

AM Colossians 1:15-20 & Hebrews 1:1-6 The Glory of Christ

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Date: 14 April 2024

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[0 : 00] 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 in earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Now we turn for our second reading to Hebrews chapter 1, which you'll notice is very similar to Colossians 1.

We'll read verses 1 to 6. Hebrews 1, 1 to 6, page 1203. Long ago, at many times, and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

[1 : 49] 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, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited, is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son, today I have begotten you. Or again I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, Let all God's angels worship him.

[3 : 09] Let's bow together now in prayer. When he was converted, Paul hated Christ, and he persecuted his followers.

But then on the road to Damascus, it all changed. Paul fell to the ground, calling Jesus Lord. And from that time onwards, Christ was everything to him.

He speaks of him always with love and adoration. Philippians 1.21, for example, For me to live is Christ.

Philippians 3.8, I count everything lost for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. And this passage breathes that same spirit of worship.

This is now our third study in Colossians. We've looked at the greetings in verses 1 and 2, where Paul calls them saints and faithful brothers in Christ.

[4 : 26] We've looked at his prayer in verses 3 to 14, where he gives thanks for their faith in Christ, prays that they may walk worthy of Christ.

These verses now grow out of that prayer and speak of the glory of Christ, ruling the world and redeeming his people.

Some have speculated that it may have been a fragment from an early hymn.

Well, maybe I'm not going to get into that particular debate this morning. But it certainly has a poetic quality. The focus is entirely upon Christ.

See how often the pronouns he and him occur here. He is the image of the invisible God. By him, all things were created.

[5 : 34] All things were created through him. And for him, he is before all things. In him, all things hold together.

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. In him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And through him, God reconciles to himself all things, making peace by the blood of his cross. I make that 12 times in six verses.

It is all about him. One of the children asked me, after the first of these sermons on Colossians, is the whole letter about Paul?

No, it's not. The whole letter is about Christ. It's about Paul's Lord. Yes, we learn a lot about Paul in this letter.

[6 : 44] But Paul is pointing us upward. To his saviour. You see, we live in a self-centred world.

Where for many, it's all about me. Even in religion, we can be very self-centred, can't we? What's in it for me? Even at our most spiritual, our highest concern is, can my sins be forgiven?

How can I walk with Christ? Excellent concerns. Biblical concerns. But if that's as high as you go, then you're still self-centred.

Paul is completely Christ-centred. All of these other concerns, the forgiveness of sins, our godly walk with Christ, are all for his glory.

Christ, we might say, is Paul's hero. Some people have heroes in this world, don't they? It might be their father, or an older brother, or it might be a film star, or a pop star, or a sports star.

[8 : 03] Might be a historical figure, might even be Paul himself. But for Paul, there is one superhero, and that is Christ.

And in this respect, he has one foot in heaven. Because in heaven, everyone worships the Lamb. Paul has started already.

And so should we. I'm going to divide this passage into two parts. Christ, the head of creation, in verses 15 to 17.

And Christ, the head of the church, in verses 18 to 20. And in each case, I want to bring up four thoughts. But all of them concern the glory of Christ.

Remember throughout, it is all about Christ. So first, Christ, the head of creation, verses 15 to 17.

[9 : 09] And the four thoughts here are Christ, the image of God, Christ, the firstborn, Christ, the creator, and Christ, the upholder of all things.

First, Christ, the image of God. Verse 15, he is the image of the invisible God. Now, Paul would have been aware of the paradox here.

How can the invisible God have an image at all? But what he is saying is that Christ makes God visible.

It's a similar idea to John's idea of Christ as the word made flesh. And it's similar too to Hebrews 1 which we read.

Where Christ is the radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature. We will notice today quite a few similarities with John and with Hebrews.

[10 : 23] Paul would have been aware also of the second commandment. That in one sense he is saying something quite shocking here. Speaking of Christ as the image of God.

Because the second commandment, Exodus 20, verse 4 had said, you shall not make for yourself a carved image. But this was no carved image made by man.

This was the true image of God. The only image that we can worship because he is God. The word in Greek translated here as image is icon.

And it's the same word that is used in Matthew 22 when Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar. I think we had a sermon about that not so very long ago from a visiting preacher.

Jesus calls for a coin and he asks, whose image is this? The Greek word he uses is icon. Whose icon is this?

[11 : 40] And they tell him Caesar's. And he famously replies, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. The average Roman citizen never saw Caesar except perhaps at a distance in the Colosseum maybe or in a military parade.

But there on that little coin was his image so that he knew what Caesar looked like. Well likewise, although God is invisible, Christ shows us what he's like.

