



Colossians 1:15-23

A Look at Christ vs. 15-20

Read these verses again to have it fresh in your memory.

These verses slow down and zoom in on the Son of God, into whose kingdom the Colossians (and us) have been transferred. The idea is that Paul takes time to show them a view of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. This view sets them up for many of the challenges they will face. They may be afraid or intimidated by certain powers (spiritual powers, religious powers, natural/'elemental' powers), but Christ is supreme over all. They may think that Christ would get them so far in their spiritual journey but they see that because of his supremacy Christ is sufficient for all.

SUPREME OVER CREATION

First Paul looks at Christ as God's highest ruler over all creation. Paul piles up the prepositions in verses 15-17 to show that nothing exists outside of Jesus, nothing existed before Jesus, nothing continues without Jesus. Cf. John 1:3 and Heb. 1:3 for the same view of Jesus as God's agent in creation.

SUPREME OVER NEW CREATION

Paul shifts gear in v18 and turns to speak of Jesus as supreme over the new creation. The repetition of "firstborn," first in v15 and then in v18 show the two part structure of verses 15-20. Jesus is supreme over all that God has done in creation and also in redemption.

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QUESTIONS

1. One of the aims in these verses is to challenge a compartmentalised view of Jesus. In what areas of your life are you prone to leave Jesus out?
2. In showing Jesus as supreme over all things Paul is also aiming at easing the fears the Colossians may have to forces and powers around them, some immaterial, some material, some religious. What things/people are you intimidated by and how does this view of Jesus as supreme help provide comfort for that?

A Look at You vs. 21-23

Paul turns to focus on the Colossians in particular, and he does so to remind them of the place they have in this big plan of God.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

First he reminds them of who they were apart from Christ. Highlighting the alienation and hostility that once existed between them and God sets the scene for the good that they have now been reconciled. Reconciliation is only good news in the light of relational breakdown.

A LOOK AT THE PRESENT

Paul's key word in this second section here is reconciliation. What Jesus is doing on a universal scale he has done with you specifically. There is a personal note here emphasising that *you* Colossians, have been reconciled.

A LOOK AT THE FUTURE

Paul locates the Colossians on a timeline. This reminds them that they are on a journey moving toward a destination but not there yet. It is all God's work but they still need to continue to trust in him.

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QUESTIONS

1. How does the language of being God's enemies apart from Christ make us feel?
2. Think about the idea of reconciliation. Do we think of God at peace with us, or do we still feel as though somehow we need to appease him or keep him happy?
3. The Colossians needed to be reminded that while they have been presently reconciled, God's purposes in redemption haven't yet been totally completed. This is why they needed to continue in faith. How does the future element of God's purposes change our perspective of the present?

See below for an appendix of answers if the rabbit holes of 'Arianism' (Jesus is not divine), 'Universalism' (everybody is eventually going to be reconciled to God), and 'Arminianism/Calvinism' (assurance and Christian perseverance/responsibility) come up. While they are really good topics to talk about, perhaps they could be parked and picked up later if they are dominating the discussion. Do direct people to David if they want further discussion on any of the topics as he would be more than happy to make time to talk.

APPENDIX (some short answers to big questions)

JESUS IS NOT DIVINE: THE CHALLENGE OF 'FIRSTBORN'.

- 1 Not how theology works: the word cannot be looked at in isolation - context matters and we need to a) discern the force of what is being said, and b) make the most sense of the whole context
- 2 Firstly, context of scripture: Psalm 89:27 God had promised to one of Israel's most significant kings - king David - that one of David's descendants would rule on his throne forever. In this Psalm we hear God speaking about that promised descendent and saying this "And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth". Now what is significant about that statement, among other things, is the parallelism of the Psalm. The way it works is that the second line develops and give more shape to the first line. So the first line is "And I will appoint him to be my firstborn," and then to clarify what is meant by firstborn we have the second line "the most exalted of the kings of the earth". So 'firstborn' in Psalm 89:27 refers to superiority of rank not temporal priority. Bringing that back to Colossians we can see that kingship is very much in the context nb: this portion of scripture is something of a parenthesis expanding the idea of the Son of God as the king of his kingdom. And so what that reading would say to us is that for the Son of God to be referred to as the 'firstborn' is a statement about his rank, namely most exalted. The Son is the most exalted over all creation. It is another way of saying that Jesus is the king of all creation while also alluding to him as the promised descendent of David - because that's the way the bible works, beautifully weaving thread after thread together into a rich mosaic.
- 3 Secondly, Paul presents Jesus as distinct from creation - and we need to respect that. Creation is said to be made in Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus - therefore the natural reading is to see Jesus not as a part of creation but as the agent of creation.
- 4 Finally, looking more widely in the letter we read in 2:9 that "in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." Not that Jesus was not divine as though he were like an empty flesh container filled with divine content, because 'bodily' is an adverb - this is *how* divinity dwelt, not *where*. The divine Son dwelt on earth in bodily form.

EVERYBODY WILL EVENTUALLY BE RECONCILED: CHALLENGE OF UNIVERSALISM

- 1 All doesn't always mean all. Paul says in Philippians that he can do "all" things through Christ who strengthens him. Either we take this in an unqualified sense and follow through logically into what appears to be absurdities and say that Paul could turn into an apple if he wanted to. Or else we limit the reference to all by context. So all doesn't always mean all. Context is key.
- 2 It contradicts Jesus' own teaching when he says, in Matthew 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven". He goes on to say "many will say to me in that day 'Lord Lord did we not prophecy in your name
- 3 It contradicts Paul's other clear teaching - speaking of those who are persecuting the church in Thessalonica he says "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might"
- 4 It doesn't fit with Paul's own concern over the Colossians in this very letter:
 - In vs 23 Paul clarifies that the presentation of the Colossians before God on the great and final day when God judges the living and the dead and in which they will be presented as holy and blameless in God's sight is reality when working under the assumption that they will have continued in the faith. The implication is that to not continue in the faith is to not be presented in such a way on that day.
 - secondly, Paul's concern is that the Colossians do not become disqualified from the future inheritance by being led astray and taken captive under false doctrine by turning away from Christ - 2:18.
- 5 A better reading is to read "all" in this context as referring to all without distinction, rather than all without exception. All the kinds of things that are being reconciled are being reconciled through Jesus. And the force of the words - the impact that they are meant to have on you - is that a) we look nowhere else for reconciliation, and b) the scope of God's redemption through Jesus extends to the whole of creation - creation itself is going to be redeemed.

- 6 Paul is not being exclusive for the sake of being exclusive. The exclusivity of Jesus is a good thing for those on the inside because it means the Colossians can be sure that Jesus is sufficient for their every need. There is no reconciliation outside of him means that there is all reconciliation in him. Let's not forget the goodness of the exclusivity of Jesus.
- 7 It is also not exclusive exclusivity. Everybody is invited into the exclusive Christ. Therefore it is inclusive exclusivity.

WHAT ABOUT 'IF'?

- 1 The bible doesn't speak in God's divine activity in a way that undermines human responsibility, but neither does it speak in a way of human responsibility that overrides God's sovereign freedom and initiative. God is sovereign and free and humans are responsible and accountable for their actions.
- 2 Language like 'if' guards against a 'deterministic' view of salvation that says "God's just gonna save us, so it doesn't matter what we do".
- 3 It is key to remember that we mustn't interpret "continue in faith" as "clean ourselves up". Paul is not inviting the Colossians into something new, he is encouraging them to continue in the same way they started. Faith is not a work. Cf. Galatians 3:3.