

Colossians: Alive in Christ | Colossians 1:15-20

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[0 : 00] This is our third week in the book of Colossians. You heard Diana read from chapter 1, verses 15 to 20. Now, if you wanted to assemble the three or four passages that best described Jesus, that most succinctly and fully defined the doctrine of Christology, the study of Jesus, like the description of who Jesus is, then easily you would choose this passage as one of them.

Phrase after phrase, clause after clause, a beautiful recitation of who Jesus is. And it reminds me of the royal titles of the Austrian emperors.

Our family lived in Austria for three years, and we learned there that when you earn a title, like doctor or professor, it becomes your name.

So your name is now Herr, Doctor, Professor, Thomas Hinson III, right? It's all one name. That's to distinguish you from other people and to define who you are.

It's your identity. And the emperor had the most elaborate name in the empire. So, for instance, Austria's second-to-last emperor's title was His Majesty, Franz Josef I, by the grace of God, Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, etc., etc.

[1 : 33] And there were, in total, 24 additional titles in addition to His name. It was meant for shock and awe, right?

When you heard His name, you looked in every direction, and for hundreds of miles, you know, this person was the owner and ruler of all those lands. Franz Josef was sovereign.

He owned it all. He ruled it all. And I think Paul is doing something similar here in this letter, too, with something like titles. But this is actually more of a song, a hymn, a poem.

You might remember from our previous two weeks together that various teachers infiltrated this young, vibrant church in Colossa.

And they were teaching the Colossians that if you want to go deeper, if you want more fullness, if you want more security, then take Jesus, yes, and add to it this thing or that thing from a Greek mystery, religion, or from Judaism, or what have you.

[2 : 46] And Paul, in this letter, doesn't waste any time. He drops the mother of all poems here right at the beginning of this letter, saying you can't add anything.

Jesus is everything. Period. Period. It's a dense passage. We could spend several months on it. You could teach a whole seminary course on this passage.

But then it would lose the effect, perhaps, that Paul is aiming for. So we're going to just spend a little bit of time on each successive clause.

And then after that, I'll suggest what may be three appropriate responses that Paul is looking for. Now, first, let's pray. Father, we're here because we love you.

Father, we want to know you better. So would you help us to see your son more clearly?

[3 : 59] Would you help us to understand him better? Would you help us to know him better? That we might know you better? And have our lives pour forth praise and worship and adoration to you and for you.

For you are and all you have done. From eternity past to eternity future. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's start at the beginning.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The Apostle Paul here sounds like the Apostle John does in the beginning of his gospel. John 1, 18 says, No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father's side.

He has made him known. No one has ever seen God, the invisible God. But Jesus, at the Father's side, has made him known. Now, imagine a letter written by a Greek in Paul's day.

At the end of the letter, the letter might say, I've enclosed an image of myself. And then there's a stamp. Now, the wax in this letter is like to the stamp, as Jesus is to the Father.

[5 : 15] Image, icon of the Father. Exact representation of his being, as we read in Hebrews chapter 1. So if you want to know what God is like, then you look to Jesus.

And it can be a helpful corrective to ways we misunderstand who God is. Do we tend to think of God as this set of theories or propositions?

Well, then look to Jesus. You'll see that God is a person. Do we tend to think of God purely in terms of love and never in terms of holiness, so that in our minds, God ends up being just a giant cosmic softy?

Then we look to Jesus, who's flipping tables in the temple, who has words of sharp rebuke. Woe to you, Chorazin. Woe to you, Bethsaida.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. Do we tend to think of God as a harsh taskmaster, full of wrath and disapproval?

[6 : 24] Well, then we look to Jesus, and we see that God is gentle, tender, full of patience and compassion, full of love for the outcast, for the poor, for the lonely, for the sick.

Jesus shows us not only who God is, but who humanity was meant to be. When God created the world, the climax of that creation was humanity, who he made in his own image, according to Genesis 1.

