

# Christ Supreme

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thanks be to God indeed. This is a terrific passage. You'll need to have a Bible before you open at Colossians 1, 15 to 23. And as you reach for that, let me just pray.

Enlarge our hearts, we pray, Lord Jesus Christ, that we might gain a picture of you that drives us not just to our knees, but up in hope and out in love to others.

And we thank you for the words that are written here and by your spirit enable us to see you and to love you and to know you, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, it's a very obvious thing to say, but things seem pretty well out of control today. I'm not just talking about COVID numbers or the fatigue with all the extra work with the protocols.

Governments are struggling to respond and to spend. The future looks very uncertain. There are new cold wars between superpower nations, which are deeply troubling, to say nothing of the increased climate change and a slew of natural disasters, even in the last six months.

[ 1 : 2 5 ] It's never been easier to be anxious, I think, and it does feel as though things are out of control. And it was worse for the Christians in Colossae, who were the first receivers of this letter.

They were entirely at the mercy of the Roman Empire and at the whims of the local Roman officials. And as new Christians, they were viewed with suspicion and outright hostility, which was soon to grow into persecution.

A few decades after this letter was received in Colossae, written by Paul in a prison in Rome, the Roman governor of the next door province wrote to the emperor as trying to figure out what to do with these Christians.

And he writes in a letter, and we still have it today, with disgust, that when they meet together, they sing songs to Christ as a God. A Jew who was crucified, an unknown Jew who was crucified out in the boonies.

And what makes it worse for these new Christians at Colossae is not so much the suspicion and hostility outside the church, but new teachers who had risen up inside the church, offering them a new way of growth, which sounded so plausible and possible.

[ 2 : 4 3 ] And it was a new way of growth that would give them a sense of control over their spiritual lives. They said, you need more than Jesus. You need our spiritual exercises and our spiritual experiences.

And so we come to this passage, chapter 1, verses 15 to 23. And it's absolutely central to the whole book. Everything else comes out of this, and it has a very practical purpose.

And that is, if you leave Jesus behind and try to move beyond Jesus, it's spiritual suicide because of who Jesus is and what he's done. But as Grace read it, I don't know about you, but it's so absolute and intense and vast.

It can be quite disorienting. It's like trying to jump on a roller coaster that's flashing by. And I think the key for us in coming into it is to know that it's a love poem.

In verse 13, the apostle mentioned that God's transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, part of our memory verse. And as soon as he says that he can't help himself from breaking into rhapsody and poetry, because that's really the only real way to express who Christ is and what he's done.

[ 4 : 07 ] There's nothing cold or analytical about it. Verse 15 doesn't start, he is, but starts, who is the image of the invisible of God?

And the second line in verse 18, not he is the beginning, the firstborn, but who is, this Christ who is, who fills my heart and fills my mouth. And it's the language of adoration and the language of eternity, a shining poetic exaltation of Jesus Christ with a very practical purpose of deepening and establishing the joy of the Christians in Colossae in Jesus Christ.

And it can do the same for us today. So there are three sections in our little reading. The first two are the poem of praise to Christ. Praise to Christ as ruler of all things.

Then praise to Christ as reconciler of all things. And then thirdly, from verses 21 to 23, he applies this to the life of the Colossians and to us. So let's just look at those three things together.

First, verses 15 to the beginning of 18, Christ rules creation and the church. This little section has it all.

[ 5 : 22 ] Why the world exists, how the world exists, the fact that Christ lives before creation. It has creation, revelation, incarnation, cosmic power, and the place of the church and the world, all in three little tiny verses.

And it begins with the Jesus relation to the Father. Verse 15, the Father's beloved Son, who is the image of the invisible God.

Just think about it for a moment. God is invisible, but in Jesus he became visible. So that Jesus said, if you have seen me, you've seen the Father. Jesus is the perfect essence of God in the flesh.

He is the flawless revelation and reflection of God. And that means you cannot see God and you cannot know God apart from knowing Jesus Christ.

You cannot grow spiritually apart from growing deeper in Jesus Christ. You cannot say you love God unless Jesus Christ is at the centre of your affections and worship.

[ 6 : 29 ] Then he turns to Jesus' relation to creation. He is the firstborn over all creation. He's not part of creation.

He is the Lord and heir. And the reason is because all things were created in him, through him, and for him.

That means that Jesus is the source of all created things. And it means that he is the goal and reason for this world and for each of us.

And that means creation is not a meaningless accident with no purpose. And it also means that apart from Christ, the world has no meaning in itself.

And my brother-in-law in Australia recently took a weekend off and drove six hours out to the Western Plains Zoo in New South Wales. In the zoo, there are all sorts of animals, vast zoo, and at night he was able to attach his camera to a telescope observatory.

[ 7 : 39 ] And I've seen some of his pictures of this beautiful galaxy that's over 11 million light years away, give or take 700,000 light years.

As well as these fantastic photos of hippos and kingfishers and antelope. Here's the thing Colossians is saying. They all exist for Christ.

The meaning of the stars and the galaxies is Jesus Christ. He is the meaning of animal life and plant life. He's the meaning of you and me and the whole cosmos.

