



SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

To understand Christology a little more clearly.

The Rest of the Story

If you know me, even decently, you know that I am quite fond of the *Star Wars* franchise. I have been since I was a little boy. As a child, I remember watching *A New Hope* for the first time at my grandparents house. I was sold immediately. I saw all of the prequels and all of the new trilogy on the day they released in theaters. In the trilogy, we were met with a new foe: the Supreme Leader Snoke. In *The Force Awakens*, we are met with a new cast in a world being terrorized by the fascist First Order led by Snoke. However, Snoke left the *Star Wars* universe almost as abruptly as he entered it. In *The Last Jedi*, Kylo Ren shockingly strikes Snoke down. The movie ends, seemingly, with Ren overcoming his now deceased master to take over the First Order as the new Supreme Leader. However, *The Rise of Skywalker* gives us the rest Snoke's story, or rather, that he had no story. He was merely a clone of the original main villain of the previous six *Star Wars* movies, Emperor Palpatine. With just a few details in the beginning of the movie, the whole story laid out in *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* changed.

In some strange way (at least in my mind) verse 15 through 20 give us the rest of the story laid out in the Old Testament. With just a few details, the creation narrative in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 and the nature of God become a bit more clear. Christ, as it turns out, is a lot more than just a good teacher or a revolutionary; He's God in the flesh.

Christology Laid Out

Verse 15 doesn't begin in a vacuum, but is a continuation of what Paul has previously just written (that we studied last week). In verses 13 and 14, Paul writes: "For He (the Father) rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (the Son, Jesus), in whom (still Jesus) we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Verse 15 then picks up with, "He," referring still to the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. Below is an outline of the attributes of Christ laid out.

THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

The first thing Paul says is that Jesus is, "the image of the invisible God." God is called or thought of as invisible in other passages of the New Testament as well. Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:17, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, *invisible*, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Hebrews 11:27 says, "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is *unseen*." In the Old Testament God appears in several places, but in each place we never get the sense that God's exact essence is being viewed. Perhaps this is what led the Apostle John to write, "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18).

That is, until, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus is, "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature (Heb. 1:3). Here, in verse 15, He is referred to as the, "image." It's the greek word εἰκὼν (eikōn), the word from which we get our word "icon." It's a word that carries significant weight in the Greek language, for it means not merely a symbol, but that which carries the actual essence of the thing signified. In the Old Testament, the people of God were strictly forbidden to make any image that represented God (Ex. 20:4-6). However, Jesus doesn't merely represent God; He is the embodiment and manifestation of God into the human realm. When someone asks, "what is God like," the answer is: "Jesus."

THE FIRSTBORN OVER ALL CREATION

The second part of verse 15 is what stirred up what has come to be called *The Arian Controversy* of the fourth century, a debate between Arius and Athanasius of Alexandria regarding the nature of Christ and His relationship to the Heavenly Father. The early church favored Athanasius' interpretation, although it isn't difficult to understand Arius' contention, that is until you understand the Old Testament allusion that is present in Paul's writing.

In Exodus 4, God speaks to Moses to tell him what to say to Pharaoh, and in verse 22 He says, "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.'" Israel, here, is pictured as the favored firstborn who historically would receive a double portion of inheritance from his father. We see it again in Hosea 11:1: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son," a passage that Matthew applies to Jesus as well (Matt. 2:15). Later, David is also called God's firstborn in Psalm 89:27. Firstborn verbiage, then, does not reflect a literal reality for Jesus but is instead a *status marker*. He is above all of creation, and also the author of it.

BY HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED

Paul continues with another shocking detail in verse 16: "For by Him all things were created." This is that missing detail that changes the entire story arc of Genesis 1 and 2. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is actually a reference to the work of Christ! This theological truth echoes what the Apostle John wrote: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3). Paul also wrote to the Corinthians: "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father,

from whom are all things and we exist for Him; *and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things*, and we exist through Him” (1 Cor. 8:6).

Paul then gives a list of over what this creative power reigns and he uses a Hebrew grammatical structure called chiasm. It's not important to understand how chiasm works, nor do we have time to lay it out in one session, but understand that the word order in a chiastic structure dictates the intended emphasis, and in this case it is the heavenly, unseen realm that is being emphasized. Jesus is not only the creator and authoritative force over the visible realm of creation, but also the angelic realm, both good and evil. All beings, physical and spiritual, are subject to Him. Nothing is outside of His reign of power. This is yet another example of His Supremacy and Deity. Only God can make these claims.

