

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 2 COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

OVERVIEW | COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

Colossians 1:15-20 is generally, and rightly, placed among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament. Someone who writes this way wants his or her readers to stop and think. The most obvious point of the poem is the parallel between creation and new creation; hence the emphasis that is placed on the fact that each was accomplished by the same being. The Lord through whom you are redeemed (Paul is telling the Colossians) is none other than the one through whom you (and all the world) were created.

The poem speaks of Jesus in exalted terms: he is not only the Lord of the church but also the ruler of the universe (1:15-17); he is not just the Savior of humanity but also the one who reconciles all things in heaven and on earth (1:20). The person of Christ is described as one who is “the image of the invisible God” (1:15) in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19).



The work of Christ includes his traditional role as God’s agent of redemption (1:14) but is expanded to include serving also as God’s agent of creation: all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, were created “through him and for him” (1:16). The incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus were self-revealing, self-fulfilling actions which the one creator God was pleased to undertake (cf. 2 Cor 5:19 w/ Col 1:19-20).

The poem leaves the church, and the world, not just with a picture of the exalted Christ, but with a vision of the gracious and loving creator-redeemer God.

– N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72-5

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- 15 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
- 16 for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.
- 17 He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.
- 18 Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.
He is the beginning,
supreme over all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.
- 19 For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,
- 20 and through him God reconciled
everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross

21 This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. 22 Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. 23 But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it.

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In Colossians 1:9-10 Paul prays that the Colossians would grow in their wisdom and understanding about Jesus. Now Paul has placed a poem here to help the Colossians and us do exactly that. It's the centerpiece of chapter one, a poem all about the crucified and exalted Messiah. And it's packed with imagery and language from Genesis (1), Exodus (40), Psalms (2, 6, 68, 72), Proverbs (8), and Isaiah (40-55).

The first section explores how Jesus is the true image of God. In him the full character and purpose of God is embodied in a human. He's the firstborn, an Old Testament phrase which speaks to Jesus' royal status over all creation. He shares in the very identity of the one true creator God. And by him all things, all powers and authorities, spiritual and human, have been created. It's in Jesus the Messiah that we discover the very author and king of creation.

In the second part we're told that Jesus is also the one bringing about the new creation. He's the head of a new body, which refers to Jesus' people, who are the new humanity, of which the resurrected Christ is the first. In him God's glorious temple presence dwells, and so it's through Jesus' death and resurrection that God has reconciled himself to humanity, to all spiritual powers, and to all of creation.

Pulling both sections together: In Christ we find strength, endurance, patience, joy, and thanksgiving in release from old life and growth in new life. All these things flow out of all the ways that Christ connects all of us and all of creation to the power, life, faith, hope, and love (see also Colossians 1:3-8) that constitute life's richest possibilities and the deepest realities of God and God's creation.

N.T. Wright sums up the poem with these three points:

1. Look at Jesus if you want to see what God looks like. Neurologists say that one of the most remarkable things about human intelligence is our ability to recognize and read human faces. Many people have said, "Well I have trouble with names, but I never forget a face!" That's very human. We're very good at it. We're so good at it we don't realize what an accomplishment it is just to see somebody's face and know who they are. Sometimes we go many years without seeing someone and yet we still know who it is when we see their face.

God has a face, and it's the face of Jesus. We see the face of God when we see and recognize the face of Jesus. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (1:15). And it's in seeing and recognizing the face of God in Christ that we are brought to life and become who we were created to be. As we spend time in the Gospels, and in prayer, and in worship, the image of God's face is formed by the artistry of the Holy Spirit. And as we gaze upon the beauty of God's face we are gradually formed into God's image. You probably know how this works. When you first interact with other people, what's one good way to make them smile? To smile first! You smile at them and they smile back. We mimic one another.

Likewise, as we look into the face of Jesus, over time we are steadily, gradually transformed into the same image. We become like Jesus. Which is what salvation is all about. It's about becoming like Jesus. And as we stay with Jesus, and we keep looking at him and learning from him, one day we realize that little by little we're becoming more and more like Jesus. Day by day we're able to see the face of God in others more and more.

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All the great questions of theology are about who is God, how can we know, and how can we tell. **And all the answers should come back to Jesus. Jesus has unveiled God. He is the image of the invisible God. When we look at him we see the very image of God.** In other words, this is not only a poem that holds together creation and redemption. It's a poem which holds together God and humans.

John, Paul, Hebrews, and Revelation all look at Jesus and say that in him the fullness of God dwells and has been revealed. When God wants to come to dwell in the midst of his people, he came as a human being. For in him all the fullness of God was glad to dwell and through him it would reconcile all things. That is the beginning of the theme of new creation.

