

Series Colossians

This Message The Supremacy of God's Son

Scripture Colossians 1:13-20

The Apostle Paul had a specific strategy in his ministry travels. It was his habit to locate in the most important city in a region, and from that location to let the gospel spread by word of mouth to outlying areas. Acts chapter 19 describes the two plus years that the Apostle Paul spent in the city of Ephesus. His ministry there was so successful that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (*Acts 19:1, 9-10*). That outreach included Colosse.

Scripture is silent about the evangelistic outreach in Colosse, but commentators assume that one of the Gentiles who received Christ during Paul's ministry in Ephesus took the gospel message to Colosse, and perhaps to the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hieropolis also. (*see Colossians 1:7; 4:12-13*) Church fellowships were formed in all of these cities. Epaphras, who is mentioned in Paul's letter, may have been that man.

Sometime later, Epaphras connected with Paul in Rome. His report of the state of the believers in Colosse was generally very positive. Paul learned of their “faith in Christ Jesus and of the love they had for all the saints” (*Colossians 1:3-4*). Paul was excited and grateful for how these Colossians believers had responded to the gospel and he prayed that they would continue to please God by “bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with God's power so that they would have great endurance and patience and joy, and by giving thanks to the Father” for His grace in qualifying them “to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (*Colossians 1:10-12*).

In the previous message we learned that there were two specific objectives in Paul's prayer: that “God would fill the believers with the knowledge of His will” in order that they might “live a life worthy of the Lord” (*Colossians 1:9-10*). These two objectives are the underlying main themes of the letter.

The report by Epaphras also had some information that was not so positive — information that motivated Paul to write this letter. He wanted to encourage the believers in what they were doing well, but he also wanted to warn them about some teaching which was outside the truth of the gospel. This letter never explicitly describes the false teaching, but the nature of it can be inferred from statements written by Paul. His concern can be discerned by the emphasis he placed on certain topics.

In the passage for today, you will notice that Paul puts a heavy emphasis on the unlimited supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Paul felt it was necessary to do this because the false teachers did not have a proper understanding of Jesus. To them, Jesus was only one of many intermediaries who bridged the spiritual distance between God and men. To the false teachers Jesus was not the triumphant Redeemer to whom all authority in heaven and on earth had been committed. This is not unlike many religious leaders today, who preach that Jesus is important but not greater than Buddha or Mohaemaed or other religious leaders.

Paul did not want the Colossian believers to “dethrone” Jesus, or for Him to be diminished in their minds in any way. In the first part of the letter, Paul acknowledged that the believers had “heard the gospel and understood God’s grace in all its truth,” and he wanted to make it clear that any other teaching than the true gospel they had received would be a form of “hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world” (*See Colossians 2:8*).

As we read the passage, notice how compellingly and vigorously Paul emphasizes the importance of Jesus. The previous passage ended with these words: “The Father has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (*Colossians 1:12*).

Read Colossians 1:13-20

Verses 13 and 14 are like a bridge between Paul’s prayer in the first part of chapter 1 and the beginning of his theological teaching. The verses can be attached to either part. The Father declares us to be qualified and acceptable when we believe the good news about Jesus Christ. The verb tense indicates that the qualifying is an instantaneous act and not a process, and that from that moment of being “born again” each believer has a “share in the inheritance of the saints.”

Three important benefits of the inheritance are mentioned in verses 13 and 14. Believers are “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light,” and they receive “redemption” and “the forgiveness of sins.” These are not benefits which are future and heavenly; rather they are “past tense” privileges — privileges which are part and parcel of the “here-and-now” “kingdom of the Son.” Believers are those who have already been qualified to live as kingdom citizens while in this life. “Rescue,” “redemption,” and “forgiveness of sins” are part of the core identity of believers.

Beginning in verse 14 Jesus and the sufficiency of His salvation become the subject of the letter. Paul wants his readers to understand that the Father through Jesus has provided a complete salvation, and that nothing needs to be added to the benefits named. The implication is that teachers who don’t understand this are incorrect and without credibility.

The statements about Jesus in verses 15 through 20 divide into two emphases: His relation to creation and to the Church. The objective of these verses is to substantiate that Jesus was/is supreme over creation as well as sufficient for the spiritual needs of believers. The main point of the letter comes down to this point of logic: If Jesus Christ is the supreme Lord on whom all created beings depend, then He does not require any kind of assistance from any dependent creature. To state this in another way: if Jesus is the power which brought the whole universe into existence and sustains it from its beginning to its demise, there is no reason to doubt that He is capable of sustaining an individual believer from conversion to glory. Paul wants his readers to have the greatest possible confidence in Jesus.

Verse 15 begins with a statement about the deity of Jesus. He is “the image of the invisible God.” This means that the characteristics of eternal God have been manifested in a visible way in Jesus. The Greek word for “image,” (*eikon*) expresses two ideas. One is “likeness.” Jesus is the image of God because He is exactly like God, exactly like the reflection in a mirror is of the person who is looking into the mirror. The other idea in the word is “manifestation.” This means that the nature and being of God are perfectly “manifested” and revealed in Jesus. (*See similar thoughts in John 1:18 and Hebrews 1:3.*) Verse 15 states that Jesus perfectly reflects and reveals the eternal God who cannot be viewed by humans.

Next Paul wrote that Jesus is “the firstborn over all creation.” This describes His relationship to the physical universe. We must go slowly here and make sure we understand all the important words because this phrase is often twisted by false teachers today. Jesus is described as “firstborn” (*prototokos*) in several verses in the New Testament. (For examples see *Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6; and Revelation 1:15*). The word “firstborn” can mean “first in time” (for example, Jesus was the first to rise from the grave) or “highest in rank” (in the sense that Jesus is Lord over all other creatures). In the context of this passage the emphasis is on the supremacy or rank of Jesus — no one has a higher position. He is over all creation.

