

The Massive HE

Colossians: Christ Above All

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Bible Text: Colossians 1:15-23
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This evening we're in the book of Colossians again and we're at chapter 1, verses 15 to 23. Colossians 1, and beginning to read at verse 15.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and upon the earth, visible things and invisible things, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through him and for him. 17 And he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he himself is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn out of the dead, in order that he alone may come to have first place in all things. 19 Because in him God in all his fullness delighted to dwell, 20 and through him he delighted to reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross. Through him, whether things upon earth or the things in the heavens. 21 And you, having been once alienated and enemies with respect to your mind in the midst of evil deeds, 22 but now he has reconciled you in the body of his flesh through death, to present you before his presence holy and without blemish and beyond accusation, 23 if indeed you press on in the faith, anchored down and steadfast and not shifting away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a servant.

You know how there are some people in which you can mention something and it immediately sets them off. I remember my father, for example, he had a sort of a thing about his cars. Every car he had, he loved, just about. And I remember that he once had a 1940 Chevy. Now, I don't go back that far but he kept this car for a long time and sometimes you could get him when he was in a car talking mood, you could just say something like, "You really loved your 1940 Chevy, didn't you, pop?" And off he would go. He would pace the floor, the finger would be pointing and so on. He would say things like, "Why, I can back out of Mr. Houston's driveway at the bottom of Harmony Hill," now that was where we would sled ride and so on, "and at the base of Harmony Hill and I can shift the gears as soon as I can and I can go up Harmony Hill in high gear at two

miles an hour without..." Well, all you had to do was just, "You really liked that 1940 Chevy," and off he would go.

Well, it's sort of that way with Paul because no sooner does he mention about our being transformed, verse 13, into the kingdom of the Son God loves, and the very mention of "the Son God loves" sets him off. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, and so on." It just excites him and off Paul goes. He's in an orgy of pleasure in laying out the splendor of Jesus Christ. As one writer says, "What you have here in verses 15 to 23 is not Paul discoursing and not Paul discussing, you really have Paul worshipping." That's a little bit difficult because you feel a little bit of shame, you know, to eavesdrop on somebody else's worship but that's sort of what we have to do tonight if we're going to deal with the text. We just need to know, and he doesn't recover from it because he goes on declaring the splendor and the supremacy of Jesus in all things from chapter 1, verse 15, to chapter 4, verse 6. All of Colossians is under this theme. Maybe not with all the intensity that you see here, but that's the theme, the supremacy of Christ over all things and in everything that Christ is enough. That's what Paul's after in this.

Now, when you come to verses 15 to 23, especially verses 15 to 20, of course there are folks who are wondering, "Well, was this authored by Paul or was this section an early Christian confession that Paul adapted or that Paul took over and annotated?" And you can go to read commentaries to that if you want, there are about four or five pages in about every major commentary, and you can go to that, and actually Paul is perfectly capable of producing this himself in human terms without an early Christian ghostwriter, so I don't really want to go into that. You need to know how we're approaching it, though. There are two ways you can go about studying a biblical passage or biblical material. One is what I call milking the cow approach, that is, you just sit there with a couple of verses and you just keep pulling until you get everything out that you can. Now, that's milking the cow approach. You kind of try to exhaust and get everything you can out of that and you take a verse or two and you try to get everything you can and explore the text in detail. And the other approach is, as Dr. Mark Ross would say, riding the helicopter. Now, when you do that, you get up over the text and you look down on it and you don't get into all the fine details but you try to get a scope of the whole and there is value in that too. Tonight we have to ride the helicopter and so don't gripe if I don't answer, you know, "But what about this?" Or, "That particular matter of background, why didn't you address that?" We're in a helicopter. We can't deal with those sorts of details and so on but Paul here is impatient. He wants us to get on with it. He wants to tell us about him.

So what does he want to tell us about? He wants to tell you, first of all, about Christ in creation, verses 15 and 16, and he speaks of Christ's clarity, the first line of verse 15, and he speaks about Christ's creating in more detail. Now, he says he's the image of the invisible God. That's Christ's clarity. The image is the visible part and it represents accurately and completely the invisible part and so this is really, Paul is really saying that the nature and being of God is perfectly revealed in Christ Jesus. He completely and truly represents the invisible God. You really have this sort of teaching, you know, in John 14 when Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." And remember what Jesus said in John 14:9, "Have I been so long with you," you, plural, "and

you have not known me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father." How do you say, "Show us the Father?" The one who has seen me has seen the Father. Do you want to know what the invisible God is like, all that you need to know about him, you look at Christ Jesus.