2. Jesus is the bridge between the old world/old creation and the new world/new creation. Christ is celebrated as the agent of the one God in creation, the one through whom creation is kept going, and through his death and resurrection, the one who reveals and accomplishes God's purposes for humanity and the cosmos. We have to remind ourselves that Paul is writing here about a man of very recent memory and present experience – the Jesus who lived and died and rose again less than a generation from when this letter is written. Many believe that this poem and the one in Philippians 2 grew out of Paul's own life and relationship with Christ during a time of real difficulty for him when he was in pain and despair in prison. Whether or not that is the case, what we're seeing here is one of the earliest expressions of what later writers call *Christology* – an expression of understanding, praise, and loyalty to Jesus. To understand how this works, we must think about the larger picture that Paul is drawing in Colossians 1, using a host of images of the Old Testament (we'll look at a few below).

The Psalms frequently confess that God *the creator* is also God *the redeemer*. In other words, what happens in **Genesis** (God making the world) is the work of the same God in **Exodus** (God rescuing Israel). That is formative for the people of God then and now. The God of Israel is alive, doing things, changing things, and making new things happen. We see this in **Isaiah 40-55** as well, a poem that stands at the pinnacle of Israel's heritage. It begins with an evocation of God as the creator, but at the same time, he will feed his flock like a shepherd and lead the mother sheep. That's what Isaiah 40-55 is all about. God is doing new things, and particularly God is repeating the Exodus story. He rescued Israel from the darkness of Egypt, brought them through the Red Sea, dwelled in their midst, and led them to their inheritance. And that's what God is doing now, coming to their rescue.

The poetic language of God's full presence dwelling in Christ takes us back to **Isaiah 40 and 52**, where God's glory would come and dwell in the temple visibly and wonderfully. This promise seemed to be too good to be true. They had rebuilt the temple and there was a sense of God's presence, but they were waiting and longing for its full expression. Malachi says, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). Yet it seemed that God had not yet returned in his full glorious splendor. That glorious return of Yahweh to Zion is what people were waiting for, not only in Isaiah but also in the Psalms.

In **Psalm 72** there is a picture of the king, who is the true king, because he does justice, looks after the poor and needy, and maintains the rights of the widows and orphans. The Psalmist says that when this happens the whole earth will be full of God's glory (72:19). The true king will build the temple so that God's glory can dwell there. The true king will do justice to put the world right so that God's glory will dwell in all the world.

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These great promises come through into the New Testament in passages like this one. We find the New Testament writers saying that this is what has happened in and through Jesus. Here that focus lies in 1:19: “In him all God’s fullness was pleased to dwell.” The point here is that, in Jesus, the Exodus 40 moment has happened (God rescuing Israel from their captivity in Egypt), the 1 Kings 8 moment has happened (Solomon dedicating the temple), the Isaiah 6 moment has happened (the glory of the Lord being visible in the temple). It has happened once and for all in and through Jesus.

This is the full picture that Paul wants to paint for the Colossians. This person Jesus is to be identified as the one through whom all things were made. And now he is the one through whom all things are being remade. Like Isaiah 40-55, this poem in Colossians celebrates a God who is both majestic and sovereign over the whole world– and who also comes down in person to rescue those who need that rescue so badly. That is the kind of both/and which this poem celebrates.

When we look at this balance of old creation and new creation, we must realize that saying there is *one good creator who made a good world* doesn’t mean that nothing has gone wrong. Somehow the church has to hold the goodness and the brokenness of the creation together. And the place they’re held together is the cross. The cross is the place where the love of the creator God does what was needed to take everything that has gone wrong and to come out into the beginning of a new creation. If you take the cross out of the picture, it’s very difficult to sustain.

The poetic material here is oriented toward God’s purposes of *shalom* for the whole creation, including reconciliation for the alienated and marginalized and justice for the oppressed – purposes brought about through solidarity of Christ in his death on the cross. The reference to Jesus’ death is now set in the context of Christ’s role in creation, and his eternal rule means that his death was not just one more act in the cycle of unending violence. Rather, through the vindication of the resurrection, there is hope that alienation and suffering throughout creation will cease.

Although it defies what we can presently prove, we confess that what holds the world together is not the survival of the fittest or an unending cycle of violence, but the reconciliation and the peace of Christ. The pattern with Christ at the center will be there for all to see when the reconciliation that has taken place through Christ’s death and resurrection is fully realized.

