

It All Comes Down to Jesus Christ

Colossians 1:15-23

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 26, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



It always comes down to Jesus Christ. It always has. It always will.

I remember taking a comparative religion course in college. It's fascinating, actually, to learn about how much the great faiths of the world share in common. In terms of ethics, the moral principles which govern human behavior, there is tremendous overlap. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims all are taught that it is wrong to steal, or do violence, or dishonor marriage vows, or lie and deceive friends. All those great faiths teach their followers to honor parents, care for the poor, practice generosity, strive for patience and kindness. Lots of overlap when it comes to ethics.

It's only when you dig deeper that you begin to see the distinctions, differences which become more pronounced the deeper you dig. This is certainly true when it comes to the person of Jesus Christ. For while most of the world's religions show at least some honor to Christ, there is stark disagreement when you ask people of different faiths exactly who Jesus is.

Muslims, for instance, hold Jesus in high regard, but do not believe he was God but only a prophet, and not even the greatest prophet. Muhammed holds that distinction in their view. Jews acknowledge Jesus' historical existence, and don't dispute records of his popular teaching and supposed miracles. They deny, however, that he was the Messiah, the divine Savior of the world. Hindus believe Jesus was a wise man and holy teacher. They enthusiastically embrace his teachings about love, self-sacrifice and humility. They even list Jesus as one of the thousands of gods we might worship, though stop well short of saying he was the exclusive revelation of God. Buddhists acknowledge and respect Jesus' self-sacrificial life, but do not believe he was God because they do not believe there is any such thing as a supreme God or deity.¹

When Mormons come to your door they would like to convince you that Jesus was a created being, greater than the rest of us perhaps, but by nature still only human. Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses will tell you that

Jesus was God's first creation, and that his pre-human existence was not divine, but that he was Michael the archangel before he showed up in Bethlehem.² And certainly most people, at least in our society, who don't identify as Christians or any other religion have at least some respect for the person, or at least idea, of Jesus Christ. They may not believe he was or is God, but they hold him in some honor as a wise teacher, as one who lived an exemplary life that we can copy.

So do not be deceived. When it comes to crucial matters of ultimate truth, there is a great divide between beliefs in our world, and there is no more crucial matter of ultimate truth that divides than the question of the person and work of Jesus Christ. It always come down to Jesus Christ. It always has. It always will. And the claim of Christianity about Christ is absolutely unique. As Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 1:22-24, **"For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."**³

As we read his words here in Colossians, understand that Paul is writing to a church in his day that also faced all sorts of distortions about the person and work of Christ, distortions which threatened the very faith and foundation of the church. It is with this in mind that he writes the words that we just read. Most scholars believe that Paul has inserted a popular hymn or creedal statement which he borrowed from church tradition to bring clarity here. It may even have been his intention for the church to take this hymn or creed, contained here in verses 15-20, and recite it regularly in their gathered worship so that they would not forget the truth about Jesus in a world that was and is pedaling so many untruths and half-truths about him.

The clear message of these verses, as I hope to show you today, is that Christ – *as he is proclaimed in the biblical witness* – is absolutely central and supreme in all of life. As New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, puts it, "Christianity isn't about a particular way of being

¹ J. Warner Wallace, "What Other World Religions Think About Jesus", *Relevant*, February 24, 2022. Read article at <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/what-other-world-religions-think-about-jesus/>

² Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Guide to Cults, Religions and Spiritual Beliefs* (Harvest House, 2002), 128 & 148.

³ This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

religious. It isn't about a particular system for how to be saved here or hereafter. It isn't simply a different way of holiness. Christianity is about Jesus Christ."⁴ Period. What we believe about Christ is the most important thing about us.

So let's take a look at what it is that we learn here about Jesus. Since there is enough material here to last a whole season of sermons, meaning that in one morning we will just be scratching the surface, I encourage you to devote more time to reflecting on these verses. You could spend the rest of your life considering this passage and you will not ever exhaust the treasures which are to be unearthed here. In my reflections today I will scratch the surface by pointing out three of the truths we learn here about the person and work of Jesus Christ, all three in relationship to creation.