Now, that's the clarity but then Paul goes on and speaks of Christ creating, doesn't he? He says he's the firstborn over all creation, or literally the firstborn of all creation. Now, that term "firstborn," what does that mean? Well, you keep reading and you understand what it does not mean, it does not mean that Christ is a part of creation or of created beings because right after that in verse 16, he says, "because by him all things were created." I know some translations read, "in him," and you can have several paragraphs explaining what that means but I still think the better translation is "by him" as you have in the last of verse 16, "all things have been created through him and for him." God the Father creates but he creates through Christ as his agent, and so I think it's still proper to say "by him all things were created." Christ is the agent in creation.

But, you see, if all things, 16a, if all things were created by Christ, then Christ himself is not a created being. Christ is separate and distinct from creation so whatever "firstborn over all creation" means, the firstborn does not mean that Christ is a created being. Verse 16a eliminates that. Actually, the term "firstborn" can have a metaphorical use and sometimes a temporal use. In Psalm 89:27, for instance, the term is really used in the Greek translation where the Psalmist is describing the covenant king of Israel and the Lord is speaking of him and his says, "And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." The firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. "Firstborn" there is used as a title of supremacy and that's the way it's used here in verse 15, "the firstborn over all creation." He is supreme over it because "by him all things were created."

Now, notice though that what Paul really underscores is the scope of Christ's creating work. All things were created whether things in the heavens and upon the earth, the visible things and the invisible things, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him. So it's as if he goes into the nooks and crannies of the universe and scrounges every last corner in placing special stress upon Christ's creation work and therefore his sovereignty over all that he has created.

Now, you notice that there is special stress here on the unseen powers, however your translation reads: thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities. Now, these unseen powers, invisible, unseen spiritual powers, angelic powers, etc., these could be good beneficent powers, on the other hand, they could be evil and malign powers and probably he may have in mind here even more, a little bit more because of the situation of Colossae of the evil powers. He's not talking here, not going into, "Well, why were they evil and how did they get that way?" and so on, he's just facing the fact there are unseen powers. There are even demonic powers, etc., but Christ is sovereign over them. He created them originally and so therefore he is sovereign over them and therefore you don't need to fear them. That's, I think, the big point that he's trying to stress.

Now, that was something that held first century man. One writer said that people feared the many spirits associated with wildlife, with agriculture, with the intersection of roads. Well, we know you have to fear the intersection of roads living in Columbia, but this was for different reasons. That there were astral spirits, the zodiac and all these different powers and they felt they were under the control and under the dominion of them, and so on. In fact, one church historian, a New Testament scholar of maybe 100 or so years ago said that, "The whole world," speaking of the pagan world in the time of the New Testament, "The whole world and its enveloping atmosphere were filled with devils, not merely idolatry but every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones. They hovered round cradles. The earth was literally a hell, though it was and continued to be a creation of God." Can you understand the fear that some of the people would be dominated by in that regard? And of course, you can go on.

That still is the case many places. Don McClure was a Presbyterian missionary among the Shulahs of the Sudan a number of years ago, probably mid-twentieth century, and there were some children in some of the United Presbyterian churches that sent a donation over to him for the Shulah children that he was to use for them, and so he wrote back thanking them and he told them a little bit about life among the Shulahs and he said that there was a man, a Shulah man, whose wife had given birth to a baby and this new father wanted Dr. McClure to come and see his new baby at their home and so on. McClure said that he always felt that when he saw Shulah babies born, he said they didn't look very good until they were about two or three months old. But he went to see this baby and it was kind of apparently a mud hut but it was immaculate as you could make a mud hut. The wife, the mother was there nursing the baby when Dr. McClure got there and he thought the baby, he said he thought the baby was ugly and skinny and so he told the parents that and they were very pleased and why is that? Well, because, he said, "I dared not say that the baby was pretty and strong or they would have been afraid of the evil eye. No one ever tells the parents that babies are pretty because they're afraid that if the evil eye hears that, it will want to live in them and so you tell them that the baby is ugly and skinny and they are satisfied."

You see the fear that people live in and so on, but that was the case in the first century, and as one writer says, "It was an age which was hag-ridden with the fear of demonic forces dominating every aspect of life and death." But if you understand who Jesus is who created all things visible and invisible, thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities, he created them and he's sovereign over them and they can't do anything but what he permits them to do. They are under his control because he created them and it casts out fear and you can live life without being consumed by terror. It makes a difference, this Christ in creation.

