

COLOSSIANS: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

Part 2: “The Preeminence of Christ”

Colossians 1:1-14

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, April 18, 2021 (Easter Season)

Communication

Good morning, and welcome to Redeemer Christian Church! My name is David, and I am one of the pastors here at Redeemer.

If you are a first-time guest, or if you are fairly new and getting to know us, I wanted to let you know that we are honored that you are here. We’d love to get to know and connect with you, and, for that reason, we would love it you would fill out a Connect Card (which is found on the back of the pew in front of you) and then drop it in one of our Giving Boxes before you leave today. That will give a member of our follow-up team the opportunity to reach out to you let you know ways you can connect here at Redeemer.

If you are interested in knowing a little bit more about Redeemer, at the end of (almost) every month, we hold a Next Steps Class, which is class that introduces people to our mission, our history, and what it means to be a member here at Redeemer. If you are interested in that class, you can sign up online at RedeemerChristianChurch.com or on our “Redeemer Christian Church App,” available on your smartphone app store. The next class is next Sunday, April 25, after the 11:30am service, and we do provide lunch. So, we would greatly appreciate you letting us know that you are coming by signing up!

Another thing we are excited to announce is that on Saturday, May 1, we will be hosting a Parenting Equip. We’ll open up check-in around 8:30am, and things should be wrapped up no later than 3:30pm. We will also be providing lunch. But the big thing about this is that Tanner Hardgrove, who is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, will be leading our sessions. If you know Tanner or if you remember, Tanner from the Marriage Equip we did a few years ago, you will know that this event will be well worth your investment. The cost is only \$10 per person, but we are asking you to make arrangements for your own childcare that day. If you are raising children and you want some strategies and help, you need to do everything you can to make it to this event.

Finally, I do want to acknowledge that today the Acts 29 Family of churches are celebrating “Church Planting Sunday.” Redeemer is a part of the Acts 29, which is a diverse global organization of churches that plant churches. Through Acts 29, we have been able to support churches not just here in West Texas and the United States, but we have helped send and support church planters in the United Kingdom, Kuwait,

Romania, and India. We believe that church-planting is a key strategy for evangelism and advancing the kingdom of God.

That's why we collaborate with Acts 29 financially. That's why our elders have given me permission to spend time training and coaching new pastors and church-planters. That's why we are hosting J.R. Favela as our church-planting resident, as he prepares to plant a church next year in East Amarillo.

Though we often don't get to see it every Sunday, I want you to know that church-planting is a major part of what we do here at Redeemer Christian Church. Here's a short video that gives you a small glimpse into what our investment is doing across the world.

Scripture Reading

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister" (Colossians 1:15–23, ESV).

Introduction

If you read the four gospel accounts from beginning to end, one thing that you will discover is that even Jesus's twelve disciples did not instantly have a perfect understanding of Christ.

True, from the onset, they all recognized that Jesus was an extraordinary man. Almost immediately, they acknowledged that he was a prophet who was able to speak the very words of God and perform mighty miracles. Some even believed early on that Jesus was the Messiah, the long-awaited deliverer and anointed king who God has promised to send to his people.

But as Jesus's disciples began to witness Jesus walk on water and command the winds and raise the dead, they began to have a dawning revelation that Jesus was way more than just a prophet or a human messiah. He was the son of the living God! And after Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, they began to realize that he was God himself in human flesh!

The Apostle Paul had an even more dramatic change in the way he understood Christ. Early in his life, Paul probably thought of Jesus as a rogue rabbi and a heretical teacher. He likely viewed Jesus as the founder of a dangerous religious movement that threatened to compromise the purity and the integrity of the Jewish people.

But then Jesus revealed himself to Paul in a way that was unignorable (cf. Acts 9). And Paul understood that Jesus was not only sent by God – Jesus was God. As a result, Paul, who once only cared about keeping the Jewish people separate from the pagan nations, becomes an apostle to go into the gentile nations. He preaches the gospel, and he plants churches so that Jesus can be known and worshipped.

