

# Preeminence Of Jesus

1:15–23

The nature of the lordship of Jesus The prologue of the epistle climaxes with thanksgiving for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, leading directly and logically into a discussion of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. This discussion forms the first major section of the body (teaching portion) of the epistle. It examines the lordship of Jesus Christ, describing His preeminence in both creation and redemption and His work of reconciliation.

## A. Preeminence of Jesus (1:15-20)

*(15) Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: (16) for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: (17) and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. (18) And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. (19) For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; (20) and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.*

Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the greatest proclamations of the doctrine of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Many commentators, pointing to the rhythm of the passage and the repetition of key words, suggest that it was perhaps an early hymn. Its theme is the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Jesus.

*Verse 15.* The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the “image of the invisible God.” The word *image* is the translation of the Greek word *eikon*, from which we get the English word *icon*. Vine explained, “The word involves the two ideas of representation and manifestation. . . . In Colossians 1:15, ‘the image of

the invisible God' gives the additional thought suggested by the word 'invisible,' that Christ is the visible representation and manifestation of God to created beings."

Many people maintain that "image" refers to an eternal distinction and relation in the Godhead; that is, one person called the Son is the eternal image of another person called the Father. But, instead, "image" relates to the Incarnation, as the following points demonstrate. (1) The context reveals that the subject of discussion is the Incarnation (Colossians 1:19). (2) The antecedent of the pronoun "who" is "Son" (Colossians 1:13). The title of Son designates the human person in whom God was incarnate, who was born and who died (Luke 1:35; Romans 5:10; Galatians 4:4). Thus the "image" is a genuine human, not a second divine spirit. (3) The prepositional phrase "of the invisible God" qualifies "image," showing that the image under discussion is visible and therefore physical, human. (4) The image is of "God"—the totality of the Deity, the fullness of the invisible One—not merely the image of one of three divine persons. Other passages also express this truth. The Son is "the brightness of his [God's] glory, and the express image of his person" (Hebrews 1:3). "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18). "Christ . . . is the image of God" (II Corinthians 4:4). In a finite, limited sense, all humans are images of God (Genesis 1:26-27). But Jesus is the image of God in a unique sense, for He is the perfect image of God and in Him dwells the fullness of deity (Colossians 1:19). A perfect representation is a manifestation or incarnation; thus, unlike other humans, Jesus is the incarnation of God, revealing God to humanity.

"Firstborn" comes from the Greek word *prototokos*. Hebrews 1:6 uses the same Greek word there translated "first-begotten," to describe Christ. 'Firstborn' here means two things: priority in time and supremacy in place or position."

As God, Jesus was not born at all; as a man, He was born in Bethlehem after thousands of years of human history. Obviously, then, the primary meaning of "firstborn" here is supremacy over all creation; it does not mean that

Jesus was actually born before all other humans. Both the New King James Version (NKJV) and the New International Version (NIV) render the phrase here as “the firstborn over all creation.”

Many people maintain that “firstborn” refers to an eternal relation between two divine persons; that is, one person called the Son is eternally being begotten by another person called the Father. According to Psalm 2:7, however, the Son was begotten on a specific day, and Hebrews 1:5-6 links this verse with the title of first-begotten, or firstborn. Moreover, we have already seen that the Son was the human person in whom God was incarnate. Thus, the begetting of the Son relates to the Incarnation, not to an undefined, incomprehensible, eternal process.

*Verse 16* begins to explain how and why Jesus is preeminent. First, He is the Creator. The verse twice states that everything was created “by him.” The first occurrence of “by” is a translation of the Greek preposition *en*, which literally means “in.”

The Bible clearly teaches that one solitary Being, God or Jehovah (“the LORD”), created the universe without assistance from anyone else. (See Isaiah 37:16; 44:24; 45:18; Malachi 2:10.) Passages such as John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, and Hebrews 1:10 speak of Jesus as the Creator because He is the one God of the Old Testament—Jehovah—manifested in the flesh (John 8:58; 20:28; Colossians 2:9; I Timothy 3:16).

The antecedent of the pronoun “him” in Colossians 1:16 is “Son” in Colossians 1:13; thus, the Son, Jesus Christ, is the Creator.

He was not yet the Son, however, when He created the world. As we have already seen, the title of Son relates to the Incarnation, to the man in whom God fully dwelt. This verse does not mean that Jesus created the world as the Son, as a human. Rather, it means that the One who later became the Son created the world. For example, when we say, “President Lincoln was born in Kentucky,” we do not mean he was president at the time of his birth. Rather, the one who later became president was born there. The Creator is the eternal Spirit of God who later incarnated Himself in the Son and was manifested to us as Jesus Christ.

All things were created “for him.” The Greek preposition is *eis*, meaning “for, unto.” In other words, Jesus is the goal of creation. Interestingly, Romans 11:36 and I Corinthians 8:6 both use the same Greek preposition to say that all creation is “to” or “in” God, the Father.

