

The Supremacy of Christ: The Supremacy of Jesus' Gospel

Colossians 1:15-23

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Dan Hoffman

~Jesus' supremacy over creation and over religious truth means we can hope in His Gospel~

If you've been with us over the last few weeks you know that we are in the middle of a series looking at the book of Colossians. This is a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to an early church in Asia in what is modern day Turkey.

Throughout this letter Paul has one overarching purpose and that's to prove the supremacy of Christ. Paul wants us to know that Jesus isn't just one among many, He's the only One. He isn't a great path to follow; He's the only path to follow. He's not a source of life; He is the only source of life. In a nutshell Jesus holds the supremacy over everything in creation and over every truth in the religious world. Jesus is the man, in the fullest sense of the word. And He's God in the fullest sense of the word.

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Now as we said a couple weeks back, Colossae was a trade town where people from all around the Roman Empire had settled and begun to call home. And with this diversity came pluralistic beliefs. People in Colossae adhered to all sorts of different philosophies and religions. And the church in Colossae had begun to feel this influence and allowed some of their beliefs to be compromised in order to fit in – they were being “tolerant”. And of course this is exactly the kind of world we live in today.

Just last week I had a plumber in my house, and after he found out I was a pastor he told me he had studied a bit of theology – it turned out he went to a Catholic high-school for a couple years. Now today he is an agnostic but he considers himself spiritually mature in that he is tolerant of everyone's beliefs. In fact his tolerance is his back-up plan in case he is wrong.

He told me “If it turns out there is a God, at least I've been accepting of everyone around me – that should cut me some slack with the Big Guy.”

And if you talk with people in Prince George this is the opinion that the vast majority hold. And it was fairly similar in Colossae.

The lie of tolerance of course is that somehow everyone's beliefs are equally valid and can co-exist. People think all religions are fundamentally similar with some peripheral differences. But in fact when you actually look at the different religions you realize that in reality they are all fundamentally different with only a few peripheral similarities.

Atheists say there is no God, and we say there is. With all due respect we can't both be right. First Nations religions and New Age philosophies believe everything has a divine force, Christians believe there is only one Divine Force who is over all – we can't both be right. Islam says Jesus was a prophet – not God – and that He didn't die on the cross. But everything in Christianity is built on the opposite of these two points. We can't both be right.

And in Colossians, and particularly our text today, Paul argues that Jesus does not fit alongside any other religion or philosophy. He stands alone as supreme over everything. And it's only by **Jesus' supremacy over creation and over all religious truth that we can hope in His gospel.**

If you haven't already, please open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1 verse 15. And would you pray with me?

[Pray]

The verses we are looking at today are a worship song or hymn from the first century. There is some debate as to whether Paul wrote this song or is simply quoting it, but what we get in these lyrics is one of the earliest accounts of the church recognizing Jesus as God - in song.

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Now if that sounds a bit strange – that the early church had to come to understand Jesus was God – you need to realize that when Jesus was around He never came right out and said “I am God.” He didn't say that.

Instead He did things and said things that only God could do and say, and then left the early church to put two and two together.

So Jesus proved His supremacy over the human condition by healing the sick and raising the dead – that's something to be grappled with. Jesus proved His supremacy over that natural world by walking on water, feeding thousands with a couple loaves and some fish, and commanding weather changes – what kind of person does that? And He proved His supremacy over the spiritual world by casting out demons and forgiving sins. And so when He came back from the dead the early church had to wrestle with who and what Jesus was. And this wasn't easy.

You see, the Jews – which is what the early church was mostly comprised of – had learned that there was only one God. They spent 70 years in Babylon paying the price for their Old Testament idol worship. They knew YHWH was a jealous God who would not share His glory with another.

And yet they had just spent three years walking and talking with a man who did things and taught things they had never imagined possible, and then, by His own resurrection, He proved that His words meant business.

And so these believing Jews came to the conclusion that Jesus was not another god – that would be impossible. Instead Jesus was YHWH with skin on.

