

SESSION 3

Christ's preeminence

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Colossians 1:15–23

BUILDUP THEME



LEARN DOCTRINE

Christ is preeminent in creation and in redemption and therefore sufficient as our Savior.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learner will choose one way to recognize Christ's preeminence in his or her life.

MEMORY VERSE

"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence" (Colossians 1:18).

Teacher Preparation

- ☐ Most professional sports figures are happy to earn a living playing the sport they love. Some aspire to be great. Of those who do, a few are in the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time) conversation. Is Michael Jordan the G.O.A.T. of professional basketball or is LeBron James? Is Shohei Ohtani the G.O.A.T. of professional baseball or is Babe Ruth? What sports figure, artist, writer, actor, or musician do you think qualifies as a G.O.A.T.?
- ☐ Read Colossians 1:15–23. Those pushing the Colossian heresy didn't see Jesus as the greatest of all time. Paul wrote this passage to set the record straight. Jesus is preeminent over creation and preeminent in redemption. His teaching strikes a blow at the Gnostic view of Christ.
- ☐ You obviously have a high view of Christ from a doctrinal standpoint. But does your doctrinal view of Christ affect your daily life? Do you live in such a way that respects Christ as the greatest of all time? Challenge yourself and your students to live in light of Christ's preeminence.

Session Summary

Christ is preeminent, meaning He is the highest ranking and the first in importance and honor. Christ's preeminence in creation means He is God over all, creator of all, and sustainer of all. Without Christ, there was nothing, whether visible or invisible, that was made. Christ's preeminence in redemption means He is the head of the church, the representative for humanity, and the reconciler of all things to God. Sinners are reconciled to God through Christ's blood. Believers will experience the end of their reconciliation, their glorification, at the return of Christ for His church. Christ will present the church, His bride, to both the Father and Himself as holy, blameless, and approved.

Session Starters

Option 1—G.O.A.T.

Steps

1. Have students suggest who they think is a G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time) in the realms of sports, acting, singing, or other activities. Allow students to disagree and make their arguments.
2. Discuss meeting a G.O.A.T.

ASK: What sports figure, artist, writer, actor, or musician do you think qualifies as a G.O.A.T.? (Q1)

ASK: Have you ever met someone who is considered a G.O.A.T.? If you did, how might you respond? (Q2)

3. Transition to the Bible study.

Those pushing the Colossian heresy didn't see Jesus as the greatest of all time. Paul wrote Colossians 1:15–23 to set the record straight. Jesus is preeminent over creation and preeminent in redemption. Paul's teaching strikes a blow at the Gnostic view of a diminished Christ. In this session we will cover Paul's teaching on Christ's preeminence.

Option 2—Greatest Scientist of All Time

Steps

1. Have students suggest who they think are the greatest scientists of all time. Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Galileo Galilee, Nikola Tesla, and Archimedes would be some worthy candidates.

ASK: Who do you think is the greatest scientist of all time? Why?

ASK: If the greatest scientists in history were alive today, would they still be considered geniuses? Why or why not?

ASK: What did some of the greatest scientists not know?

The present generation always has the advantage of learning from the thinkers and innovators who went before them. But no generation will ever come to the point of figuring everything out. So no matter how brilliant a scientist is, he or she will be followed by scientists who discover more truths.

2. Transition to the Bible study.

The combined knowledge of all the scientists who have lived

could never compare to the knowledge Christ possesses. Christ is preeminent in creation. He designed and created it all, after all! This session begins with Christ's preeminence in creation and moves to His preeminence in redemption. We will be challenged to live in light of Christ's preeminence in our lives.

Bible Study

Gather

- Resources 63-R6 and 63-R7.

Paul's prayer for the Colossians in the previous passage (Col. 1:9–14) meant more to the Colossians once they read and studied verses 15–23. In that important Christological passage, Paul exalted Christ's preeminence in creation and in redemption. Paul's teaching bolstered the Colossians' faith in Christ and struck severe blows to Colossian heresy.

I. Christ's Preeminence in Creation (Col. 1:15–17)

Paul established Christ as preeminent in creation to show that Christ is not a low-level emanation Who is lower than the angels, as the proponents of the Colossians heresy suggested.