And unlike the rather crude image on a coin, it is a perfect likeness. Not a physical likeness, obviously, because God is spirit. but in a spiritual sense, showing us God's character and glory.

Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians 4 where he speaks of the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. The word icon is still used today, of course.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, they use icons in worship painted pictures of Christ and the saints. That really is a breach of the second commandment.

[13:06] There was an iconoclast controversy in the 8th century when some people saw that and tried to destroy them, but the church sadly kept the icons. We speak of iconic places like the Eiffel Tower.

You see a picture of the Eiffel Tower and straight away you think Paris. We have icons on our phones, little pictures that represent different apps.

Well, Christ is the true icon of God. See Christ and you see God. He himself claimed that, John 14, 9, whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

Perhaps there's also another idea here going back to the creation. In Genesis 1, 26, God said, let us make man in our image.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was widely used in those days, the word is, you've guessed it, icon. The image of God in man has, of course, been defaced by the fall, though not entirely destroyed.

[14:28] But Christ as the perfect man is also the perfect image of God. So you have here both the divinity and the humanity of Christ as the image of the invisible God.

God. I must hasten on. We're only one eighth of the way through these points, and it's quarter to twelve already.

So let me hasten on to the second thought here, Christ, the firstborn. Verse 15 again, he is the firstborn of all creation. That again is found in Hebrews 1.

When he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, let God's angels worship him. You may know that the Jehovah's witnesses have tried to use this text to argue that Christ is himself a created being.

But that is clearly not what Paul is saying. Quite the contrary. He goes on to speak of Christ as the creator. Now in Jewish thought, the firstborn was the position of honor.

[15:44] It was the position of preeminence. The firstborn was the heir who would inherit the family land. And this also you find in Hebrews 1.

God has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things. It's the rights of the firstborn that Paul has in mind here.

Christ is supreme over all creation. Hastening on, thirdly, verse 16, Christ himself is the creator.

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.

Now this is an aspect of Christ that is sometimes overlooked. We think of God the Father as our creator and God the Son as our redeemer.

[16:50] And so they are. But the whole Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit always work together. And the Bible does sometimes speak of the Father as our redeemer and the Son as our creator.

God spoke and the world was made. How did he speak? Through the word, through Christ.

And later he says in the plural, let us make man in our image, the Trinity of the man. Find it also in John 1, all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.

And again in Hebrews, through whom he created the world. Paul emphasizes all things, visible and invisible, because the Colossians apparently were inclined to worship angels.

Don't worship angels, he's saying. Worship the one who made the angels. angels. As it says in Hebrews, let all the angels worship him.

[18:12] Some think that the principalities and powers and so on are different kinds of angels. But whether they're angels or whether they're earthly rulers, the point is the same.

Christ made them all and Christ rules over them all. furthermore, Paul says not only did he make all things through Christ, but also for Christ.

That's very humbling, isn't it? The universe exists for his sake. We exist for his sake. Christ doesn't exist for our sake.

yes, he does amazing things for us. That's wonderful. But at the end of the day, we exist for him, not the other way around.

We exist to bring glory to Christ. One final thought under this first heading, Christ the upholder of all things.

[19:20] Verse 17, he is before all things and in him all things hold together. Christ was before all things in time because he always existed.

He is before all things in honor because he is Lord. But also in him all things hold together. Yet again we have the same thought in Hebrews, he upholds the universe by the word of his power. There is a famous poem by W.B. Yeats, things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Which expresses very well the sense of instability and impending disaster that we feel here in this world. But ultimately the center of all things is Christ. And he can and he will hold. Whatever disasters may come upon this world.

Christ knows about them. He has allowed them. He has even commanded them for his own wise purposes. He is Lord of all and his kingdom cannot be shaken.

[20 : 42] But now let's come to our second heading, Christ the head of the church in verses 18 to 20. Christ the head of the body, Christ the firstborn from the dead, Christ the fullness of God, and Christ reconciling all things to God.

And maybe you'll notice there the poetic parallels between the first four thoughts and these four. First, Christ the head of the body, verse 18, he is the head of the body, the church.

Picture of the church as the body of Christ is a favourite of Paul's. You have it in Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. I spoke recently on a Wednesday night about 1 Corinthians 12 where he speaks of the relationship between us as members of the body.

But here the focus is upon Christ. the head of the body. The head rules the body.

Think about the human brain. It's enormously complex. I'm not an expert on these things, but from what I've read, there's the cerebrum controlling thoughts and reasoning.