Nothing like this had ever been imagined before, but it was the only thing that made sense when they did the math. And so very early – I’m talking the months and immediate years after Jesus – people began worshipping Him as God.

And worship songs had been a part of the Jewish tradition for thousands of years, so now worship songs to Jesus were written.

And that’s what we get here in verses 15 to 20.

And in this song we get some of the richest Christology – that is the theology about Christ – in the entire New Testament. And primarily it tells us two things: It tells us Jesus is supreme over all creation, and Jesus is supreme over all religious truth. And because these two things are true, Paul then argues, we have hope for salvation.

So let’s look at what these early worshippers said about **Jesus’ supremacy over creation...**

Look with me at verse 15

[Read Colossians 1:15-17]

That’s the first verse of the song. Let’s just jump into unpacking this with the first line: “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God.”

Now right away if you’re thinking you’ve heard this before you are right. This is a reference to Genesis chapter one and creation. We looked at this just a few weeks back in our Advent series.

When God was creating people He said:

“Let Us make mankind **in our image**, in our likeness...” (Genesis 1:26)

And we said bearing God’s image meant two things: First it meant we were able to do things that God did like have dominion over creation. And second it meant we were able to relate to our Creator. And these two things became humanities God given purpose. We image God to care for creation and worship our Creator in joy.

But sin entered the picture pretty early and we've been living in a broken world of sickness and death ever since. That's the consequence of separation from God.

But God wasn't finished with us. And so, in order to restore what we lost, God ordained that a New Man, a Second Adam, would re-forged and re-create humanity in God's image. And Jesus is that Man.

Jesus isn't a picture of what God is like; Jesus is the image, the express image, the exact representation of the invisible God. If you want to know who God is you must look at Jesus. There is no alternative. There is no revelation of God outside of Jesus.

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Now put yourself back in the first century. Put on your radically monotheistic shoes – shoes that mean you will die for the belief that this is one God who is worthy of all worship. And then imagine yourself meeting Jesus.

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See the problem?

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This man rocks your world. This man says and does things that you know only YHWH does. And you find yourself being forced to come to grips with the absolutely scandalous, preposterous idea that the man you talked and ate and walked with was in fact YHWH with skin on.

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Friends, don't let the power of that be lost on you. No one saw this coming. No one would have ever imagined God would stoop to this.

And these early Jesus followers had no choice. They could either view Him as a fake and a fraud, or as God Himself.

But a fake would have stayed dead on the cross. He would have promised what he couldn't deliver. But Jesus blew the doors off that tomb and walked out leaving those Jewish witnesses with mouths gaping, stunned and in awe. God had moved into their neighbourhood. YHWH could be known.

And so the hymn goes on to describe the Jesus they knew as the firstborn over all creation.

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Now here I want to stop just for a second because cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses cite this verse as evidence that Jesus is a created being not God.

After all if He is the firstborn that means He is the oldest creation. And that might be pretty special, but it is a whole lot different from being God Himself. Right?

Do you see where they would get this idea?

But this doesn't work with the picture the Bible paints of Jesus for two reasons. In the Bible Jesus is elevated and esteemed and worshipped in passages like the one we are looking at. But if Jesus isn't God then He isn't worthy of this kind of language. It is heresy to worship any created being. That's a problem the Jehovah's witnesses don't make any sense of.

But the second problem with thinking "firstborn" means created is that this idea depends on the English word "firstborn" not the Hebrew. The Hebrew of this word carries two meanings not one. It can mean born first, but it also refers to a birthright or position of importance that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with birth order. So for example God said of David:

And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. (Psalm 89:27)

Now obviously David wasn't the first king in the world or even in Israel, he wasn't even the oldest son of his father – he was the eighth son of Jesse.¹ But the text says David will be appointed firstborn – and then it defines exactly what that means – the most exalted of the kings of the earth. David is the firstborn king not because he is first but because he was the greatest.