Then Paul says, "I want to tell you about Christ and coherence," verse 17. "And he himself is before all things and all things in him hold together." Now, just notice, by the way, I know this is a little bit of the milking the cow kind of Bible study, but you notice that verse 17 begins with a little word, "and." It's a conjunction and a lot of biblical translators like to eliminate those things because they like to kind of clean it up a little bit

so it reads a little better. So some of your translations don't have the "and" at the beginning of verse 17 or at the beginning of verse 18, but I think the "and" is important in a way. That little "and" suggests that there is always more of Christ than you think or imagine. There is always something more about Jesus for you to know and wonder at. There's always a big "and" there and here, it's in part his pre-existence. He is, he himself is before all things. He's not part of the "all things" but he's before "all things." That's arguing for his pre-existence and by implication his being eternal being and so on.

"And in him all things hold together." The idea is they have held together and they currently continue to be held together. They cohere. In other words, there is order and there is stability and there is coherence in created life. As one commentator says, "Because Christ holds all things together, the world is a cosmos and not a chaos." That's the basic point. Clinton Arnold, trying to sum up what this kind of means in the context says, "Not only does Christ keep the world from falling apart as a result of earthquakes, floods, plagues and cosmic disturbances, he maintains a check on the awful workings of the demonic powers," with an eye back on verse 16.

You might say, "Okay, I believe that. Big deal. What difference does that make?" Well, I don't know. The most familiar thing to me would be to take you back before the New Testament age. Let me take you back into what we sometimes call the Old Testament period and back to Abrahamish like times and 2,000 or 1,500 BC and back in there. I think maybe I told you once before that some scholars have spoken of the world at that time, the pagan world, as suffering overtones of anxiety. Now, why was that? Well, it was because of their theology, because of what they believed about their gods and goddesses. It was the kind of theology they had and what was that? Well, no one was in control. The deities they worshiped might be high deities or low deities. They may be more powerful deities or less powerful but no one was in total control and held it all together. The universe had no glue in it and chaos could happen at any time.

It made a difference. Let me just give you a clip of this sort of thing. Now, for instance in the Mesopotamian floods story and don't get out of shape because there are pagan parallels to biblical events. If you read the pagan stuff, it helps you to appreciate the biblical account. But in one of the Mesopotamian floods stories, the gods, the majority of them, decided to destroy mankind and once the flood started, the gods were terror struck at the very forces they themselves had unleashed. They were appalled at the consequences of their own action or decisions over which they no longer had any control. The gods were told, "We're frightened like dogs crouched against the wall." And the goddess Ishtar is said to have cried out and screamed like a woman giving childbirth. It was open theism with a vengeance, you could say. No one could control it. The gods themselves were struck with terror with what they had unleashed. No one had a hand on things.

That's the universe they lived in and you say, "Well, alright, but we don't believe in that old paganism stuff. Too bad about those folks, you know, but in our secular age, we don't think of that." No. No, we have a new paganism instead. Peter Moore in one of his books describes a sunken garden that I understand is outside the Beinecke Rare Book Library on

the campus of Yale University. This sunken garden is meant to represent the universe and it's all of marble and there are criss-cross lines and so on in it, simulating the universe. Then in one corner, there is a pyramid that represents time. In another corner, there is a large or a huge donut-shaped structure that is standing on its side and that represents energy. And in a third corner, there is a huge massive die, as in dice, that's sitting on the pinnacle, ready to flip one way or another and that, of course, represents chance. That's the new paganism, you might say, but it's the same old stuff in a way. Chance, no one is in control. It's a universe that operates by chance and everything is flip-floppy and there is no rationale or coherence to it and you need to go there, you might say, and cry out, "It's a lie! It's not like that at all!"

In him all things hold together. Jesus Christ supplies the moment by moment glue that holds the universe together. It doesn't mean that there aren't tsunamis. It doesn't mean that there aren't hurricanes. It doesn't mean that there aren't earthquakes. But why are they so limited as they are? And why doesn't everything fly off into nothingness? It's because Christ holds it together moment by moment and therefore life is not meaningless and history is not one stupid thing after another and the world is not a nerdy chaos. That may not eliminate the depression you're having in your life right now but it may give you the reason to get through it. Maybe that's why William Gadsby could write in his hymn, "Immortal honors rest on Jesus' head." Unfortunately the editors of the Trinity Hymnal didn't put it in our hymnbook. It's a marvelous hymn. I can be sung to the tune, Toulon, from 168 in our hymnal. But the first stanza of Gadsby's hymn,

"Immortal honors rest on Jesus' head;
My God, my portion, and my living bread;
In Him I live, upon Him cast my care;
He saves from death, destruction, and despair."

