

The Beauty of Christ's Preeminence

Colossians 1:15-23

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August 9, 2026

Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. My name is Penny and I'm the pastor here and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. Glad that you would join us this morning as we gather for worship and as we come to God's word and sing to him and offer him praise. It is good for us to be together. And so it is good for us to join together this morning. And if you are new with us, you're joining us in the second week of a new sermon series in the book of Colossians. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Colossians, Chapter 1. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you and the passage can be found on page 983. So Colossians, Chapter 1.

We're going to look at the middle section of chapter one this morning, verses 15-23. Now if you were here with us last week, then you might remember that we talked about how Paul is writing to this church that he's never met before. He's never interacted with them. He hasn't been there. He didn't plant it. He's only gotten word about who they are and what they're struggling with and the challenges they're facing because of his friends, his friend Epaphras, who planted the church. And what Paul has heard from him is that there are these philosophies and ideas about spirituality and about religious life that are starting to seep into the church. And these philosophies and ideas are devaluing the significance and importance of Jesus. And so Paul writes to them. So I want you to put yourself in Paul's shoes for a moment. I want you to think about what would you write to these people, to this group of believers, to this church, where there is danger of them being led astray, of being pulled in directions away from Jesus. How would you combat those philosophies, those pulls?

There's a few different approaches maybe we would take, right? We could maybe take the Bob Newhart approach and just simply say, "Stop it," right? "Don't do it," right? Just in big letters at the top of every parchment, like stop. We could do that. That'd be one way. Maybe we could shame them. That'd be another way, right? We could say something like, "Are you kidding me? Are you all idiots? Like, how long have you been trying to do this? And how long have you known of Jesus? And now you're going to deviate from this?" Like, "Come on," (give your head a shake). Maybe say that. Or maybe we could simply close our eyes and hope for the best. Maybe they'll come to their senses and maybe not too much damage will have happened, right? Those are options that would be available to us, none of which are very good. But those are the options, and of those options, Paul doesn't use any of them. No, when Paul seeks to counteract the philosophy of the day, of the errant teaching that is seeping into the church, he doesn't close his eyes, he doesn't shame them, and he doesn't just simply yell, "STOP." No, instead, he writes this in verse 15.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”
(ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would meet with us as we come to your word. Father, we need your help, so we ask you would open our eyes. We ask that you would make our minds attentive, that you would allow my words to honor you. Father, we pray that we would behold your glory, we would behold the beauty of Jesus, and we would cling and hold fast to him. And it's in his name we pray. Amen.

Well, I imagine that the vast majority of us know the name Saint Augustine, that great bishop of Hippo, right? He's one of the most influential thinkers in the history of the church, right? He's got to be at least top five greatest theologians, maybe top three, right? It's like Augustine, Calvin, I don't really know who else, but you know, it's those two, right? They're right up there, because he was an incredible thinker, incredible mind. He lived in the 300s, in the 4th century, and his writings, his readings, they're still poured over today. I have many of his works on my bookshelves. And it's not just Christianity that he influenced, he influenced the broader culture. I remember being a history major at a secular university, and when we studied ancient history, we had to read Augustine. Not because of his theology, not for his influence of the church, but because of his influence to the culture at large. He was an incredible theologian, a pastor, an academic, incredibly insightful. And that's what we remember of him, right? The great bishop, the great theologian.

But if you know of Augustine, you know that that's not his whole story. Because before he was a bishop, before he was a pastor, he was someone chasing after what he called created things. He was climbing the ranks of academia, he was sexually immoral, he was ambitious for a governorship, and he devoted his life to a philosophy called Manicheanism. This was a philosophy that had an understanding of the world of dualism, that there is good and evil, and they are competing against one another, and we're not sure which will win, because both good and evil have great power. This philosophy, it mocked the Lord. It mocked the Old Testament depictions of God. This is who Augustine was. So what happened to him? How did he become this great bishop, this great theologian? Well, if you know Augustine's story, you know that he was in a garden and he heard the words, “Take and read,” and he sat on a bench, and there was a Bible, and he opened the copy of the Scriptures, and he turned to Romans 13, and there he read of putting off his flesh, and putting on Christ, and clinging to the beauty of God and of Jesus. And he says in that moment, God's beauty broke his rebellion. Reflecting on that moment, he wrote to the Lord, “Lord, late have I loved you. Beauty so old, so new. Late have I loved you. And see, you were within, and I was in the external world, and sought you there. And in my unlovely state, I plunged into those lovely created things which you made.” He wrote, “God's beauty called and cried out loud, and shattered my deafness. Beauty broke through.”

His Preeminence Over Creation

It wasn't philosophical arguments, and it wasn't shame that transformed him, that combated the immorality that he was clinging to, or caused him to turn away from that errant philosophy. No, it was the beauty of the Lord. That's what changed him. That's what transformed him. That's what combated all those other things that were seeking to pull at him. And that's what Paul's presenting in our passage. That's what he puts before the Colossians, and what he's putting before us. Paul combats the errant philosophy, and the teaching that is seeping into the church by presenting the beauty of Jesus. The beauty of Jesus seen in him being preeminent over creation. That's how the passage began. We hear it immediately. "He," that is Jesus, "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him."