BEFORE ALL THINGS AND IN HIM ALL THINGS

Verse 17 captures a sense of time in each of these statements. The first thing Paul says is, “He is before all things,” indicating that He existed prior to the creation event that He was responsible for. Jesus' incarnation was an event in time and space when Jesus took on human flesh, but it was not His beginning, for He is without beginning (John 1:1-3). Secondly, it says, “in Him all things hold together.” Not only is Jesus responsible for creation, but He is responsible for sustaining everything that has been made. Jesus is the binding agent that prevents creation from falling apart. Apart from Him nothing would exist, nor would it continue to exist.

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

Yet another powerful truth is revealed in the first part of verse 18: “He is also head of the body, the church.” Paul likens the church to the body of Christ elsewhere as well. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, Paul expounds on the uniqueness of each individual's spiritual gifting and how they each play a role in the same way that the different members of a body all have a role. Here, Paul clarifies who is directing the body; the head, Jesus. Practically, this means that there is no authority on earth that can lay claim to the direction and oversight of the church; that is a role that only Jesus fills. He is also, “the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead.” Again, there is the word, “firstborn,” and we are to take this to mean, “a position of authority.” Jesus is the first to enact redemption through, “the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:20), and thus He has authority over those reconciled by His cross.

THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS

The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Him, according to verse 20. Here, the fullness of Deity and the fullness of humanity collide in Jesus to form what the ancients called, “the hypostatic union.” The union of the Divine with the human. Jesus, then, can be said to be 100% God and also 100% man. He has two natures. A Divine nature, and a human nature. He can suffer fully as a human, and exercise perfect sovereignty as God.

The Heavenly Father plays a role in this act of redemption. Verses 19 and 20 can be difficult to decipher, so here is a helpful way of thinking about this: “For it was the **Father's** good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him (**Jesus**), and through Him (**Jesus**) to reconcile all things to Himself (**the Father**), having made peace through the blood of His (**Jesus**) cross; through Him (**Jesus**), I (**Paul**) say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

The Divine plan of redemption is carried out in Divine harmony between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The blood of Jesus' cross is a reconciling act not just for humans, but for all things physical and spiritual. Paul's contention is that through Christ, all things, “whether on earth,” or, “things in heaven,” are being reconciled. In other words, the cross is the climactic moment of time; everything revolves around it.

Pivotal

Jesus has been described and portrayed in many ways throughout the centuries. He is recognized as a moral teacher, a wise man, a seer, a sage, a philosopher, and more, and yet, Colossians 1:15-20 gives a depiction of Christ that far surpasses all of those things combined. Jesus is not merely an example of Godliness; He is God Himself. He is not someone who merely teaches with authority; He IS authority. Being confronted with the Supremacy of Christ is a pivotal moment in every human being's life, because we are faced ultimately with a choice; submit or rebel. The choice is yours. Choose well.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Colossians 1:15. What does it mean that Jesus is, "the image of the invisible God?" (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Colossians 1:15. What do you think Paul meant when he said, "the firstborn of all creation?" Does this mean that Jesus had a beginning? Or something else? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Colossians 1:16. How does this verse reshape the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2?

2. Read Colossians 1:17. What is implied by the statement, "He is before all things?"

Day Three

1. Read Colossians 1:17. In your own words, what does, "in Him all things hold together," mean?

2. Read Colossians 1:18. Why is Christ being the head of the body significant? How does this limit the authority of earthly church leaders?

Day Four

1. Read Colossians 1:19. What is the Father's role in the plan of redemption? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Colossians 1:20. What singular act is the climactic moment in creation, according to this verse?
-
-

Week 3 Discussion: Rethinking His Image

In Colossians 1:15-20, Paul lays out a powerful description of Jesus as the Supreme Creator and Redeemer. This description, in many ways, challenges our view of Jesus. If you were to ask your class how they viewed Christ, you might be surprised at how many different “images” are described. This passage forces us to reconcile our view the biblical one. Talk as a group about how this passage challenges your view of Jesus, and how the biblical description of Christ should motivate your obedience.

1. Icebreaker: Are there any parts of this passage that were shocking to you? If so, why?
2. Were you aware of Jesus’ role in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2?
3. Read Exodus 4:22 and Hosea 11:1. Are these passages referring to Israel as a literal firstborn, or a figurative firstborn? Explain your answer, and how it applies to Jesus.
4. How does the Deity of Christ change the way you view Him? Are you more in awe? More afraid? More excited? Be honest with your answer.
5. Do you think understanding the theology of these verses is important? Why or why not?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus existed before creation and is the Author of creation.
2. Jesus also is the Sustainer of creation.
3. The Deity of Christ is a clear doctrine in the New Testament.

PRAYER REQUESTS: