

Session 3

THE ULTIMATE IMAGE

Colossians 1:15-20

Memory Verse

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

*¹⁶ For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—
all things have been created through him and for him.*

¹⁷ He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.

– COLOSSIANS 1:15-17, CSB



The Ultimate Image

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God to the world.

The Screwtape Letters (1942), C.S. Lewis’s satirical set of letters between a senior demon named Screwtape and his junior tempter and nephew Wormwood, focus on Screwtape’s advice to his nephew on how to ensure the failure of his assigned victim. In backhanded fashion, Lewis’s work highlights many of the tendencies in humanity that have traditionally caused difficulty in following Christ. Of course, given the slant of the satire, these tendencies are viewed as favored instruments to induce believers to stumble and fail. One of the most chilling methods is the “Christianity And” strategy:

*The real trouble about the set your patient is living in is that it is merely Christian. They all have individual interests, of course, but the bond remains mere Christianity. What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call “Christianity And.” You know — Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychological Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring. . . .*¹

The sad reality is that the “Jesus And” approach to Christianity is still alive and well in many ways. One of the best defenses against such a distracted pursuit is the continual recognition that it is in Christ alone that the fullness of God dwells. Paul dealt with the same issue in his letter to the Colossians, as will be seen this week.

❓ What are some of the “Jesus And’s” you see in our culture today? How can you best detect them?

❓ In the example listed above, are all the “Jesus And’s” naturally bad things? If not, what elevates them to becoming problematic in the life of a Christian?

❓ Describe a time in which you identified something in your life that was taking too much priority. What sign led you to realize it was becoming an issue? How did you adjust?

Session Summary

In this week’s session, Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, reminding them of the magnitude of Christ. In warring against numerous other religious systems, Paul taught that Christ is God in His fullness. Christ was not only the model for how Christians were to live, but also the ultimate image of the invisible God.

1. The Image of God in Creation (Col. 1:15-16)

Paul’s letter to the Colossian believers was most significantly informed by the presence of a body of false teaching that was referred to by scholars as the Colossian heresy. The specific tenets of the heresy are debatable but, observing certain textual clues in the letter, it at least included the religious practice of extreme asceticism (self-denial). The asceticism, which included angel worship in some manner, eventually induced a mystical trance-like state

that was believed to lead to a deeper knowledge of God, thus subverting the gospel. For fairly obvious reasons, Paul was very much opposed to such heretical notions.

To that end, Paul transitioned from a prayer for the spiritual growth of the Colossian believers in 1:9-14 into a hymn-like collection of verses that focused on the doctrine of Christ. Paul started the section with the grandest possible explanation of who Christ is. Specifically, “He is the image of the invisible God.” Paul had said previously (2 Cor. 4) that Christ was the image of God. F.F. Bruce comments that Paul’s meaning in both uses was “to say that in Him the nature and being of God have been perfectly revealed—that in Him the invisible has become visible.”²

The perfection of the revelation of God in Christ stood in stark contrast to humanity who, though created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), displayed only a marred version of the image of God. According to Bruce, “Defaced as the divine image in humanity may be by reason of sin, yet in the order of creation it remains true that humanity is ‘the image and glory of God’ (1 Cor. 11:7).”³ In His incarnation, Jesus displayed the glory of God in a way that fallen humanity could not. However, He also provided an inspirational glimpse of what humanity would become when renewed at Christ’s return.

? What does it tell you about God that He would go to such incredible lengths to reveal Himself to you?

? Application: When you read the Gospels, how do the accounts of Jesus’ physical life inspire you to live like Him? How does the gift of reading about the physical life of Christ help you understand the invisible God?