You can't understand creation apart from him. And more than that, verse 17, he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Christ existed before creation with God for eternity, and he is the one who holds the world in existence. This world is not self-sufficient.

[ 8 : 41 ] It doesn't just roll on day after day. It depends on God. It depends on Jesus Christ for life every second of every day.

In fact, if Jesus did not continue to hold you and me in existence, everything would cease to exist. What holds us together are not laws of nature, but the person, the person of Jesus Christ.

Now, I am speaking through a microphone, into a camera, and over the internet, and if you're watching on YouTube, which some of us increasing numbers are, you should be aware that there are sophisticated algorithms which are watching you as well.

And I don't know how algorithms work. I don't even know how this microphone works. I need help with getting my earphones in each week, actually. I think a lot of people today think we're far too sophisticated to believe in this Jesus.

We're way too clever. Jesus could never understand our algorithms. Netflix has produced a sort of docudrama called The Social Dilemma, and it's a fascinating series of interviews with key people who helped create and run Facebook and Twitter and YouTube and Google and Instagram, et cetera.

[ 10 : 01 ] And they created a number of algorithms which would use our psychology against us to help us become more addicted to monetize our psychology and the internet.

And all these people have left these companies for ethical reasons because they've become increasingly aware of the danger and the invisible manipulation going on.

What started out with good intention has become a predatory, big data-feeding monster. But the most striking moment in this docudrama for me is when they asked the experts, what is the problem?

What is wrong? And none of them could say. Not one. And Colossians says, if all things are created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ, if we discount Christ or ignore Christ in what we do, we always end up building a tower of Babel, scratching our heads, trying to figure out what the problem really is.

And I think this is where the church is so important. And the first line of verse 18 belongs to the first part of the poem. He is the head of the body, the church.

[ 11 : 24 ] Because it's through the church that Christ reveals what his purposes for his world are. The church is his body. He is the head. And through the church, God is bringing the knowledge of God to his creation.

I think that's why Paul, back in verse 16, took a little detour. If you look back at verse 16, in him all things were created. Then he says, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.

And then he names these spiritual forces and beings, thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, all things were created through him and for him. I think the focus is on these invisible powers in the cosmos.

Spiritual beings who are at work against Christ and his rule. We know from another letter that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against these invisible powers. And the church in Colossae seems so small and so weak and so insignificant as the church does today in a world that seems so out of control.

And the apostle is saying that there is no power, spiritual, physical, no subatomic particle that is beyond the rule of Christ.

[ 12 : 43 ] The Lord, who is the head of the body, the church, and we have been transferred from the dominion, the domain of darkness, into the kingdom of his beloved son. There is no power equal to his.

There is no force. There is no person. There is no army who can overthrow or rival our Lord Jesus. And so ultimately, there is nothing to fear.

If we worship this Jesus, we will begin to reflect his kindness in the weakness of our lives together.

His power, which is the power of grace. So that's the first section of the love poem. It's about Jesus as Lord of creation who rules.

Secondly, we pick up in the second line of verse 18 to verse 20. Christ reconciles creation by his blood. This is wonderful. So Paul moves from Christ ruling to Christ reconciling.

[ 13 : 47 ] And what that means is you can only understand creation by moving backward from redemption. Because God's purposes in creation rest on Christ and those purposes only come to fullness in his reconciliation through the cross.

So if the first part of the poem explains the complete rule of Christ, put it this way, the second part of the poem answers the question, how does Jesus use his rule?

How does he exercise his rule? And the shock, I think here, is that he doesn't crush all his opponents violently. What he does is Jesus himself, this Lord of all things, steps into his world and he absorbs the violence of this world in his death.

The creator is crucified. This is the way he rules. He bleeds out and he dies. Such is his goodness and love. He makes himself vulnerable to hatred and to death so as to reconcile and to restore all things to God.

And if that's what it takes for reconciliation, there must be something hideously wrong with our world to cost the life of the ruler and creator. You see, if Christ has come to reconcile all things, it means that apart from his death, everything and everyone is alienated from God.

[ 15 : 16 ] There is a rupture in the world. This is what the Bible teaches. We've ravaged the image of God within us. We've vandalised the cosmos. The world created by Christ for Christ is now marked by disharmony, discord and disease.

If you've got any doubt about it, just watch the news. This week, we had a bit of a brawl in the United Nations. There was a special session on how nations around the world should deal with COVID-19.

And the Secretary General Gutierrez urged the bigger nations to put down their weapons and stop warring against each other for the greater good of humanity in the world. It fell on completely deaf ears.

Every single nation that responded blamed other nations for what was going on. And I think that's why the Apostle begins the second half of this poem with the resurrection.

Verse 18. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. See, Christ was supreme at the beginning of creation.

[ 16 : 21 ] He will be supreme at the end of creation, not supreme in some things or just churchy things or even just spiritual things, but in everything. And while Christ has been Lord of creation, through the resurrection from the dead, he has been installed as Lord and ruler.