[22 : 17] the cerebellum controlling movement and coordination. The brain stem controlling breathing digestion and blood circulation. And so on.

Everything is controlled from the brain. There are apparently approximately 100 billion neurons in the brain, sending signals to every part of the body.

Well, Christ is the brain of the church, sending out signals through his spirit, controlling everything that happens in his church throughout the whole world.

Without the head, the body is lifeless. decapitation puts an end to life. Tradition has it that Paul was decapitated, his head was cut off.

That was the end of Paul in this world. If the church were to be separated from Christ, its head, that would be the end for the church.

[23 : 32] Churches that fail to honour and obey Christ, will quickly die. And I rather fear that there are a lot of dead, decapitated churches in our land.

And just as the body has only one head, so the church has only one ruler. The pope cannot be head of the church. The king cannot be head of the church.

the church needs and has only one head, Christ. Second thought under this second heading, Christ the firstborn of the dead.

Verse 18, he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. We've already had Christ the firstborn of creation, now we have Christ the firstborn from the dead.

When Christ rose from the dead, he did so as the first of many who will rise again at the last day. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians, each in his own order, Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming, those who belong to Christ.

[24 : 54] He is the beginning of a new creation, he is the beginning of a new human race. first in time, first in glory. And he has the preeminence on earth and in heaven.

In 3 John we read of a man called Diotrephes who loved to have the preeminence. How many people we know like that in the churches who love to be in control.

What was so shocking about Diotrephes was that he was usurping the position of Christ. Christ must have the preeminence.

He must come first in the church, in the world, in our lives. Third, Christ the fullness of God, verse 19, for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

here is as rich a statement as you will find anywhere of the divinity of Christ. Paul underlines it in chapter 2 and verse 9, for in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily.

[26 : 13] Jesus himself said in John 14, believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me. now if the fullness of God dwells in Christ, then having Christ you have everything.

As Paul says later in chapter 2, you have been filled in him. John says, of his fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.

And Paul prays in Ephesians 3, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. What an amazing thought. You see, Christ is so much more than just a great man, as so many people suppose. He is God. And there are riches in him beyond our imagining. Finally, Christ reconciling all things to God.

Verse 20, God was pleased through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. Reconciliation lies at the heart of the gospel.

[27 : 30] Paul describes his ministry as the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. We live in a broken world.

Sin has caused a catastrophic breakdown in the relationship between man and God and a breakdown in relationships between people.

And the whole of creation has been affected by that. You see it all in Genesis. In the beginning, there was fellowship between God and man.

There was love between Adam and Eve. And there was harmony in the world. After the fall, Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden. Cain kills Abel, and the ground brings forth thorns and thistles.

Not everything is completely ruined. The world is still a beautiful place. Happy relationships still exist. But it's not what it was, and not what it should be.

[28 : 38] The great mission of Christ was to put that right. He did so, Paul says, by the blood of his cross. Christ died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin.

Hebrews says, he made purification for sins so that we could be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God.

And everything else follows. Not only are we reconciled to God, but to one another. We're brought together in the church. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, old and young, Iranians and Scottish and English, brought together through the reconciliation of Christ.

And that will have cosmic results. Paul speaks in Romans 8 of the whole creation waiting for deliverance. And the Bible comes to its climax with a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and in which multitudes from all nations will worship Christ.

And all because of the cross, Christ having made peace, shalom, between heaven and earth. What shall we say to these things?

[30 : 02] Well, first, are you part of this cosmic reconciliation? Paul continues in verse 21, and you, he has now reconciled.

Could he say that to you? Or would he have to urge you to be reconciled to God? The invitation is there not just to be saved, but to be part of something vast, part of a reconciled universe.

Don't turn that invitation aside. If Christ is as great as Paul says he is, then he is the perfect saviour. He is the captain of our salvation, as I said to the children.

He is the superhero who can never fail. You can trust in him. But if you are a Christian, this passage speaks to you of the majesty of your Lord.

Majesty greater than anyone can imagine. We who are Christians, we know Christ, and maybe you feel you know him very well.

[31 : 24] But there's always more to know. We can always get to know him better. Imagine meeting someone and becoming friends with them and then discovering that there's a little more to them than you thought.

Turns out that they're rich, immensely rich. Turns out that they have royal connections. Turns out that they have multiple degrees from Oxford and Cambridge.

Turns out that they've won the Nobel Peace Prize. How much more is there to learn about this person? It's a little like that with Christ, isn't it?

We've only touched the surface this morning. There is so much more to discover. May the Lord help us to know Christ and to love Christ and to adore Christ forever.

Amen. Amen.