There's so much here in these few verses. I was talking to a friend of mine this week. He's a pastor in Alabama, and he commented on this passage that you could probably preach a sermon on every word. A different sermon on every word. We're not going to do that this morning. But there are a few things I want to point out. The first is that most theologians think that verses 15-20 is actually a hymn. It's a song. And there's some debate, like *did Paul write the song, or is it a song that was familiar to, that was going around in the day?* It was familiar to the different churches. You know, it was kind of making its way from place to place. It was kind of like the first century version of the Gettys, right? Like, it seems like everyone's singing this, and maybe Paul's like adapting it to his purposes. It's probably the latter, not the former. That's how I would probably understand it, that Paul probably didn't write this. But he sings. He introduces poetry and song into his letter, and he sings. And what does he sing of? He sings Christ is the firstborn over creation. The firstborn over creation.

Now, when we hear that word, firstborn, it might make us think that Paul is saying that Jesus was a created being, right? Like that in the beginning, before there were the heavens and the earth and all that they contained, there was God the Father. And at some point, God the Father created God the Son, and then they made the heavens and the earth. It could make us think that that's what Paul is saying, but that's not what he's saying. He's not claiming that Jesus is a created being when he says that he is the firstborn of all creation, because to do so would to go against what the other scriptures tell us. Like in John, Chapter 1, we hear there that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word took on flesh and tabernacled, dwelt among us." And of course, in John 1, the Word is Jesus. And so what we're being told is that before there was the heavens and the earth, and before there was anything else, before there was even creation, there was the Father and the Son and the Spirit dwelling in perfect unity. John 1 tells us this.

Psalms 2, quoted in Acts 13, Hebrews 1 and Hebrews 5, tells us that Jesus is begotten, not made. Begotten, that means he's of the same substance as the Father, not created. And so the firstborn of creation isn't speaking of existence. It's actually speaking of priority or rank. The pastor Kent Hughes put it this way. He said, "highest honor belong to him. Christ is completely supreme in creation." That's what firstborn is indicating, that Jesus is over the creation. Not that he is a created being, but that he is completely supreme over it. And we see that in verses 16-17. Do you see what Paul says? That "all things were created by him. All things were created through him. All things were created for him. He is before all things, and he holds all things together." Now listen, when Paul says all things, he means all things.

Not just things pertaining to Sunday morning. Not just things when we are reading our Bibles. Not just those things when we are going and praying to the Lord. No, when he says all things, he means it all. And just to make sure that we understand he means all things, he gets very explicit. In heaven and earth, visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. All things were created by Christ. You were, and I was, in this world. Jesus is the one for whom all things were created by, and for whom they were created for. And that means, because he is the creator and preeminent, that all things belong to him. All things were created through him and for him. And so practically what this means for us is that we are functioning the way in which we were created to function, and we are our most human when our lives are oriented towards him and under his rule. That when our talents, and our minds, and our words, and our careers, and our homes are lived for him.

But we know the world doesn't operate that way very often, don't we? I mean, we experience this. We see a world that often isn't oriented towards the ways of the Lord. That isn't functioning in a way that is supposed to, that is coming under Christ's lordship. Or is seeking to live or operate in a way that gives him glory. Right? We see this in the world. We see it with wars, and strife, and murder, and hatred, with theft, and greed. That the created order isn't functioning the way it was created to be. But y'all, that's not just a problem in the world out there. That's a problem in here too. Like, that's a problem for me. It's a problem for me because every time that I sin, every time that you sin, in that moment, in that second, we have not ordered that moment, that second around Christ. Instead, we've indulged our flesh, and given in to temptation, and lived for ourselves. Paul says in verse 21, "we were alienated, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." Christ is the creator, but his creation turned its back on him. Or as Augustine put it, "I abandoned you to pursue the lowest things in your creation." We turn from the creator. But there's good news.

His Preeminence Over New Creation

There's good news because though the creation turned from the beauty of its creator, to the ugliness of sin and rebellion, Jesus's beauty is found not only in his preeminence over creation, but his preeminence over new creation. Did you see it in verses 18-20? "He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." So do you see what Jesus is doing? He's making all things new. He's reconciling all things to himself, and we see this reconciliation in creation, in the created order. Right? When Paul says, whether on earth or in heaven, he is reconciling all things to himself. He's picking up on a theme that he wrote of himself, that he wrote himself in Romans 8. In Romans chapter 8, when the apostle Paul is talking about the redemption of Jesus, he says the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. The creation itself is groaning because it's been subject to futility. It's awaiting the redemption of Jesus. It's waiting for that day when Christ will return, and when he does, he will bring forth the new heavens and the new earth. And in that day, groaning will give way to a giant sigh of relief. I don't know what mountain sighing will sound like, but we know that the futility that the creation has been subjected to will be no more. That there will be a new heavens and a new earth because Jesus is reconciling all things to himself. And this reconciliation isn't just in the created order, it's in us as well.