Humanity was designed to be the perfect vehicle for God's self-expression in this creation. And here we find Jesus fulfilling that purpose. This clause tells us that it is only in Jesus that we understand what divinity and humanity really mean.

Okay, moving along. He's the firstborn of all creation. It might be tempting to read this and think that Jesus was a part of creation. And some have read that into this. There's a heresy in the 4th century called Arianism, named after its chief proponent, Arius.

Who taught that there was a time when Christ was not. That Christ had a distinct beginning. That he was the first of everything that God created.

[7 : 52] That Harsley lives on today. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe and teach the same thing. But that is misreading this verse. Firstborn doesn't refer to origins.

It refers to rank. It's a title. Referring to rank and dignity. A king is firstborn. Right? But it's a title. Firstborn. It's a title that can be bestowed. We read in Psalm 89. That God says of David that, I will appoint him to be my firstborn.

I will appoint him to be my firstborn. The most exalted of the kings of the earth. So this teaches us that Christ is supreme. First in rank and dignity above all of this creation.

And not only is he above all things, but all things were created by him and they find their origin in him. For by all things, 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.

[9 : 07] Wherever you look, or whatever realities you can think of, you discover entities which, even if they do not acknowledge the fact, owe their very existence to Christ.

He rules everything and everyone because he created everything. Therefore, for those who have been redeemed by Christ, the universe no longer holds any terrors.

They know that their redeemer is also the creator and the ruler and the goal of all. The universe has no terrors because Jesus created it all.

He rules it all. And we read in the next clause that he is before all things and in him all things hold together. Before all things is another phrase that refers to primacy in rank and dignity.

But he holds all things together. He prevents the world from falling to utter chaos. The universe owes its continued cohesion and coherence not to an idea or to a virtue or to a movement or to some abstract unseen force but to a person, the risen Christ.

[10 : 22] He's the reason an electron remains encircled around a nucleus. He explains the music of the spheres, the fine-tuned dance of planets and moons and their synchronized orbits around the sun.

And it explains the possibility of love. He holds the universe together. He can hold your family together. He can hold your relationships together.

He can hold your friendships together. He can hold your marriage together. things only make sense when Christ is kept at the center, including the church.

He's the head of the body, the church. He's Lord of his people. He's the locus of our unity and coherence. He's the source of our sustenance and direction.

And he's the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. Many Jews in Paul's day believed that the resurrection of the dead would be a large-scale, singular event that lay sometime in the future.

[11 : 30] The resurrection of the dead was an event that would begin the age to come. Paul is saying that that event has already been inaugurated.

Elsewhere, Paul writes that Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. The firstfruits and the harvest are all one harvest.

It's all one event. So do you want to know what your future holds? Well, look to the resurrection. His resurrection, His resurrection guarantees the resurrection of all those who follow Him.

Not only that, Paul is saying that God brought forward into the present that age to come in the midst of this present age in order that the power of the new age might be unleashed upon our world.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, He is making all things new. that in everything He might be preeminent. Jesus has always been Lord in right.

[12 : 39] With His resurrection, He becomes Lord in fact. His defeat of sin and death makes Him Lord in fact.

Do you doubt that Jesus is indeed Lord? Then look to the resurrection. The Hebrew says that it doesn't appear, it doesn't look, in the present, that all things are placed under His feet.

This phrase shows us God's purpose. That ultimately He will bring all things under His rule in Christ. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

In Christ is found the fullness of God. The Colossians were not to seek bits of the divine and various other gods or spiritual beings. all of the divine is found in the risen Christ.

He is the only means to access it. Jesus is the only way to God. It was true for the Colossians and it is true for us.

[13 : 43] Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. And no one comes to the Father but through me. and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

Sin stood as a barrier between God and His human creatures. Sin results in death. But when Jesus died, sin's power was exhausted.

It's the fulfillment of Isaiah 53 which says, He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His wounds we are healed.