We get the same thing in Exodus where God was bringing His people out of Egypt where they had been slaves for four hundred years. Moses told Pharaoh:

‘This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.” But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.’” (Exodus 4:22-23)

What's going on here?

Well, in Egypt Pharaoh was god, and so in these verses we get a power encounter between two gods – the God of Israel and the god of Egypt, and the question is who will be supreme.

And it is a battle with an incredible price. On the line is what these gods value most, their firstborn. Now Israel wasn't the oldest nation on earth – Israel became a nation in Egypt. But YHWH chose it and declared Israel as His most valuable possession – His firstborn. And then He goes on to wager the people who would carry His image into the world, against Pharaoh's firstborn, the son who would outlive Pharaoh, carrying His image into the future. And in the battle of the gods, YHWH was supreme. His firstborn lived while Pharaoh's died. Get it?

Back to Colossians 1:15: Far from being evidence that Jesus was created, saying “He is the firstborn over all creation” means Jesus is the Supreme Being over everything that exists. This works with the Hebrew understanding of this

¹ 1 Samuel 16:10-11

word and is the only reading that makes sense with the rest of scripture and the immediate context here.

You see from here the song unpacks what it means for Jesus to be the firstborn over creation with three powerful pictures. First verse 16 says “for *in* (or some other translations say *by*) Him – by Jesus – all things were created”, and then verse 17 says “He is *before* all things” and finally “*in* Him all things hold together.”

And these three prepositions – by, before and in – explain what it means for Jesus to be the firstborn over all creation.

So first look at 16, “for *by* Him all things were created.”

This means everything created came into being by Jesus.

There is one other word that is significant here and it is the word “all.” So let me ask you, when you use the word “all” what do you mean? Do you mean most, or almost everything, or do you mean all? Whatever you mean when you use this word, this song makes it very clear that all means all.

Look at the next few words. “All things in heaven and things on earth” were all created by Jesus. So that means trees and rocks and water and fish. And it also means stars and planets and solar systems and galaxies. Everything that exists in the heavens and on earth was created by Jesus – that’s “all.”

And the song goes on – “visible and invisible.” That means stuff you can see and touch with your senses like people and plants and atoms and elephants. And it means things that can’t be seen like spirits, angels and demons. Everything that exists was created by Jesus – that’s “all.”

And the song goes on – “whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities.” So that is earthly kingdoms and powers like Queen Elizabeth and Canada and the CRA and anything else that you can possibly think of that would fit into this category. Everything that exists owes its origin to Jesus – that’s “all.”

So let me ask you, if every created thing was created by Jesus then can Jesus possibly be a created thing?... Not if all means all. Then it would have to say every *other* created thing... but it doesn’t.

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And then we get to the second preposition. The song sings “He is *before* all things.” This is a time statement. This means quite simply that before anything else, before everything else Jesus was there. That means Jesus pre-existed and pre-dates every single created thing. There is only one thing that does that. The supreme thing – God Himself.

And then the third preposition sings “and in Him all things hold together.” This means not only did Jesus make everything that exists and therefore pre-date everything that exists, but He also holds everything that continues to exist together.

So if Jesus were to take one step back or remove His hands from anything it would cease to exist. We would cease to breath, electrons would cease to orbit protons and neutrons, planets would fall into their suns. Jesus is not just a watch maker who sits back and lets things run their course; Jesus is literally the sustaining force behind every single thing that exists in our world and the spiritual world beyond.

Now that is quite a statement! That’s a statement about God. And that’s what verse one of this song is about. Let yourself feel the significance of this. Jesus is the God of creation.

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And then we get to the second verse of the song where we see that **Jesus doesn’t only have supremacy over creation but over all religious truth ...** Look at verse 18.

[Read Colossians 1:18-20]

In the first half we saw that all creation owes its existence to Jesus – but creation is broken, it’s been saturated by sin. So now Jesus is also the agent of New Creation – the redeemed – the church.