And that's what you see in Christ and coherence. But then, thirdly, Paul says, "I want to tell you about Christ and church." Verses 18 and 19, "And he himself is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that he alone may come to have first place in all things," and so on. Now, you notice that it calls him the head of the body, the church, and the sense here seems to be, the implication is that what's true for the head will be true for the body. What's true for Christ will prove true for his people.

Then it says that he's the firstborn out of the dead. Now, here "firstborn" is used more in the sense of a temporal sense probably, used here in the sense of synonyms perhaps: pathfinder, trailblazer, pioneer, that sort of thing. The first one. The first born out of the dead. It's referring to Christ in his resurrection and resurrection power.

Then you notice that Paul says, "in order that he may come to have first place in all things." Apparently even in death because he rose victorious over death as the firstborn from the dead, and what's true for Christ will be true for his people. What's true for the head will be true for the body. And so he not only deals with my dread as in Christ in

creation, not only with my despair as in Christ and coherence, but he deals with my death and Christ and the church here. My morality is sucked up in his life.

This whole idea of the firstborn, the trailblazer, the firstborn from the dead, Michael Green gave a kind of an analogy to it in one of his books, "The Empty Cross of Jesus." He said a time was in the Middle Ages when they debated over the possibility of a sea route to India and there was a lot of speculation in political and economic circles in the European capitals. Was there a way to the rich land of spices and perfumes around the southern tip of Africa? And no one knew for sure, although many believed that there was. And all attempts had failed and so much so that the Cape at the tip of Africa was called the Cape of Storms because there were so many wrecks there and so on. One sailor, though, determined to try again and he succeeded in rounding the Cape and reaching the East and there is still a monument, I understand, to that famous mariner, Vasco da Gama, in China today. Ever since he sailed back to Lisbon in triumph, it's been impossible to doubt that a way to the Orient exists around the bottom of Africa, in fact, it was renamed the Cape of Good Hope. Green says it's sort of like it is with Christ.

He is the firstborn of the dead. Is there a way through death? Is there a victory in death, etc.? Can you go into death and can you come out raised to life again? Is there an answer to that? Well, Jesus took that voyage into the darkness. He walked into the valley of the shadow of death and he came out in resurrection power. And with the empty tomb, he is the one who walked in darkness with no glimmer of light and he can take my hand and he can take your hand if you're trusting in him, and he can say, "Come, I'll take you through the darkness. I have been there and I've come out," so that 1 Thessalonians 4:14 is true. God will bring with him, that is, with Jesus in his resurrection, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. Christ and church.

But then Paul goes on and he says, "There is one more thing I want to underscore for you," and that's in verses 20-23, Christ and cross. Christ and cross. Now, you notice just to pull the connection together here, in verse 19, Paul made this astounding statement, "Because in him," that is, in Christ, "God in all his fullness delighted to dwell and," you have to repeat the verb, "he delighted through him to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, through him whether things on earth or things in the heavens."

Now, he mentions reconciliation and Paul is saying, you notice he mentions "through the blood of his cross." That's the focus of Paul here. But he's saying he brings about a cosmic reconciliation, that's in verse 20, a cosmic reconciliation. You notice the scope of it, "all things." He probably means the whole universe; the whole created order; things on earth or things in heaven. Likely this is a very close parallel, in my view anyway, others would disagree I suppose, but very close parallel to Romans 8:20-23 where Paul talks about how the whole created order is groaning and how it needs, you might say, to be pacified because it's out of sync and it's infected with futility and so on, and the whole created order is so plunged into and ridden with curse and disorder since Genesis 3 that it needs to be restored to its proper order and function, and even this is through the blood of the cross.

Now, notice that crass word "cross." It's almost as if Paul was saying, "Yes, it was through the electric chair that this happened; where it was through the gas chamber." The cross is the instrument of torture and of execution. This is not particularly a nice sort of affair.