One of the places Paul planted a church was the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor (or modern-day Turkey). From Ephesus, Paul trains and sends a man named Epaphras to plant a church in the town of Colossae. And it to the church in Colossae that Paul is writing the letter we are studying today.

It seems too that the Colossians have a knowledge of Jesus. They know that Jesus is good and that Jesus is God. But there are other cultural forces around them that are beginning to press in on the Colossian church that would both distort and co-opt their faith in the gospel. It seems that some of the Colossians are functionally believing that Jesus is good, but he is one of many good things. They seem to believe Jesus is God, but maybe he is one of many gods.

And in response to this situation, Paul wants to clearly show that Colossians the overwhelming truth that Jesus is brilliant. Jesus is better. Jesus is first, foremost, and the fullness of God's glory. He wants the Christians of Colossae to know – and he wants us to know – ***“The Preeminence of Christ.”***

The passage we are in today contains some of the most amazing and important declarations about Jesus in the Bible. If you want to know the truth about who Jesus is and what he has done, this is a passage you will want to examine carefully.

Exposition

1. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation

Look again at that very first verse in our reading today: ***“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”*** (Col 1:15).

Already this is packed with a rich theology of Christ. He is the visible image of the invisible God, meaning that when we look to Jesus, we are looking to the very fullness of God! Paul wants us to know that Jesus is God. He is not Junior Varsity God!

He is also the firstborn of all creation. Now, typically we think of the word “firstborn” in terms of birth order. I have three sons, and if I were to refer to my firstborn son, that would be a reference to my oldest son Solomon.

But that is not what the term “firstborn” means in today’s text. Here the term firstborn is a statement regarding Jesus’s foremost place of honor and importance. It’s the same way that we used the term “First Lady of the United States.” The person who holds that title is not the first lady to ever be born in the United States. Rather, it is a title of prominence and honor.

Yes, there was a moment born that Jesus was physically born and took on humanity. But his person existed from eternity past. He has no beginning. He is co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father.

Christ belongs to the category of Creator, not that of creature. That is made all the more evident by the rest of this passage. All created things were made through him and are dependent on him for their existence. As the text says: *“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”* (Col 1:16).

That all things are created “through him” is a reference to the Old Testament account of creation in Genesis 1. Unlike other ancient accounts of creation, the God of the Bible does not simply rearrange matter. He is the author of creation. He makes all things through the word of his power.

Here’s Genesis: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”* (Gen 1:1–3).

Even in these first few verses of the Bible, there is a subtle introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity. God is the author of creation. He speaks and his Word accomplishes creation. His spirit seems to apply the work of creation.

And even among the New Testament authors, there is a deep connection between the creative word of God and Jesus Christ. As John writes in the first words of his gospel, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.... 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.”* (Jn 1:1-3; 14).

The word of God became flesh. God has made himself known and seen. Herein lies the power of God’s word and the extraordinary nature of the incarnation of Christ.

Christ is the embodiment of the great “I Am,” the very God who spoke to Moses and split the Red Sea. He is eternal God present in time. He is the Creator who has joined himself to his creation.

He is not just the Creator, who got it all started and then ignored the world he made. He is the active sustainer of everything: *“And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together”* (Col 1:17).

There are some fascinating ramifications to this doctrine. At the time the book of Colossians is being written, the most powerful person on the planet is Caesar, the ruler of the Roman Empire. But even Caesar’s next breath is dependent on God; his power does not compare to the ultimate sovereignty of Christ. At this time, pagan gods are being worshipped as the forces that uphold different aspects of nature and society. Yet, these are merely demons who shudder before Christ’s infinite glory and might.

And yet, it was this God who came into his own creation to suffer. He willingly endured death on a cross for the sake of his enemies.

In 1961, Yuri Gagarin of the communist Soviet Union became the first person to travel into space. Upon returning, he announced, “I went into the heavens, and I did not see God.” A reporter later asked the great Christian thinker C.S. Lewis what he thought about Gagarin’s remarks. He simply shrugged and said, “That is like Hamlet climbing into his attic to look for Shakespeare.”

God cannot be compared to or constrained by the categories of space and time, which are a part of his creation. As the Creator, he is distinct from his creation in the same way an author is distinct from the novel he or she writes.

If God is that radically other, we could never know him in our own strength. True, we can see hints of his handiwork in creation. We can deduce the truth of his existence through the principles of logic. We cannot truly know him through the scientific method or human reason.

The only way to know such a God is if he makes himself known to us through his revelation and self-disclosure. He must write himself into his own story. And that is exactly what he has done.

First, he revealed himself through the prophets of the Old Testament. Then, this eternal God entered his own creation and revealed himself ultimately through his own son. As the author of Hebrews writes, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 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. 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. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”* (Heb 1:1–3).

Christ is the image of the invisible God. He is the firstborn of all creation.

2. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead

Let's continue in the text: "*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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross*" (Col 1:18–20).

I think Christ's work of redemption can be best understood as a rescue operation. When sin entered the world, God did not abandon his creation to death and decay. Instead, he inaugurated an intricate plan of redemption and restoration.

Out of all the nations of the world who rebelled against him, he called forth and created a people named Israel. He spent centuries revealing himself to this people, interacting with this people, and ultimately promising this people that he would come to them.

Then he came. The fullness of God folded himself into humanity. He lived a perfectly righteous life. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, delivered the oppressed, and raised the dead. Through his miracles and teaching, he showed us a glimpse of a kingdom unstained by the powers of evil.

He suffered for our sin and endured death on a cross. But then, he rose from the dead. That resurrection is a historical reality witnessed to and attested by hundreds of eye-witnesses. In fact, he left a dent so big that it changed the way we measure years.

Yet there is no denying that Christianity is an inherently supernatural faith. It is built on the foundation of the miraculous.

The Christian hope is not in bad people becoming marginally better people – it is dead people becoming living people. We believe that Jesus's resurrection power can breathe new life into broken lives, marriages, families, and communities.

Jesus's resurrection is a first fruits of our ultimate and eternal resurrection. It is the singularity of New Creation. Because of Jesus's resurrection, there is hope of reconciliation; not just for us, but for all of creation. One day the cosmos will be healed and death will die.

We are put at peace with God through the cross. He came to rescue us. And he will redeem all that is broken in our sin-fractured world. This is the source of all hope; and *the expectation of this hope is deep within us.*

I love stories and the power of narrative. I love how stories have a unique power of telling the truth, and I love how our stories can reveal so much about ourselves.

For this reason, in my undergraduate studies, I studied English literature. One of my favorite things to study in literature is the concept of the hero. Every culture of every age

possesses the same story of the hero. Joseph Campbell noticed this phenomenon in his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

The hero is the one who leaves the comfort of home for a journey. He endures the powers of death. He often sacrifices himself. And he often comes home to reign over a people and a land who have been restored by his sacrifice.

From the Epic of Gilgamesh to the Odyssey to the Lord of the Rings, we have told this story thousands of times over and over again to ourselves. Why?

I believe there is a reason we tell and retell this story, no matter the continent we live on or the language we speak or the age of history we live in. Deep in our hearts, we have been longing for this hero.

And Christ is the hero with a thousand faces, the chosen one, the boy who lived, the prince that was promised, and the long-lost king who his destined to return and reclaim his kingdom so that his people might be free of the power of evil.

He is the embodiment of the hope that life can come from death. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the firstborn of the dead.

3. What it means for us

We can know this truth about Christ in our heads. But in our hearts, we can also be captivated by another vision of glory.

