists outside of the realm of Christ. And nothing exists apart from his action. He made and owns everything!

Nothing is ever dynamic until it is specific, and Paul takes the thought of a creating, ruling Christ and applies it. Remember that he is attacking the wrong thinking of some in the church who had elevated other powers or even became enthralled with unseen spiritual forces over Christ. He highlights the scope of Jesus’ supremacy over the following:

- Heaven and earth, visible and invisible – Paul uses the poetic form of parallelism to say that Jesus is the supreme creator over everything seen and unseen. Heaven is to invisible what earth is to visible. Jesus is sovereign over everything. Everything, in all realms, owe their life and, therefore, their allegiance to Christ.
- Spiritual Forces – Paul jumps on the invisible piece here identifying four cosmic powers which are also under the authority of Christ. He list thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. The Bible often uses these terms to regarding the unseen spiritual forces (i.e., good and bad angels).⁴ We have to be careful not to make too much of the order or their arrangement. There may be some ranking, but it appears that this is simply a list of spiritual powers in the unseen world. And his point, very simply, is that all spiritual forces – good and bad – are subject to Christ.

Therefore, everything in heaven and earth—visible and invisible—and all spiritual forces—from the highest to the lowest—belong to Christ. Everything was made in Him—under his banner. Everything was made through him—he made it. But there is one more!

³ Another great example would be Ephesians 1:4 – “chosen in him.”

⁴ See Eph 3:10, 6:12; Col 2:10, 15.

Finally, everything was made for him. This is where the hymn reaches its crescendo! Not only is Jesus the image, the firstborn, the realm, and the source; he is also the focal point or the reason why all these things exist. Nothing exists just because it is intrinsically valuable. Everything in creation derives its worth because of its value in honoring Christ.

This is the emotional summary of Paul at the end of the mind-blowing content of Romans 9-11:

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:36)

Jesus is the image, the firstborn, the realm, the source, and the focal point. Or let's just say it this way: He's the core! The more I learn about this, the more my heart exults (leaps for joy), and this is what Paul wanted to happen. He wanted to briefly, clearly, and powerfully drive these truths into our hearts.

A number of years ago Pastor Shadrach Meshach Lockridge (1913-2000) wrote a six-minute description of Jesus Christ that captures what it means to exult in the supremacy of Jesus Christ. It is called "My King."

A Final Question: What does this mean?

There is one final question that begs to be asked. We've asked "who is Jesus?" and "what did Jesus do?" Now we have to ask what does this mean? In other words, in light of what we learned about Jesus, what should we think or do?

1. **Jesus is the center, deal with it!** I'm saying this in an edgy kind of way because I really want you consider where you are at with him. If Jesus is the image, firstborn, the source, the focal point, and everything is under his banner – then we need to know how we relate to him. Jesus is either your Savior or your judge.
2. **To know God you must know Jesus.** The Bible tells us that creation declares that God exists, and anyone who has welcomed 30 second old baby into the world and heard his first cry knows this to be true. God is real, and I believe your heart knows that to be true. The only way that you are going to know God personally and recover from the mess of your life is to receive Christ. He is the center of the universe. He is the only way to be right with God, and everyone here must deal with that issue.
3. **Life wasn't meant to work without Jesus.** Remember, all things were made in him, by him and for him. Everything in life was meant to have Christ at the center. A few examples:
 - Marriage: Husbands are to love their wives *as Christ loved the church* (Eph 5:25). Wives are to *submit to their husbands as to the Lord* (Eph 5:22).
 - Children: They are to *obey their parents in the Lord* (Eph 6:1)

- Servants: They are to work hard *with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord* (Col 3:23)
- Relationships: We are to *submit to one another as unto Christ* (Eph 5:21)
- Sexuality: Our bodies are *members of Christ* (1 Cor 6:15). You were bought with a price – Jesus' death! (1 Cor 6:20)
- Time: Make the most of time, *understanding what the will of the Lord is* (Eph 5:17)
- Everything: Just in case you think something is missing, Paul says "*do everything in name of the Lord Jesus*" (Col 3:17).

You cannot be God's kind of person, partner, parent, parishioner, or provider without Jesus in the center.

4. **God's goal is to make me like Jesus.** Have you ever said, "God! What are you doing to me?" I have. You know what is funny (kind of) about that question? The Bible answers question. Jesus imaged the Father to the world, and God is relentless in his passion to make you like his son. In fact the Bible says, "All things work together for good...to be conformed to the image of His son" (Rom 8:28-29). So you never need to wonder what God is up to. He wants you to be Christ-like. The question is whether or not we get on board with that.
5. **Everything must have Jesus' permission.** There is absolutely nothing that happens outside of the control and supremacy of Christ. Even the devil's schemes and all the enemy's devices must submit to the sovereign rule of Christ. So don't you let the devil or your flesh tell you that God has abandoned you. Every throne, dominion, ruler, power both seen and unseen bend the knee to Jesus. He is king and the devil is not free!

One of favorite books is John Piper's poetic rending of the story of Job called *The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God*. Here is how he says this truth:

"I think God never laid
 Aside the reigns that lie against
 The neck of Satan, nor unfenced
 His pen to run at liberty,
 But only by the Lord's decree"⁵

The Apostle Paul gives us a crystal clear creed that could be used to combat heresy and bring great comfort to our heart. This passage answers two questions: Who is Jesus? What did Jesus do? And the answer is: Jesus is supreme over everything, including my life!

⁵John Piper. *The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Book, 2002. p. 70

Or to put it in a creed that we all know:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

That's my King! Do you know him?

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