But then you notice what Paul does, not only is there cosmic reconciliation but he adds three more verses and you notice in verse 21 how he begins, "and you," emphatic, "and you who were once being alienated and enemies in your mind in the midst of wicked works," and so on. And you. It's not just cosmic reconciliation but there's a personal reconciliation. It's almost too much, you might say. If there's this cosmic worldwide whole created order kind of reconciliation, what could that have to do with me? Sometimes it's too much to believe maybe. Sort of like Willie Mays when he was the star center fielder for the San Francisco Giants, had a number of a certain young lady in Pittsburgh and when the Giants were playing in Pittsburgh one time, she was a graduate student at Howard University, her name I think was Mae Louise Allen, and he had her phone number. So she was quite a baseball fan herself. She loved the Pittsburgh Pirates, I think, and the St. Louis Cardinals, and she was a super Willie Mays fan, although I don't think he knew that and so on. But in any case, he called her up and he said, "Mae Louise Allen?" and she said, "Speaking." He said, "You don't know me but this is Willie Mays," and she responded, "Yes, and I'm Martha Washington," and she hung up.

You can't believe it. You can't believe that someone like Willie Mays would be calling you and there is the same wonder here. You had three more verses tacked on and it begins, "and you who once were alienated." Oh my, do you see the way the Gospel is? In verse 21, you have the "once," and in verse 22, you have the "but now." That's the way it is. Once it was this way, but now. That's the difference Christ makes. Once what? What were you? Well, your condition: you were lost, having been alienated or estranged. And as to your thinking: you were enemies in your mind. And as to your living: in the midst of evil works. So you were lost, you were alienated, you were hostile, you were enemies in your mind, and you were depraved and perverted because you were living and practicing evil works.

"But now," he says, "but now he has reconciled you in the body of his flesh through death," verse 22, and what's the program? "To present you before his presence at the last, holy and without blemish and beyond accusation." What an astounding difference. "No, this," Paul says, "this isn't just something cosmic for the whole created order, this is for you folks at Colossae. Back there in Phrygia in a relatively obscure city like yours in the Lycus River Valley. This is for you and you as well." There is that personal element.

Well now, what I want you to see here is that for all the stellar splendor of Jesus, it ends "with the blood of his cross," verse 20, "and in the body of his flesh through death," verse 22. Very crassly physical. This is not some philosophical, clinical, refined Christ but the one in whom the splendor of God is seen. It's the Jesus of the old rugged cross. Here is no bright, shiny, chrome-plated, shrink-wrapped Jesus but here is the one, as Isaiah said, "so

disfigured, his appearance did not seem to be that of a man." That's part of the splendor and the glory of Christ. Christ and cross.

Let me tell you a story. There was a time in Scotland that was known as the killing times. This particular one happened about 1684 and it was a time where believers, covenanters, some of them were called, that they were supposed to completely submit to the tyranny of the king; the king and the government could not be questioned at all and the problem was that the soldiers and really the thugs that went out to take care of these treasonous people, could do so without any legal process at all. They didn't have to put them on trial. They didn't have to take evidence. If the fellows who apprehended them wanted to execute them on the spot, they could, all they had to do is decide to do it. There was a fellow by the name of Claverhouse, a thug and we would call him a jerk, I suppose, but in any case, he was eliminating some of these folks and he came and apprehended a fellow by the name of John Brown of Priesthill and apparently they found some bullets and what they called treasonable papers in his cottage and so he said, "You must die. Go to your prayers." Well, Brown prayed. He prayed for his family and so on, his wife and his children and so on. Then finally, Claverhouse said, "That's enough." He counted off six of his soldiers and he told them to shoot him and they hesitated because hardened as they were, they were very impressed with John Brown's prayer when he had been pleading with the Lord in the time that he had been given. So Claverhouse pulled his own pistol and shot him dead with his own hand, and then apparently the other six men must have shot him as well and most of the bullets came on his head and scattered his brains around all over the place, and then Claverhouse said to Isabel Brown, "What thinkest thou of thy husband now, woman?" And the poor widow said, "I ever thought much good of him and now more than ever." So Claverhouse rides off with his henchmen and Isabel Brown with an infant in her arms and a toddler clinging to her leg took them both and sat them down in that desolate place on the ground and she went and she gathered up her husband's brains and tied it up as good as she could and then she took her plaid and covered him up and she sat down and she wept.

So now, what do you say when Paul shows you not only the cosmic Christ creating and controlling, originating and ordering the masses in minutiae of the universe? And when he shows you not only the conquering Christ who has trampled death and has turned our funerals into vestibules of glory? But then he shows you the crucified Christ and the body of his flesh through death, he shows you the mangled Jesus in the blood of his cross, what do you say to that? And can't Isabel Brown help you here? Can't she come up alongside of you and give you the words to say? "I ever thought much good of him and now more than ever."

What a matchless massive Messiah you are in every respect of your grandeur and your person. You meet some desperate need of ours. Praise be to you, O Christ. Amen.