

Today, we're back in the book of Colossians, looking at the second half of chapter one. Last week we read that the apostle Paul gave thanks for the Colossian church's faith, and their love for the saints. Paul told the Colossians that he constantly gave thanks to God for them, and that he prays for them without ceasing, asking that God would fill them with the knowledge of God's will, so that they might "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him."<sup>1</sup>

I mentioned last week that part of Paul's intention was to address the 'Colossian heresy', a set of beliefs that undermined the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. False teachers had introduced false ideas, teaching that Jesus' work of salvation through the Cross was not, in fact, enough to ensure a person's salvation; but they needed to add to Christ's work, by undergoing Jewish circumcision, observing the Sabbath, and worshipping angels, amongst other things.<sup>2</sup>

Paul, however, is adamant that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection *are* sufficient; His work has completed God's reconciliation of all things.

In the verses we're looking at today, Paul recites what is believed to be an ancient hymn about the supremacy of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the fact that it's a hymn is disguised in our pew Bibles as it is written in prose; but that it was a hymn suggests it was sung in the early church, at least in those churches associated with Paul – and it therefore represents key theological beliefs about Christ in the early church – because we sing what we believe.

As an aside, therefore, if you ever visit other churches, take note of the hymns and songs they sing, as they will give you an indication of what they believe.

Paul begins by pointing out that "he" – meaning the Son of God, meaning Jesus – is the 'image of the invisible God.' That God is invisible is common knowledge; God is beyond our human perception.<sup>4</sup> Jesus, however, makes visible Whom we cannot see.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:9

<sup>2</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Colossians," in CSB Study Bible: Notes, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1892

<sup>3</sup> David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 89–90

<sup>4</sup> Michael F. Bird, Colossians and Philemon, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 52

In this we hear an echo from Genesis where God says,

*“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”*<sup>5</sup>

But before we jump to the conclusion that Jesus is simply another, albeit greater, human, in Genesis, humanity is created “in” or “according to” the image of God; humanity is never identified as *the image* of God.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is ‘the image’ of God. The writer of Hebrews put it this way:

*“[Jesus] is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.”*<sup>7</sup>

Paul then says that Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation.” This is one of the trickier statements in the New Testament,<sup>8</sup> and it has been taken by some to suggest that Jesus is a distinct, lesser, and separate being from God the Father. This is the view taken by Jehovah Witnesses. However, Paul is not speaking literally of Jesus birth, and he is also not saying that God created Jesus.

The word “firstborn” refers to Jesus’ primacy, his supremacy over creation.<sup>9</sup> Scholars refer to the status of the firstborn son in Jewish culture. The firstborn had a higher status than other children. But we ought not push this idea too far, because Jesus is not like us, and we are not like Him. He’s not merely the greatest created Being.

This is made clear in the next verse, where Pauls says, “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.” Paul identifies Jesus as the Creator. The God we read about in Genesis 1, *is Jesus*.

He created “all things in heaven and on earth ... things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him.”<sup>10</sup>

This phrase is all encompassing. Everything we see, “things visible”, and everything we cannot see, things “invisible”, have been created by Jesus. Things

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>6</sup> David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, 94

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 1:3

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Wall, Colossians & Philemon, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Col 1:15–18

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Mangum, ed., Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Col 1:15–16; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Colossians,” in CSB Study Bible: Notes, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1894

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:16

that are visible includes all human authorities, all kings and queens, all presidents and prime ministers, all politicians and power brokers. All have been created by Jesus. This includes all “thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.” Paul here is likely referring to the things that are invisible, the spiritual reality that exists alongside our physical reality. All these forces, both good and evil, are created by Jesus.

Now, much, *much*, more could be, and needs to be said about this, but for brevity I am not saying that Jesus is the creator of evil. Only that everything, ultimately was created by Jesus, even those things that might turned against God; and the Bible suggests there are forces in the world that were created by God, but which has subsequently turned against God.

Verse 16 ends saying that not only was everything created by Jesus, but *for* Jesus.

Think about that for a moment; you and I, and everyone, and everything, were not only created by Jesus, but for Jesus. We like to think we belong to ourselves. But what if we belonged to Jesus? What does it mean that we were created for him? Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?

But Paul is talking about more here than a crude sense of ownership; Paul is suggesting that Jesus embodies God’s will for all creation; Christ is the content and goal of God’s grace.<sup>11</sup> We were made for salvation and redemption.