3. Jesus is the blueprint for what it looks like to be human, as illustrated in the gospels. That’s why time spent watching and walking with Jesus in the gospels is so important. We need to know who Christ really is and what he has done for us in order to know who we really are and how to act out of that knowledge.

Paul writes that Jesus himself is head over the body, the church. Paul puts the church in the middle of this picture. They are the people who are the body of which Jesus is head, and they too have a role right within the heart of this poetically expressed truth about Christ. In other words, they are to live as the true people of God, knowing that Jesus has brought heaven and earth together, and through his own blood, is reconciling all things to the Father. That is the foundation of Christian life and witness and thanksgiving.

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Perhaps the real challenge of this poetic material lies in its depiction of the church as the beginning of a reconciliation that will be cosmic and universal in scope. As a reconciled and reconciling community, we are a people through which this purpose is furthered, and through whom the community finds new ways to be human together. If this is true, then what is the most urgent task of Christ-followers today? Andrew Lincoln puts it well:

“The most urgent task of Christ-followers is to play their part in making the church a place of healing for broken relationships, where divisions caused by race, class, wealth, education, gender, and nationality are overcome, and an agent of peace and justice in situations of conflict, whether in the home or the workplace, at the national or the international level. The details of the future are prepared by a loving and just God, therefore our present focus is to say and do all we can as ambassadors for the values of the coming new world.” (Lincoln, *Colossians*, 611)

[Continue to Believe and Stand Firm \(1:21-23\)](#)

Paul has given us this extraordinary map of God’s purposes from the creation of all things in Christ to the reconciliation of all things in Christ. At the center is the affirmation that Christ is supreme over all things, the head of the body, the church. Paul is writing to people who weren’t from a Jewish background but who had been ordinary pagans worshiping the local gods or goddesses. So Paul says, “There was a time when you were excluded.” What from? For Paul, what matters is being part of the people of God. Paul affirms that the gentiles in their natural state were unclean and outside the people of God. They were enemies in their way of thinking (1:21). It was opposed to the way of thinking that you find in Israel’s scriptures and in Jesus. They were hostile to the idea of a creator God who might have good purposes for the world. The result of that was idolatrous behavior and sin.

Then we have one of Paul’s glorious “but now” moments where he says, “But now God has reconciled you” (1:22). God has broken down the dividing wall (Eph 2), and made a way for the outsider to come in. Something about the death and resurrection of Jesus means that those who were excluded are now included. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God in Christ deals with the idolatry and wickedness of human nature, and now they can be welcomed. God has reconciled us and cleansed us through the blood of Christ, bringing heaven and earth together.

Paul goes on in 1:23 to say that just because we’ve now been welcomed, we can’t say there’s nothing left to do and go back to the way we were living. Rather, something new has begun and we must continue, “not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard” (1:23), the hope of the inheritance and new creation (see 1:5). Paul says to keep our eyes fixed on the fact that God is going to renew the world and we will be part of that. And if we grasp to that, it will enable us to stay firm on our foundation. That foundation is the hope of the gospel which has been announced under all creation under heaven, the gospel to which Paul says he’s become a servant.

Now when Paul goes from place to place, he goes with the conviction that he is speaking into a situation which has already been claimed by God as God’s own territory and into which the gospel of Jesus, though it may be painful, has every right to go. That is the foundation from which the Colossians must not waver. Paul will keep referring back to this as he goes on in the letter, including next week when he shows how the truth of Colossians 1:15-20 has transformed his own suffering in prison.

DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be the “head” of something? What do you expect from someone who is designated as the “head”?
2. In Colossians 1:15-20, what difference does it make that Christ is all of these things? How would you sum up what the poem reveals about Christ? What is most meaningful to you?
3. What does it mean for Jesus to be “the image of the invisible God”? If God looks like Jesus, what does this tell us about God’s nature and disposition toward us?
4. Reflect on your ability to see the face of God when you see the face of another human (each of whom are created in the image of God). What helps you do this? (You can even share some disciplines that have helped you). When has it been difficult for you to see the face of God in others? Why is this discipline so important in our world today?
5. If we are to grow as Christians, increasing in wisdom, strength, patience, and thanksgiving, we need to know above all what the Colossians needed to know: *the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ*. If Christ is the center of all things, and the blueprint for what it means to be human, how does this affect your home and family life? Your work? The work of our church? Your life as a citizen?
6. What are one or two ways in which your life is different since you were changed from being “alienated from God” to being “reconciled through Christ’s death” (1:21-22)? How have you become (or in what ways are you striving to become) an ambassador of reconciliation in your life right now?