*Verse 17* underscores the teaching of verses 15-16 that Christ is the source and sustainer of creation. “He is before all things.” As the one true God, the Spirit of Christ was eternally preexistent. Moreover, the Son—the foreordained Lamb—was first in the mind of God; all creation was predicated upon the Incarnation and the Atonement. Significantly, the verse says “He is” instead of “He was.” Jesus is not merely a human; He is also the eternal, unchanging God (Hebrews 13:8). Yahweh (Jehovah), the unique name used to identify the true God in the Old Testament, comes from the third person singular form of the verb “to be,” meaning “He is.” It is equivalent to the first person singular form that God used for Himself, “I AM” (Exodus 3:14). In the New Testament, Jesus identified Himself as “I am,” the God of Abraham (John 8:58).

*Verse 18.* Jesus is the head of the church, “the inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power, the mainspring of its activity, the center of its unity, and the seat of its life.” 13 The church is Christ’s body (Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:12, 27); He is its head.

Jesus has the preeminence in all things. Literally, He is “holding first place.” As to His deity, Jesus has always been supreme, but by virtue of His human life, death, resurrection, and ascension He conquered sin, death, hell, and the devil and established the New Testament church. (See Acts 2:32-36; Philippians 2:9; Hebrews 2:14; 9:14-16; Revelation 1:18). He thus openly declared His lordship and earned the right to be called Lord as to His glorified humanity. He is not only the King of eternity but also the human Messiah and Savior. His resurrection proclaims His universal preeminence as the perfect man, the incarnate God.

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*Verse 19* can be translated in one of two ways. Either way, the fundamental meaning is the same. 1. The Greek grammar of the verse supplies an explicit impersonal subject: *pan to pleroma*, meaning “all the fullness.” Using this interpretation, the verse reads, “All the fullness willed (or was well pleased) to dwell in him.” Marshall’s *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* identifies the subject here as “all the fullness,” while the Revised Standard Version identifies it as “the fullness.” J. B. Phillips translated, “It was in him that the full nature of God chose to live.” This option seems likely because it means both Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 have the same subject in Greek. 2. Alternatively, since the verb is personal, perhaps there is an implied personal subject. The KJV supplies “the Father,” while the NIV supplies “God.” Kenneth Taylor has rendered it, “For God wanted all of Himself to be in His Son” (Living Bible).

“Fullness,” from the Greek *pleroma*, means that Christ is not merely a representation, summary, or sketch—as the “image” in verse 15 could otherwise be interpreted—but the full revelation of God.

*Verse 20.* The purpose of the Incarnation is the Atonement. God came in flesh to reconcile His fallen creation back to Himself. Knox translates that God came “to win back all things . . . into union with himself.”

## **B. Reconciliation through Jesus (1:21-23)**

*(21) And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled (22) in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: (23) if ye continue in the faith grounded*

*and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.*

These three verses expound upon the message of redemption and reconciliation stated in verses 13-14 and 20.

*Verse 21.* God has reconciled the saints through the blood of Jesus. We needed reconciliation because we were alienated from God by our sins. We were actually His enemies, because we rebelled against His will. (See Romans 5:10.)

*Verse 22.* The redemptive work of Jesus Christ abolished our alienation, and His redemptive work depended upon the death of His physical body. The Gnostics did not believe in the reality of Christ's flesh, but this verse emphasizes the necessity of believing that He truly came in human flesh. (See also I John 4:2-3.) Our salvation depends upon it; otherwise, we have no blood of atonement, no kinsman redeemer, no substitutionary sacrifice. Christ's physical body is the necessary link between the Incarnation and the Atonement.

The One who acts in verses 21-22 is the same One who acts in verse 20: God. The NIV translates, "He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death." Phillips's translation seems to recognize that both the pronouns "he" and "him" refer to God: "You . . . he [God] has now reconciled through the death of his body on the cross." The body of Christ is the very body of God.

The use of "present" here and in verse 28 underscores the reference to sanctification; the word speaks of our presentation to Christ at His coming. Ephesians 5:27 states this point clearly: "That he [Christ] might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."

Verses 19-22 reveal a strong link between the doctrines of Oneness, the Atonement, and holiness. The doctrine of Oneness—the absolute oneness of God and the absolute deity of Jesus Christ—proclaims that God

reconciles us to Himself in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Atonement explains how He does so: through the death of Christ. Finally, God's work of reconciliation calls us to a life of holiness so that we can walk in restored fellowship with the holy God (I Peter 1:15-16).

*Verse 23* reminds us that God will present us holy, blameless and beyond reproach only "if ye continue in the faith." The verb "continue" is present tense, indicating that we must remain in the faith if we expect to enjoy the final benefits. "If" reveals a condition: the means or condition of receiving God's work of salvation is faith, specifically continuing faith.

We must be "grounded," or established firmly; "settled," or steadfast; and "not moved away," or not being shifted. The image is that of a building, and the admonition is to remain firmly on the one foundation.

The foundation is "the hope of the gospel," namely, the gospel message that brings salvation and the hope of eternal life that it generates. Similarly, verses 4-5 state that Christians base their faith and love on their heavenly hope.

Like verse 6, verse 23 says that the gospel has been preached to the Colossians and to everyone. Again, this statement is a figure of speech known as hyperbole, and it stresses the universality of the gospel. The gospel's universal proclamation, availability, and application serve as its credentials. Perhaps there is an implied contrast to the heresy at Corinth, which was apparently associated primarily with a local teacher.

Paul identified himself as a "minister," or servant, of the gospel. The switch to first person singular pronouns begins here. The personal reference forms a bridge to the next portion of letter, which deals with the ministry of Paul.