Verses 16 and 17 give the reason why Jesus is identified as the firstborn over creation. The reason is simple: because He made it. He gave existence to everything. The words “all things” are used four times in these two verses. Notice what “all things” represent: Everything in heaven and on earth, everything that is visible and invisible. This includes “thrones,” “powers,” “rulers,” and “authorities.”

There are three prepositional phrases which help us understand the creative activity of Jesus: All things came to be “in Him,” “through Him,” and “for Him.” We can say that creation was “in Him” because it was His responsibility and He had the ability to do it. He was the member of the Godhead who carried out the wishes of the Father. Creation is “through” Him because He was the member of the Trinity who did the work. He carried out the Father’s wishes concerning creation. Creation is “for” Jesus in the sense that all creation is intended to serve Him and contribute to His glory. By means of these statements, Paul is emphasizing that Jesus must be at the highest level in the thoughts of the believers. He is Lord over all by right of creation and ownership.

Verse 17 adds two additional thoughts: that Jesus existed “before all things,” and that “in Him all things hold together.” The word “before” can mean that Jesus is first in rank above all else. However, here the word refers to time. Before anything else existed, Jesus, as a member of the Godhead, was there (*Compare John 1:1-2*). The phrase “in Him all things hold together” is the declaration that Jesus personally sustains all of creation. He is the force who keeps all the natural laws of the universe coordinated and functioning. Jesus has the ability to make everything cohesive. He prevents the cosmos from becoming chaos.

The preceding statements describe the relationship of Jesus to the physical universe. The next verses describe His relationship to the Church. The Church is the spiritual creation of God. (*See Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16*). "He is the Head of the body, the church." Jesus is the One who guides and governs the Church.

The word "Church" (*ekklesia, literally "assembly" or "congregation"*) is used in both a local and universal context in Scripture. In this passage, the "Church" includes all the people who have placed their faith in Jesus and been redeemed by God. In this passage the Church is identified as Jesus' "body." He and His people make up one living unit. Jesus and His Church would be incomplete without the other.

In the middle of verse 18 Paul gives two reasons why Jesus is entitled to be the Head of the Church: "He is the beginning" and "He is the firstborn from among the dead." The word "beginning" can refer to time, or to origin and source. Both meanings apply to Jesus. The Church came into existence because of the work Jesus did in the incarnation and His death.

In the context of verse 15, the word "firstborn" indicated highest in rank. Here in verse 18 the emphasis is on time or sequence. Jesus was the first to be resurrected from the dead. This victory over death was the launching point of a new age in human experience. Jesus now possesses in Himself a new and higher kind of life, and He is willing and able to share His life with people who place faith in Him. Christ overcame death in order that His body, the Church, might also overcome death and be as eternally alive as He is.

The last part of verse 18 explains why Jesus had to conquer death: "So that in everything he might have the supremacy." Paul, in another of his letters, wrote that the last enemy to be conquered is death (*See I Corinthians 15:20-27*). By conquering death, Jesus became the supreme Lord over "the last" of everything. Just think, He is Lord over everything in space (the physical universe) and time (past, present, and future), and we should be especially thankful that He is Lord over the evil things in the spiritual world that hinder our fellowship with God. Jesus' resurrection was the ultimate achievement of history. The conclusion of these verses is obvious: Jesus alone is the supreme Lord of all things.

Verses 19 and 20 are like the concluding statement of this passage. Paul had declared that Jesus is exactly like God, and that He is Lord over creation and Head of the Church — over all things in the physical and spiritual realms. In verse 19 Paul's words were, literally, "everything of everything" dwells in Him, or, "completeness with completeness" dwells in Him. Paul did not actually write the word "God" as the subject. The emphasis of the verse is on "fullness." Translators have not known how to adequately express the original Greek words, and the closest they can come is "God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Christ."

I hope you appreciate the struggle Paul had in describing the qualities and abilities of Jesus. He used the word "fullness" to represent "all that God is," meaning that nothing of God is lacking in Jesus, neither the nature of God nor the totality of divine powers and attributes. The word "dwell" in the phrase "the fullness dwells in him" implies permanent residence, which makes the sense of "fullness" even stronger.

In verse 20 Paul wanted to convey the truth that God acted fully in Jesus to achieve His purposes. Grammatically verses 19 and 20 are one sentence. In the first part of the sentence the fullness dwelled "in Him" (Jesus). In the next part of the sentence the fullness reconciled "through Him." The word "reconcile" means "to change completely" an acrimonious relationship into one which is harmonious, to change hostility to peace.

It has been the work of God since the disobedience of Adam and Eve to reconcile sinful people to Himself (*See Romans 5:10, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:14, 15*). It was the death of Jesus on the cross which made peace between God and mankind possible. The phrases, "things on earth" and "things in heaven," indicate the extent of reconciliation achieved by the death of Jesus. Verse 20 is a reference to the cosmic significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul had a special reason for writing as he did. He wanted to make absolutely clear to his readers that all of God was in Jesus and that Jesus was completely sufficient to reconcile all things to Himself. It is vitally important that we comprehend the all-sufficiency of Jesus to meet our spiritual needs, both our eternal and daily needs. Paul wants us to know that it is not Jesus plus something else that meets our needs. Jesus alone is sufficient. The words in this first chapter of Colossians are packed with deep meaning. Paul wanted his readers in Colosse and us to understand the greatness of Jesus and the thoroughness of His ministry.

Let me remind you again of Paul's prayer in the first part of chapter 1: he asked God to fill the readers of his letter "with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding in order that they might live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way" (*Colossians 1:9-10*). That knowledge must be centered on Jesus!