Verse 17 then says that Jesus holds all things together. Jesus is not only Creator, but everything also continues to exist by His holy will. In the Genesis account, creation can be understood as God creating order out of chaos. Genesis 1:2 says, “the earth was a formless void.” The word ‘formless’ literally means chaos. Jesus is the reason why there is a cosmos instead of chaos.<sup>12</sup> The world is not perfect, by any means, but it could be infinitely worse. Jesus is the reason why this is not so.

Paul, then transitions from creation to salvation. Jesus is not only the Creator of the world, but He is also the Saviour of the world. He is the ‘firstborn from the dead.’<sup>13</sup> What does this mean? It cannot mean that Jesus is the first to be raised

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<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Wall, Colossians & Philemon, Col 1:15–18

<sup>12</sup> Michael F. Bird, Colossians and Philemon, 54

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 1:18

from the dead, as there are several accounts of resuscitation in the Bible;<sup>14</sup> what it means is that Jesus is the “prototype” for God’s renewed humanity. By “prototype” I don’t mean – as is typically used today – that Jesus is God’s first test concept for humanity; but in the more traditional sense, that Jesus is the original from which all others are copied. Jesus is what we will become – albeit to a lesser degree, as we are not, and will never be, divine.

Jesus is the beginning of the new creation, and in Him we look forward to the day when even our bodies will be redeemed, and we will live in God’s new world. This new creation began, expectedly, when Jesus rose from the dead.<sup>15</sup>

So, Paul concludes, Jesus has the first place in everything: He is God’s agent in creation, and in redemption.<sup>16</sup>

We’ve dabbled our toes in an ocean of theological thought and reflection, and you might wonder why Paul is talking about such things. We might think that detailed reflections on the Person and Work of Christ are for theological students; but Paul wrote this letter to normal people like you and me, who were being tempted to turn away from Jesus; they were being tempted to believe that Jesus wasn’t enough, that they needed to add something to God’s grace.

About 250 years after Paul wrote this letter, the early church faced one of its most important controversies, when a man named Arius started to teach that Jesus was not eternal nor equal to the Father, but was rather a created being – the first and greatest of God’s creation. This sparked what is today known as the Arian Controversy.

In response to this controversy the first of the great church councils was called, in Nicaea in 325 AD. During that Council, a man named Athanasius refuted Arius, and argued for the full divinity of Jesus Christ.

[SLIDE]

Homoousios - same substance

Homoiousios - similar substance

The central question at the Council was a single word: whether Jesus was of the **same substance** (homoousios) as the Father, or merely **similar** (homoiousios)

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<sup>14</sup> See 1 Kings 17:17–24, 2 Kings 4:32–37, 2 Kings 13:20–21, Luke 7:11–17, Matthew 9:18–26, John 11:1–44

<sup>15</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Phi, lemon*, 55

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

and was therefore created. The 'I' in Greek is the iota, and it is this Council from which we most likely we get the phrase "not one iota of difference." The inclusion of the iota made all the difference – it reduced Jesus to a created being.

You might wonder why this is important for us today? Good theology is as important for you and me as it is for theologians. It's as important for us as it was for the Colossian church. While I'm not suggesting we all go and get advanced degrees in theology, I do believe that we live in a time when people in the church are just as in danger of false teaching as the Colossian church. We need to better understand our faith, to safeguard ourselves from false teachers, of which there are many.

Sadly, many people in our churches today are theologically ignorant. I don't mean to sound critical, and I recognise that I have had the privilege of a theological education, but I was interested in the Bible and theology long before I went to college.

The danger of poor theology is that it can lead us away from Jesus; it can lead us away from the Church. Many times, I have heard of people who have left the Church because someone hurt them; while I am not defending those who hurt others, sometimes people conflate the Church with Jesus. Jesus is not the church – He is the head of it, but He is not it. He is not us. But when people have a poor understanding of Jesus, they can abandon their faith, when it was never Jesus that failed them or hurt them.

Poor theology also leads us to have a poor understanding of our value before God, a poor understanding of our purpose in the world, and a poor understanding of our hope for the future.

We are so loved by God that he gave His only Son. God saves us and gives us the purpose of helping others also know their Creator. In saving us God gives us hope for a future where we live together with God in God's renewed world. In all of this Jesus has the permeance. He created us, He saved us, and He is raised to new life, and one day we will be like Him.