Does this mean that every single human gets reconciled to God? It doesn't. Reconciliation requires something of us. We'll get to that in a minute.

But what it does mean is that God's purposes in reconciliation include the whole world. In the creation, it was man that was supposed to bring God's order upon the earth.

[15 : 02] Human sin led to the creation's fall and now man's reconciliation can lead to the restoration of all of creation. Paul writes in the book of Romans, for we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly as we eagerly wait the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

redemption is not to be thought of dualistically, right? That the created world is bad stuff and redemption means getting rescued from it.

Christ still loves what he has made and still belongs to him. Redemption is not an invasion from an outside hostile realm, but the Lord of this world comes to claim his rightful possession.

All right. We did it. We zoomed through it really quick. That was a lot. And it's really thick and dense. But as we said, Paul is trying to elicit a response.

[16 : 09] So now it's time to ask the question, so what? Before we do, I'd like just to make one general observation about this passage, top to bottom.

Like, what can you say about it? I think you can summarize it this way. That Paul is saying Jesus is God. Jesus is God. Where do we see that most clearly?

Well, it says he's the image of the invisible God. It says that in Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. But I think the other things that he says makes it even more clear.

Let's talk about how the Jews conceived of the uniqueness of God. As you know, the Jews were strictly monotheistic. Very self-consciously monotheistic.

Twice a day, they would recite this verse from Deuteronomy, chapter 6. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. He's one.

[17 : 10] Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Now, in their minds, how was the one God unique?

Like, what distinguished him from everything else that claimed deity or divinity? I mean, as a whole, they didn't use categories like from Greek metaphysics to describe God's uniqueness.

Like we would. Like we would say, God is omniscient, he's omnipotent, he's omnipresent, therefore, he's God. No, that's not how they went about it. Over and over, we find in literature from this period, we find that God's uniqueness from all other reality, from all other pagan gods, lies in his unique identity.

It's an identity. Namely this, that God, the only true God, the God of Israel, is the sole creator of all things and the sole ruler of all things.

He's the sole creator of all things and the sole ruler of all things. First, in creation, God acted alone. Isaiah 44, 24, says this, Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb, I am the Lord who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.

[18 : 41] I spread out the earth by myself. God had no helper. No one else had any part. So that's creation. Now, in his sovereignty, he employs servants like a royal court, but they are merely servants.

There are no co-rulers. And so we read, when we read in this passage that by him and in him all things are made, it's not that Jesus was a helper. Jesus is being identified directly with the God of Israel.

And when we read that Jesus is the firstborn, first in rank, that he's preeminent, Paul isn't saying that God is sharing his rule with Jesus, Paul is again directly identifying Jesus with the God of Israel, the one God.

Now, some people look at the Bible, scholars will look at the Bible and say, now Jesus said a lot of great things. And then later, the church came along like Paul and said that he's God, but that's not really who Jesus claimed to be.

Well, actually, he did. He did claim divinity. In relationship to Israel itself, God's uniqueness actually lay in his name.

[19 : 50] His uniqueness lay in his name. Yahweh, which sounds like I am, right? So in John 8, when Jesus says to those who are trying to kill him, before Abraham was, I am, I am is God's name, Jesus is identifying himself with the God of Israel.

And that's why those who are trying to kill him in that moment picked up stones and tried to stone him. They knew exactly what he was doing. Okay. Now, what does this mean for all of us?

I would suggest that there are three, or I mean, at least three, responses that are required based on what we've heard today. Now, the first is to decide.

Decide if you believe the claims that Paul is made about Christ. Decide if you believe the claims that Jesus made about himself. That Jesus was creator of all.

That he's ruler of all. That Jesus is God. C.S. Lewis famously made the argument that one cannot dismiss Jesus as just a teacher or a good person or even a prophet because he didn't claim those things.

[21 : 06] His claim was much more extreme. He had, like we just heard, he claimed to be God.

And if it wasn't, if Jesus wasn't God, if he wasn't what he claimed to be, then Lewis wrote, he would either be a lunatic on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg or else he would be the devil of hell.

You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.

But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

So that's the first response to this passage. Decide and believe or not believe. But we're faced with a decision.

And if you believe the claims that Jesus made about himself, if you believe what Paul teaches here in Colossians, then the next response is as C.S. Lewis suggests, to fall at his feet and call him Lord

and God.

[22 : 27] This is for all of us. Falling at his feet, calling him Lord, means we repent of our claims to lordship. We are like, we're like Franciscus titles.

We are wanting to lay claims to everything that our eye beholds. We want to grasp at everything around us and say, it's ours. I am the Lord over my finances.

I'm the Lord over my time. I'm the Lord over my body and I can do what I want with it. I'm the Lord of my abilities. I'm the Lord of my resources. I can do what I want with them.

And so we set up ourselves as rival lords to the one who has created and really owns everything. And that's not just being bad.

that's cosmic rebellion. And this is why we need reconciliation. And only God can accomplish that.

[23 : 30] Jesus took that rebellion, that cosmic rebellion and all of its consequences on himself when he died on the cross and there he dealt with it. The only thing we can bring to this reconciliation process is our confession, our emptiness, our brokenness, our need.

Interestingly, we find this very same thing in the Austrian royal funeral rite. When Franz Josef died in the year 1916, his body was led from St. Stephen's Cathedral through the streets of Vienna in the most elaborate and ornate funeral procession you've ever seen.

No one does death quite like Vienna, I learned. And like his predecessors, Franz Josef's casket would have been brought to the Capuchin church under which lies the crypt where many of Austria's emperors and empresses lay interred.

And on behalf of the deceased emperor, the high chamberlain knocks three times on the door of the church with the royal mace and the prior of the Capuchins calls out, who seeks entry?

And the chamberlain, on behalf of the deceased emperor, replies, his majesty, Franz Josef the first, by the grace of God, emperor of Austria, apostolic king of Hungary, king of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slovenia, Galicia, Lodomeria, and Illyria, king of Jerusalem, archduke of Austria, grand duke of Tuscany and Krakow, duke of Lorraine, Salzburg, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola, and the Book of Vena, grand prince of Transylvania, Margrave of Moravia, count of Habsburg, and the Tyrol, and the prior calls out, we do not know him.

[25 : 46] Again, three knocks. Who seeks entry? And the high chamberlain calls out, emperor Franz Josef, apostolic king of Hungary, king of Bohemia, and the prior again says, we do not know him.

Who seeks entry? And the chamberlain then kneels down and humbly says, a poor sinner, Franz Josef, who begs God's mercy.

mercy. And the prior then opens the door to the church and its crypt and commands, enter.

What are you claiming lordship over? What areas of your life are you trying to keep from Jesus' reign? God's sin? How have you set yourself up to as a rival lord, to the creator and ruler of all things?

Living in reconciliation with God means renouncing our claims on anything, falling on our knees before him, and pleading for his mercy. I'm suggesting three responses to this passage.

[27 : 22] The first was to decide and to believe. The second is to repent. The third is to worship. Worship.

Paul used a poem to say these things because he was going for maximum impact, for shock, for awe, but not just to our minds.

He means to engage our whole selves, our minds, our bodies, our souls. So let's get to that right now. Ordinarily, we end our sermons with a prayer.

And we'll do that same thing together tonight. We're going to do it together. So would you please stand? We're going to pray together the hymn found in Colossians 1.

So if we can go back to it. And when you see he is the image, say you are the image. And you see by him, say by you all things were created.

[28 : 25] Okay? Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you are the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by you all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, rulers or authorities, all things were created through you and for you.

And you are before all things. And in you all things hold together. And you are the head of the body, the church. You are the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything you might be preeminent.

for in you all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through you to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of your cross.