That Christ was the firstborn over all creation explained that all of creation came into existence as a result of His agency. In no way would Paul have intended to say that Christ was the first created thing among all other created things; such would

deny the divinity and eternity of Christ. Instead, Paul was expressing the vastness of Christ's eternal omnipotence. Literally everything that has ever been or ever will be exists because of Christ. Even the inclusion of "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities," which would include all manner of angelic host, emphasize that nothing is beyond Christ's reign. This was particularly important for the believers in Colossae due to the heretical teaching that plagued them. Bruce again clarifies, "With special reference to the 'Colossian heresy' it is not emphasized 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."⁴

2. Christ Governs All of Creation and the Church (Col. 1:17-18a)

Reaffirming his earlier teaching, Paul summarized the teaching of verses 15-16 in the brevity of verse 17. In saying that "He is before all things," Paul emphasized once again Christ's distinction from creation. There was no possibility of a point in eternity past when Christ was not. The fact that Christ was before all things meant that not only did He exist before anything was created, but He is also superior to them (again, especially the angels, in refutation of the Colossian heresy).

Finishing verse 17, Paul added that Christ maintains all things. Christ did not create all things and then leave them to run their own course—not that they could have without Him anyway. Instead, once creation was spoken into being, Christ continued to be the agency that held all created things together in relationship with one another. Bruce notes, "For Paul the living Christ, who died to redeem His people, is the sustainer of the universe and the unifying principle of its life."⁶ The holding together, then, is as much mechanical as it is relational. In Christ, all of creation operates perpetually in a systemic fluidity.

 During the moments in your life when everything seems to be spinning out of control, how does Paul's reminder that all of creation is maintained by Christ impact your anxiety, frustration, and distress?



Application: How have you seen the unifying impact of Christ's presence evident in your relationships with other believers? What part of discipleship should reconciliation and peacemaking have?

Verse 18 turned the teaching about the eternity and omnipotence of Christ into a practical issue for Christians. All of the power demonstrated through the creation of all things and the subsequent holding them together found constant application in the church because Christ is its head. While the shift from Christ as the Creator of all to His being the head of the church might seem dramatic, Paul wrote to a local congregation that needed to know what Christ's example meant for the way in which they lived together in biblical community.

3. All God's Fullness in Christ (Col. 1:18b-20)

The hymn-like structure of the passage was highlighted using strategically repeated words. With verses 15-20 being broken into two strophes (15-16 and 18b-20) with a transitional segment in between, the use of "firstborn" marked the two main sections. Significantly, in the first strophe, Christ was referred to as the "firstborn of creation." In the second strophe, He was referred to as the "firstborn from the dead." Firstborn from the dead pointed to the resurrection of Jesus, making Him the first of the once dead to live again. Gloriously, being firstborn also meant that there were others who would follow, as Jesus made it possible through His atoning work for all those who call Him Savior to share in the eternal life He provides. In light of the two uses of firstborn, Christ was not only the agency through which all things in the first creation were brought into being, He is also the agency through which new creation is brought about. Indeed, first place in everything belongs to Him alone.

The verbiage in verse 19 would hearken the reader back to the divine pronouncements about Jesus during His baptism by John the Baptist and the Transfiguration. During both of those events, the voice of the Father spoke affirmingly of the Son, saying specifically "in whom I am well-pleased" at the baptism. At the zenith of the hymn, the author referred once again to God's pleasure with regard to the Son and His divine work.

❓ What difference does it make when you read Scripture to know that part of the reason God was pleased to have all His fullness in Christ was so that Jesus could reconcile all things (including you) to Himself?

❓ Application: How would you explain to someone what it means for Jesus to be “firstborn from the dead”? Why is it important to understand that description of Jesus?

According to Bruce, “The fullness of the divine energy is manifested in Christ in the work of reconciliation as well as in that of creation.”⁸ The redemption of humanity as a focus of Christ’s work is clarified in verses 21-22 that follow. However, as Paul pointed out in other writings, such as Romans 8:19-22, the redemption of all creation, which groans in anticipation of the renewal through Christ’s redemptive work, is wrapped up with the reconciliation effort. The manner in which that reconciliation was procured was through the shedding of His blood. As Peter wrote, “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you” (1 Pet. 1:20). That Christ was the agency through which all things were created in the beginning, and that He was foreknown before the foundation of that creation, means that, at the least, there was never a moment in which Christ was not the plan for the redemption of all things.