Remember those forces we talked about last week; forces that press on the church? Our comfort, our security, our success, our acceptance, material wealth, Political power, a worldly outlook on pleasure and significance will all press in on us to take our eyes off of Jesus.

We have to be reminded that Jesus isn't just one of many gods; Jesus isn't just one of many good things. He must be preeminent. He must be first in our lives, first in our loves, first in our hearts.

We must remember what is ours because of Jesus. We must remember what is true of us because of his goodness, his love, his sacrifice, his infinite power.

Paul reminds the Colossians: *"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him"* (Col 1:21–22).

Once we were alienated, now we are reconciled. Once we were blameworthy, now we are blameless. Once we were under reproach, now we are above reproach. He became what we are so we could become what he is.

We are given what theologians call “imputed righteousness.” That’s a big term that simply means someone else has paid our bill. We have been accepted and approved on the basis of someone else’s credit.

At the cross, Jesus took the penalty of our sin. And when we believe in him, we receive a righteousness we did not earn.

Yet, we do have a responsibility. We must continue in this faith. As Paul says, “...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Col 1:23).

Paul is saying, “Remain in this gospel. Continue in it. Don’t shift from it! Be stable. Be steadfast.” This is a profoundly important exhortation in our culture that has been preconditioned to chase the new.

There is a place for appreciating novelty. But we equate following Jesus with spiritual novelty, we will be doomed to vicious ups and downs. We will be doomed to an unsustainable spirituality of hype and searching for the rainbow’s end of new experiences.

For most Christians, the key to growth and maturity as disciples of Jesus is not to be introduced to something new; it is to be reminded of that which is true. And nothing is truer, nothing is surer than the reality of Jesus Christ.

It’s so easy to shift our focus on something that is not Jesus. But, as Pastor Timothy Keller has said, “The gospel is not the ABCs; it is the A through Z of the Christian life.”

The gospel is just not the introduction to the Christian life – he is all of the Christian life! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the same message that saves sinners and sanctifies saints. And that is what I love about the gospel. His truth is so simple that a five-year-old can understand it. Yet, it is so unfathomable that it can still mystify and mesmerize the greatest of theologians.

I pray that we will be a church that will continue in the gospel, stable and steadfast. And that will come with an opportunity cost.

That means we will not be a church that everyone is drawn toward, and I know that. We will not be a church built on or known for impressive production value, clever marketing, and endless activities and events created for the entertainment of Christians.

But I pray we can be known as a church that sincere, humble, and simply devoted to being all about Jesus.

We will teach you the word of God. We will seek to connect you in community. We will seek to disciple and train you to see the glory of Jesus and how that glory can shine in and through every aspect of your life.

If what Colossians is saying here about Jesus is true, we cannot respond with indifference. Once Paul understood the truth about Jesus, he devoted his life to share this message. So should we. We won't all play the same role, but we have a role to play in this story. We have been invited and commissioned by the Lord of glory himself.

Paul has reminded us who Christ is, what Christ has accomplished, and what it means for us – this the gospel. This is the gospel that changed history. This is the gospel that continues to change lives today. This is the gospel that testifies to a day when God will make all things new.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we set our eyes toward beholding the glory of Jesus. May we hold him as preeminent in all things. And may we remain stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of this gospel.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Colossians 1:15-23. Summarize this passage in your own words. Make a list of things that are true about Jesus from this passage.
2. The word “firstborn” is used twice in this passage (Col 1:15,18). What are the two ways that Paul uses this word?
3. Look up the word “preeminent” in a dictionary. What does it mean for us to view Christ as preeminent? How would (or should) our lives look if we truly believe in the preeminence of Christ? How would our lives look if we do not truly believe in the preeminence of Christ?
4. In Col 1:15-20, Paul is teaching the Colossian Christians truths about Jesus. In Col 1:21-23, Paul is teaching the Colossian Christians what is true about them in Christ. How does Col 1:21-23 apply to us? What does this paragraph teach us about ourselves? How should this paragraph challenge us?