Just as he was the founder of the first creation, he is now the founder of the new creation. And how is he qualified for this? Verse 19. In him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

In the Old Testament, God made his name dwell sometimes in the pillar of fire, in the pillar of cloud, in the wilderness, in the tabernacle, or in the temple, Mount Zion.

But that was only for a time. But now in Christ, all the fullness, the whole fullness of God dwells permanently, eternally, and joyfully.

God's fullness is pleased to dwell. It brings pleasure and delight to God. It brings happiness to God's fullness to dwell in Jesus Christ, which is why if we want to know the pleasure of God, we have to be in Christ also.

[ 17 : 40 ] It's astonishing. I mean, this is 30 years after Jesus died and rose again. And the apostle is saying, you're not going to find fullness of joy in anything else.

You can't add anything to Jesus for fullness. You can't supplement Jesus. All the fullness of God is in him. Can't claim to know God and recognize and not recognize him as Lord.

And how does he use that fullness and divinity? Verse 20. Here we come to it. Verse 20. Through him to reconcile to himself, God, all things, whether in heaven or on earth, making peace by the blood of his cross.

His majesty and grace overflowing. It is profoundly physical and human. Jesus makes himself vulnerable and weak. He gives himself over to violence and to shame.

He absorbs the violence of our rebellion and rupture. He is estranged and abandoned in the cross to bring us to God. He is wounded so that we could be healed.

[ 18 : 51 ] He is banished so that we could be welcomed in. But did you notice that the scope of his peacemaking is breathtaking. It's wider than just humans. At the cross, Jesus reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven.

And that includes all the invisible powers of evil and all those who reject Christ as well. Now, some people have taken this to mean that everyone will be saved in the end.

I don't think we can possibly say that. say that. This is what theologians call pacification. Through the cross, God offers peace to all, but those who refuse that offer will be pacified.

It doesn't mean that everyone is going to happily submit to the rule of Jesus and trust in him for the forgiveness of their sins, but it does mean that every knee will bow, many willingly and many unwillingly.

But what this means is that the work of redemption, the work of Jesus Christ is not just a work of massive power. We've got to see this. It's a work of restoration, peace for some, pacification for others.

[ 20 : 05 ] The desire of God is for reconciliation, for communion and union and fellowship and the end of hostility. Because in the cross, God does not treat us as we deserve.

He doesn't take revenge on us for our hostility to him. He doesn't hold our sin against us. He doesn't just let bygones be bygones.

He actively, positively does us good by cancelling our debt, by paying what we owe, by standing in our place and forgiving our offences.

And he creates a new relationship of love and of hope, peace, by the forgiveness of our sins. Well, I could go on but we need to move thirdly to the last section, to the application.

What does this cosmic work look like when it lands in the lives of real people? This is what it looks like. Verse 21, 22, and you who once were alienated, hostile in mind because of doing evil deeds, he is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.

[ 21 : 13 ] It's pretty unflattering stuff, isn't it? We were alienated for God because of our defiance and hostile mindset to his rule. God isolates and withdraws from us.

We are not apathetic or neutral spiritually, we are hostile because we love to do evil things. So we're alienated from God. But through Christ, God has taken the initiative to break the cycle of sin and to heal that rupture.

Verse 22, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. His words are just so wonderful they're hard to believe.

To come to Christ in faith for the forgiveness of our sins means reconciliation with God and he looks at us as though we are in Christ.

He transfers us into his kingdom, into his body and so believers in Jesus Christ stand now even now and on the day of judgment holy, blameless, above reproach even though we know we've got a long way to go to get there.

[ 22 : 23 ] And then comes the application. What do we do? Paul says in verse 23, if indeed you continue in the faith stable and steadfast not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

Here is the reason for the letter and I just want to finish you could apply this in all sorts of ways and I invite you to make application of these magnificent truths to your life but let me just mention three.

Number one, if this Jesus is the real Jesus, you can never get tired of him, you can never go beyond him and if there's something wrong between you and him it's on your side and you have to get back to him.

If there's something tempting you to go beyond Jesus, I promise you it can only lead to darkness and alienation. When the apostle says continue in the faith, what he means is verses 15 to 20.

That is the faith, who Christ is and what he's done. And although faith is a gift from God, God does not do our believing for us. That's number one.

[ 23 : 38 ] Continue in the faith. Number two, if this Jesus is the real Jesus, our future and the future of all peoples and the cosmos is in the hands of the one who has the marks of the cross.

And though things seem out of control, as they do, they are being directed by Christ toward reconciliation. And I think that means it's impossible for a Christian to be cynical.

Yes, bruised, yes, disappointed. But cynicism represents a lack of hope and it's the opposite of adoration. This Jesus deploys his power and majesty to bring us to God, to bring us peace and pacification, and he will do it.

And thirdly, if this Jesus is the real Jesus, do not shift from the hope of the gospel. And part of the hope of the gospel is that he's promised to preserve us holy, blameless, above reproach until that day.

Part of the hope is that nothing can separate us from his love. Though it seems like everything is anxiety causing, Jesus Christ is the ruler, the redeemer, and the reconciler.

[ 25 : 08 ] Do not shift from the hope of the gospel. Amen. Amen.