Conclusion

The implications of God’s image being at its fullness in Christ are profound and far-reaching. The language Paul used, regardless of whether the passage was part of an early hymn or not, is lofty and theologically rich. It is tempting to read through such a passage, acknowledging that it is correct, without pondering the depths of what it teaches. However, a careful examination of the passage yields several points for consideration.

First, the passage unequivocally states that Christ is the fullness of God. This is critical for spiritual growth because there are so many things that compete for our allegiance in the world. When Jesus said in John 14:6 that no one can come to the Father except through Him, He meant exactly that. No combination of faith systems, personal enlightenment, pursuit of one's own joy or happiness, or any other man-focused endeavor can change the fact that Christ alone is the image of the invisible God. Therefore, any attempt to gain God's favor that does not align with the clear teaching of Scripture will ultimately fall into the same camp as the Colossian heresy—aiming to subvert the gospel.

Second, Christ reigns sovereignly over everything. Nothing is beyond His reach. That means that every challenge, temptation, anxiety, and fear that the Christian faces is helpless in the face of Christ's limitless rule. Because He is eternal and omnipotent, the struggles the believer faces are not shocking to Him at all. What is more, the writer of Hebrews made it clear that precisely because Christ was incarnated as a man, He faced every temptation that is common to believers today, but did so without sinning. He understands the daily struggle of the Christian because He lived it. But, because He did not sin and is the image of the invisible God, He was victorious where humanity failed. He knows, understands, and offers victory to those who follow Him.

Third, Christ as the head of the church means that those in the body of Christ are under His leadership. While this has many implications, one of the things it means is that Christians must seek unity and reconciliation as a priority. The congregations to which Paul sent letters all faced inner turmoil. Had there not been an issue with the congregations, Paul wouldn't have been writing to them. In those correspondences, Paul repeatedly pointed Christians to be reconciled to God and one another, seeking and offering forgiveness as those whom had been forgiven much. Seeking such reconciliation can be difficult and filled with painful conversations, but it aligns Christ's followers with Him as the head of the church, whose very mission was reconciliation.

❓ What are some ways that you've witnessed people justify or rationalize things that would challenge Christ as the central figure in their worship? Have you noticed that being an intentional change, or something that happens gradually? If you are a Christian, how do you keep from succumbing to the subtle temptations to diminish Christ's centrality in your life?

❓ Why do you think recognizing Christ's supremacy is so important for battling anxiety, fear, and frustration? How have you experienced that in your own life? Give an example.

❓ Who in your life has best demonstrated a devotion to seeking reconciliation with others? How did that person confront the awkwardness of those difficult conversations? What part of their example have you implemented?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus is the perfect revealed image of God.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Being a witness for Jesus in a world that increasingly seeks to reject Him can be daunting. Remembering the supremacy of Christ over all things and the power that accompanies His Great Commission helps Christians to not only persevere, but also thrive as His ambassadors.



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Saving Image

Main Passages

- Romans 8:28-30

Session Outline

1. The Good of God's Work in His People (Rom. 8:28)
2. Becoming Like Christ Is the Goal (Rom. 8:29)
3. Being Conformed Is a Lifelong Process (Rom. 8:30)

Memorize

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¹⁶ *For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him.*

¹⁷ *He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.*

- Colossians 1:15-17, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Colossians 1:15-20

- Tuesday - Hebrews 1:1-3

- Wednesday - John 1:1-5

- Thursday - John 1:14-18

- Friday - John 14:9-11

- Saturday - John 8:25-29

References

¹Lewis, C. S. *The Best of C.S. Lewis*. New York, NY: Christianity Today, 1969.

²Bruce, F.F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.