Because look what he does. He takes those alienated, hostile in mind, doing evil things. People like you, people like me, people not living for the creator. And in verse 22, "he is now

reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Did you hear what he does? Those who are alienated are now holy. Those who were hostile are now blameless. Those who were doing evil deeds are now above reproach. And we are this way not because of anything that we did, but because of what he does. He makes us new creations and presents us to the father as holy and blameless and above reproach. New creations. That's what we are. The apostle Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 5, one of the most beautiful passages in the entire New Testament, when he says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is passed away. Behold, the new has come. All this is from God who, through Christ, reconciled us to himself.” The old is gone and the new has come. Y'all, that is the beautiful work of Christ. He is the only one who can do this. This is the beauty of Jesus making all things new. And how does he do it? Verse 20, “making peace by the blood of his cross.” Verse 22, “reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.” Verse 18, “he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Paul is recounting Christ's death and resurrection because it's by his death and resurrection that this newness comes about. In his death, Jesus took our place and his blood was shed. He takes our punishment that we deserved and through his death, he brings peace with the Father. We were alienated and now we are children of the Father. We were hostile and rebels and now we're part of his family.

That's what Christ does through his death. But it's also through his resurrection because in his resurrection, this new created order is brought about. We see it in verse 18. “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Paul's using similar language to that of creation, but now he's talking about new creation, right? Beginning. This word beginning, it's Jesus being the source, the source of a new age that is dawned with the resurrection. That just in the beginning, before all time, Jesus made all things new. Well, now at his resurrection, there's a new beginning, a reconciliation, a new creation that has come. It begins. It has begun. It will come in full when Jesus returns and he consummates his kingdom. And this new order will be the norm for all time, right? This is all that we will know and experience. Glorified, resurrected bodies that are free from sin and death and decay and disease. This is the new order that Jesus is ushering in. It's what we await, but we don't just wait for it. We actually experience it in part today. We experience it even now because this new creation that Jesus has ushered in with his resurrection, it's on display in his church. Did you see what he said in verse 18? He is the head of the body, the church. It is in the church, in God's people, where we see this new creation at work because it's in his church, in you and in me, where the people who were alienated and hostile and doing evil are now recreated through Christ.

Now listen, when I say we see this in the church, I'm not saying that the church is free from sin. I'm not saying that we are perfect. I'm not saying that we're not going to at times hurt each other or say things we didn't intend to say or treat each other poorly. The church is a beautiful bride who is sometimes very ugly. So I'm not saying that we are free from sin, that we embody this perfectly. No, but what I am saying is that it's in the context of the church that Christ is bringing this new creation about. That as we see one another repenting of sin, pursuing one another in faith and love, turning from hostility and alienation and being united together, that is a demonstration of Christ's new creation. And it's a demonstration not just for us, but it's a you and me would actually be united together. This is the new creation that Christ is doing. This is our story. Some of us, many of us, experienced some of the extreme of Augustine, right? We were flirting with the seductions of the world. We were given over to the indulgences of the flesh. We were mocking the good things of God. That was my story. It was some of yours, and yet God wooed us by the beauty of the cross. He wooed us by the beauty of his son. And so if we have beheld this beauty, why would we ever turn to lesser

things? Why would we ever flirt with philosophies and new ideas that would steer us away from the Lord? Why would we give ourselves to lesser things?

Paul says in verse 23, “if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” Now that phrase, the “if,” that conditional clause, it could register a lot of concerns maybe for us, because it could have a doubtful connotation. You've heard what you have heard, the gospel. You've said that you believe, but you know, Paul's saying, *I'm not sure if you're really going to hold on*. That's how we could take it, kind of doubtful. Or we could actually read it more positively. The theologian Doug Mu says that we should interpret this if, we should read it more like, as I'm sure you will, continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope. You see, Paul is saying that those who have tasted of the goodness of God, that those who have beheld his glory, that those who have taken in the beauty of Jesus, that we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Paul knows that temptations and rival philosophies and counterfeit beauties will come, but he's telling us that the only place for our faith, the only stable and steadfast hope we have, is in the Christ who brings about the new creation, in the beauty of Jesus. Augustine said, “God's beauty called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.” And the beauty of the preeminent one over creation, the preeminent one over creation, that is the beauty of Christ that has shattered our deafness, has broken through our hearts, and has made us new. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given your Son, Jesus, this beautiful one who has given his life so that we would live. Jesus, who is ruler over the heavens and the earth. Jesus, who is the ruler over our lives. We thank you that you, Lord Jesus, are the preeminent one, and I pray that we would gaze upon your beauty, we would behold your glory, and we would cling, holding fast, stable and sure to the hope of your cross and the hope of resurrection. And so I pray, Lord, that you would empower us to do this. Turn our eyes towards Christ and let us behold his beauty. And we pray all this in the name of Christ and God's people said together, Amen.