A. Christ is God over all (1:15)

READ: Colossians 1:15. **ASK:** What wrong conclusions might someone draw from this verse? (Q3) *That Christ, like man, was made in the image of God; that Christ was born into being at some point in time.*

Paul described Christ as "the image of the invisible God." Man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), but that isn't what Paul meant. Christ is the image of God rather than *in* the image of God. Jesus Christ is the perfect manifestation of God in the flesh.

Jesus shares the essence of deity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is not simply like God; He is God. The Incarnation did not make Him the image of God; it simply made it possible for people to behold the image of the invisible God. When Jesus lived on earth, He did not lay aside the essential attributes of deity. He did, however, lay aside the independent use of those attributes. He lived in dependence upon the Father and fully complied with the Father's will. At the same time, He was fully human with real flesh and blood.

Anyone who wants to know what God is like can examine the life of Christ. The apostle John wrote that when Jesus lived among men, Jesus' disciples gazed upon His glory and saw a perfect picture of grace and

truth. He also wrote that Jesus, the Son of God, declared the Father.

READ: John 14:9. **ASK:** What did Jesus reveal about His relationship with the Father? (Q4) *That watching Him was to watch the Father.*

The heresy at Colosse taught that Jesus was not God but was merely an emanation from God. Paul's declaration that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God" landed a blow against heretical Gnosticism threatening the Colossians.

Paul's statement that Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature" (Col. 1:15) landed another broadside to the heresy building at Colosse. The Gnostics perceived Jesus as the lowest emanation in a succession of emanations from God, each emanation being less like God than the previous one. Paul's use of the word "firstborn" to describe Jesus identifies Him as holding a position of highest honor, that of supremacy. Christ wasn't born; that isn't the meaning of the title. The title means Christ holds the position of heir and ruler over all creation. The writer of Hebrews uses the word "heir" to describe Christ's position.

READ: Hebrews 1:1, 2. **ASK:** What is included in the "all things" that Christ is the heir of? (Q5) *All that is now and all that God has planned for the future, including the new earth.*

Paul wrote elsewhere that believers are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). That means we are part of the family of God and that we will inherit what Christ inherits. That inheritance includes ruling with Christ over this present earth when He returns with us to set up His Kingdom (Rev. 20:4). It also means inheriting and dwelling on the new earth for all eternity (Rev. 21:1). It doesn't mean believers will become God. Only Jesus is God of all.

B. Christ is Creator of all (1:16)

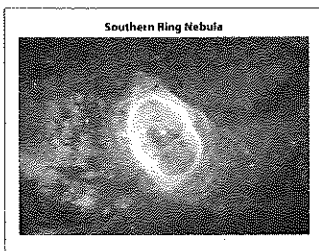
READ: Colossians 1:16. **ASK:** What impresses you most about all the visible things Christ has created? (Q6)

All that is visible was created by Christ. That statement perhaps means more to us today than it did to Paul. We have a better understanding of the vastness of the universe, being able to peer into the depths of space with powerful satellite telescopes. The deeper we look, the more we appreciate Christ's creative power.

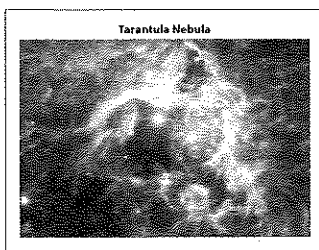
DISPLAY: Resources 63-R6 and 63-R7. The images show nebulae, which are clouds of dust and gas. The James Webb telescope greatly enhanced our view of such objects and increased our wonder of Christ's creation.

The Gnostics reasoned that matter is evil and that only immaterial

The title "firstborn" applied to Israel as God's chosen, favored, and honored nation (Exod. 4:22); to a family's oldest son as its most privileged heir and subsequent head (Deut. 21:15–17; 2 Chron. 21:3); and to the Messiah (Ps. 89:27).



63-R6



63-R7

things are good. Because Jesus created a material universe and took upon Himself a human body, they did not believe that He is truly God. Instead, they chose to regard Him as a mere emanation from God, perhaps an angel of low rank. Paul contradicted this Colossian heresy by insisting that Jesus Christ created everything, including all the ranks of angels.

Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers all refer to the angels. The terms seem to indicate a ranking among the angels or at least different functions. The Bible's mention of Michael the "archangel" (Jude 9) and Satan's original state as a "cherub" (Ezek. 28:14) seem to suggest a difference in rank and function between the angels. Regardless, Christ created all the angels and has never existed as one of them.

Not only did Jesus create all things, but all things were created "for him," Paul affirmed (Col. 1:16). This, too, must have rocked the Gnostics back on their heels. They erred in worshipping angels. Only Jesus Christ is worthy of worship, adoration, and service, because He alone created all things for His pleasure.

ASK: Why is it important to know that we were created both by and for Christ? (Q7) *By Him—so we'll worship Him and acknowledge His rights in our lives. For Him—so we'll choose to live for Him instead of for ourselves.*

C. Christ is Sustainer of all (1:17)

READ: Colossians 1:17.

Paul taught Jesus Christ existed before creation and is now sustaining the universe. Contrary to what Jehovah's Witnesses teach, Jesus Christ is not a created being; He existed before all things. Contrary to what pantheism teaches, nature is neither God nor Mother Earth; it is part of God's creation. Contrary to what evolutionists teach, nature does not progress by natural selection. Everything owes its existence to the sustaining power of Jesus Christ.

ASK: How does Christ's sustaining power over creation relate to the belief that the earth can be destroyed by climate change? (Q8) *It proves that the earth won't be destroyed until Christ is ready to destroy it, or to stop making it "consist." The idea that anything in this universe can destroy the earth and wipe out all human life rejects Christ's ability to hold everything together and rejects His sovereignty.*

Peter wrote that Christ will stop sustaining the universe at the end of time. He will burn it up with a great noise and a fervent heat (2 Pet. 3:10).

ASK: How should a believer respond to Christ's sustaining power? (Q9) *With trust in Him, with gratitude for His power, and with focus on things eternal rather than temporal.*

II. Christ's Preeminence in Redemption (Col. 1:18–23)

Paul transitioned his teaching from creation to redemption, having established Christ as preeminent over all things.

A. Christ rules the redeemed (1:18)

READ: Colossians 1:18.

Jesus Christ is not only the creator of all things, but He is also the head of the church, which is His new creation (Eph. 1:22, 23; 2:13–22). The church consists of all believers from the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to the yet future rapture of the church. As the head of the church, Christ causes the church to grow both by adding members to the church and strengthening those members spiritually.

As the head of the church, Christ is also its authority. Christ tells the church what to do through God's Word. A local church, which is a microcosm of the larger body of Christ, is to submit to Christ.

READ: Ephesians 5:23, 24. **ASK:** How does a local church submit to Christ's rule? (Q10) *By submitting to Christ's clear direction in God's Word and in the Epistles especially; by praying for wisdom and direction; by supporting the pastor God leads to their church; by not trying to become self-sustaining.*

Furthermore, Christ is "the beginning" (Col. 1:18); that is, He existed before the church and then started the church. As "the firstborn from the dead," Christ made the church possible. He rose from the dead in a glorified body, which is the same manner He will raise believers from the dead when He returns to rapture believers. Having risen from the dead, He lives forever as the preeminent head of the church. He is not a low-ranking demigod, as the Gnostics taught; He is the exalted Lord of the church.

B. Christ represents humanity (1:19)

READ: Colossians 1:19.

The Gnostics taught that the spirit of Christ descended upon the man Jesus at His baptism and departed from Him at the crucifixion. They denied that two natures—divine and human—resided in Jesus. Paul assaulted the Gnostic heresy by affirming that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, possessed all the attributes of deity even though He was truly human. The Incarnation did not mark the beginning of the divine fullness in Jesus; it simply marked the beginning of the divine fullness in human flesh. Jesus was deity before the Incarnation and is still deity today.

Believers are already risen with Christ in a spiritual sense. He gives us new life and the opportunity to live for Him now. Paul presents that present truth in Colossians 2 and 3.

On one occasion during His life and ministry on earth, Jesus took three of His disciples—Peter, James, and John—to a mountaintop. There He was transfigured so that His face shone as the sun and His clothing became white as the light (Matt. 17:2). Where did the light that brightened His face and clothes come from? Liberal theologians allege that unusually bright moonlight settled upon Jesus. They fail to explain how Peter, James, and John escaped the moonbeam. The word “transfigured” indicates that the brilliant light came from Jesus Himself. He transfigured Himself! The glory of His deity shone through His humanity.