The song sings “Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead, that in everything He might have the supremacy.” So when Jesus came back from the dead it marked the beginning of a new era, the kingdom of God invaded earth. And Jesus is supreme over this – He’s the head of the church.

Friends, there aren’t multiple paths to salvation just like bodies don’t have multiple heads. Jesus holds the monopoly on religious truth. And that’s because in no other being has God been pleased to have all His fullness dwell – Again “all” means “all” – All of God is in Jesus.

So when it comes to the problem of humanities separation from God Jesus has supremacy over the answer. Jesus, through His blood shed on the cross, has become the source of all reconciliation between humanity and the Father – there are no other paths. And Jesus ordained that the church would become the continuing agent for this reconciliation on earth.

The church is the body of Jesus that is still present in the world. It is made up of those who have been re-created in the image of Jesus and are connected to the Head – to Him. And that means we can do the things He did – like Him we are the salt and light of the world, and like Him we bring His message of salvation to

humanity, and like Him we will be resurrected when we die – the Church does what Jesus did.

And on top of this we also have the ability to once again relate to our Creator. This is what Jesus did for the Church.

Now there is so much more that could be said here, but I want to conclude where Paul does today, by bringing the two points of Christ's supremacy together at their logical conclusion. **Jesus' supremacy over creation and over religious truth means we can hope in His gospel.**

Look at verse 21

[Read Colossians 1:21-23]

Paul concludes this section of high Christology by arguing that because Jesus is supreme we have hope for salvation.

How does this work? This is the mystery of the gospel, but basically because the fullness of God dwells in Jesus, when He died His infinitely valuable blood was able to pay the debt we owed God. And when this happened Jesus reconciled the books with the Father on our behalf. While once we were enemies of God, separated by our rebellious desire for autonomy, and therefore hopelessly in debt to our Creator, now the Prince of Peace has made peace with God by His blood so that He could present us holy, without blemish or accusation before Him.

When Jesus died He not only took our sin upon Himself, but He clothed us with His righteousness. And we gain this when, by faith, we put our hope in Christ's supremacy over everything in creation and over all religious truth – and that surely includes whatever situation you find yourself in today no matter how bad it is. Because Jesus is supreme, when we become part of His body, part of the church – that's the universal Church and the local church, because they always go together – we have access to His salvation. That's the hope of the Gospel.

But there is a warning here as well. Verse 23 stresses the importance of finishing well. Verse 21 says "Once you were enemies", verse 22 says, "but now you've been reconciled, and then verse 23 warns "If you continue in your faith."

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While salvation is always 100% about grace and comes to us totally undeserved, this grace evidences itself in 100% human effort.

That means our continuing in faith is the evidence that we are saved. When God's grace infuses us it changes us, we love Jesus. And this means that we live our lives differently because of it. This doesn't mean we never sin or never have doubts, but that no matter what happens we hold, with everything we've got, to our faith in Jesus.

Friends, the hope of the gospel isn't just for the moment of salvation, it is for every second of life thereafter. The hope of the gospel is that because Jesus is supreme He has re-created the relationship between ourselves and God that we were designed for in the beginning. Because of Jesus we can know YHWH and enjoy Him forever in the most intimate way – as part of His body.

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As we draw this to a conclusion my prayer is that we would get out of this what Paul wanted the Colossians to get. He wanted them to see Jesus as supreme over everything in creation and over every source of truth and philosophy. Jesus is God, and Jesus is the head of the church, and because this is true there is hope in His Gospel.

So ask yourself today: Have I responded in faith to Jesus Christ? Have I stopped trying to save myself, thinking I can do it without God? Have I turned to the only One who can reconcile me to God?

The good news of the Gospel is that there is salvation for sinners – no matter how bad of a sinner you are – because Jesus is supreme over everything. He is supreme over everything in creation, and He is supreme over all religious truth. And He has declared that by His blood we can be part of His body.

So friends, pledge yourself afresh today no matter what you have come up against to continue in your faith, established and firm, not moving from the hope held out to you in Jesus' gospel.