READ: John 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16. **ASK:** What two qualities did John and Peter ascribe to Jesus? (Q11) *Glory and holiness.*

God the Father was pleased to have Jesus as God in the flesh, for Jesus represented humanity before Him. Jesus is the way for the Father to reconcile humanity to Himself. God very much wanted that reconciliation to happen.

C. Christ reconciles us to God (1:20–23)

As we have learned in this session, Jesus Christ alone is perfect God and perfect man—the Redeemer, Creator, Sustainer, Head of the church, and God incarnate. As such, He alone is qualified to reconcile people to God the Father. Reconciliation is the process in which enemies of God become His friends.

1. By His blood (1:20, 21)

READ: Colossians 1:20, 21.

Paul did not teach universalism. Christ will not save everyone in the end. That is not what “all things” means in verse 20. “All things” means there is nothing standing in the way of a person’s reconciliation with God the Father. Sin had erected an insurmountable barrier between humanity and God. We were alienated from God and His enemies because of our sin nature and our sinful acts. Divine grace and love removed the barrier to make reconciliation possible. Through faith in Christ, a person can be reconciled to God. That is, God will declare the person righteous and acceptable to Him based solely on Christ’s work on the person’s behalf. At Calvary, Jesus shed His blood as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He bore our punishment so all who trust in His Son as Savior can have peace with God. Not everyone, though, will respond and trust in Christ as Savior. That is abundantly clear in other passages (Rev. 20:11–15).

READ: Isaiah 53:10–12. **ASK:** God was pleased to reconcile believers to Himself through Christ’s death. What does that say about God’s love for you? (Q12) *Reconciliation proves God’s love for believers is real and unfathomable.*

As mentioned earlier, God very much wanted to reconcile humanity to Himself. So God the Father was pleased to bruise Jesus for our iniquities because that was the only way to make our salvation possible. And Jesus willingly became flesh because we were lost and hopeless without Him. He bore our sins on the cross and then rose again so we might be saved.

Not only did God reconcile us by the blood of His Son, but He also secured the reconciliation of the universe. Creation is included in the “all things” of Colossians 1:20. When Jesus returns to Earth with believers to set up His Kingdom, He will subdue nature and restore it to Edenic conditions for one thousand years. Until then, creation groans under the weight of the curse (Rom. 8:21, 22).

ASK: How do you see the earth “groaning” and waiting for its restoration? (Q13)

2. In His time (1:22, 23)

While we stand justified before God and acceptable to Him, we are still not free from the presence of sin in our lives. That won’t always be the case.

READ: Colossians 1:22. **ASK:** Can you imagine being sinless? What thoughts go through your mind? (Q14)

Paul looked ahead to the time when Christ presents believers to God as holy, blameless, and above reproach. Christ will return for His church, rapturing the living believers and resurrecting the dead (1 Thess. 5:16–18). All believers will receive a glorified body and be permanently free from sin. In Heaven Christ will present us to the Father as sanctified, unblemished, and free of charges. Christ will also present believers to Himself.

READ: Ephesians 5:25–27. **ASK:** Describe Christ’s love for His bride, the church. (Q16) *Christ’s love for His bride is sacrificial, selfless, and genuine.*

READ: Colossians 1:23.

According to Greek grammar, Paul’s linking of the word “if” and the indicative mood of the verb “continue” suggests that Paul was confident that Christ would perfect the Colossian believers. He believed that the Colossians would continue in sound doctrine (“the faith”), stand like a well-constructed, steadfast building against the winds of heresy, and remain true to “the hope of the gospel,” which had been preached throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul ended this section by assuring the Colossians that he had been made a minister of the gospel as he had laid it out. Paul hadn’t

preached the Colossian heresy or anything that resembled Gnosticism. But Paul did suffer for preaching the gospel, a point he made clear in the next section of his letter. His sacrifice, like that of Christ's, reveals the sincerity of his heart and the genuineness of his message.

Session Application

Steps

1. Have the students review Colossians 1:14–23 and suggest three reasons why Christ deserves to be the full-time captain of our lives. (Q17)
2. Have the learners finish the following statement: I can recognize that Christ has the rightful claim to first place in my life by . . . (Q18)