First, Jesus Christ is the image of God in creation. The hymn begins in verse 15, "**He [i.e. Christ] is the image of the invisible God.**" Later in verse 19 we read, "**For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.**" Please understand that nobody outside the Christian church believes this. Nobody. Because do you see what this is declaring? There are lots of places in creation where we can learn about God. People talk about going into nature to learn about our Creator. There is something to that. You stand on a mountain peak or at the beach at sunset, or ponder the beauty and wonder of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, or a field of wildflowers in full bloom, and we learn something about the one who made these things. Other people say that we learn about God mostly through the Bible, the sacred texts inspired by the Holy Spirit. Still others would say we see God best in his people, those who follow him and have become his dwelling place on earth.

All this is true. But by far the clearest picture we have ever been given, or will ever be given, of what God is like, is the person of Jesus Christ, because though he was as human as we are human, he was also God, fully God. Not a copy or likeness of God, but the visible manifestation and embodiment of God in our world. As John puts it in the opening verses of his Gospel, "**No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.**"⁵ As the Nicene Creed beautifully declares, a creed we often recite here in worship together,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,

eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.⁶

If you want to know what God is truly like, look at Jesus. The things Jesus says, that's what God says. The things Jesus does, that's what God does. The characteristics we see in Jesus, those are the characteristics of God, no more no less. The way Jesus treats people, that's how God treats people. All that means that what we primarily discover about God through Christ is that at the heart of God we find other-centered, self-giving, sacrificial, never-failing love. Jesus Christ is the image of God in creation. That's the first thing we learn here.

Second, Jesus Christ is the author and sustainer of creation. Listen again to these claims. Jesus is (**verse 15**) "**the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.**" I don't know where I missed this along the way growing up in church. For years when I pictured God creating the world, I pictured the Father taking charge. I suppose I believed that Jesus was hanging around somewhere, but like a child sitting by watching his father cook dinner or build something on his workbench, I didn't picture Jesus taking an active role when the world was made. That is not the testimony of scripture. Again from the first words of John's Gospel: "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.**"⁷

The natural world was Jesus' idea – oceans, mountains, whales, grizzly bears, stars, thunder and lightning, earthworms, language, color, sex, music, laughter – all of it was Jesus' idea, his workmanship. Any beauty or power or sweetness in creation is there because Jesus made it that way. Creation is not exclusively the work of Christ, of course, as if the Father and the Spirit sit by watching Jesus work. No, the work or persons of God cannot be divided in that way. That's a sermon for another day, so let me just say for now that is the mystery of the Trinity that when one person of God is

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 150.

⁵ John 1:18

⁶ Read the full text of the Nicene Creed, along with other creeds embraced by the PCUSA, at this site:

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2016.pdf

⁷ John 1:1-3

at work, all three are at work. And yet, it's clear that Jesus Christ had a special role in the origins of the universe in which we live. All things were created through him and by him and for him.

Add to this that Christ is not only the author of creation, but the sustainer of creation. Paul writes in verse 17, **“in him all things hold together.”** It reminds me of Paul's words in Acts 17:28, **“In him we live and move and have our being.”** Do we realize this, that there is no life apart from Christ, who is the author of life. It's ironic, if not tragic, that so many people walk around today enjoying life while, at the same time, either denying or ignoring this reality. The life of every person, believer and atheist alike, is sustained by Christ, moment by moment, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And not just humanity, but all of creation. In fact, if Christ removed his sustaining presence from creation, everything would quickly move towards death, not instantly, but eventually. If the sun suddenly ceased to shine, stopped providing any light or heat to our planet, our planet would not die immediately, but in time all that would be left is a cold, dark rock floating in space. Much worse would happen if Christ removed his sustaining presence from our world.

This is why the scriptures tell us that the consequence of sin is death.⁸ Sin, at its most basic level, is separation from God, a choice to live life on our terms rather than God's terms. But because God is the source of all life, not just creator but sustainer, there is no ultimate life apart from God. In this sense, death is not so much a punishment for sin, but an inevitable consequence or result. A person stubbornly separated from God by sin can live for a while with the illusion that life is still possible, but time will tell another story. Christ is not only the author, but sustainer of creation. Ultimately there is no life apart from him.

Third, Jesus Christ is the redeemer of creation. There is beauty in our world to be certain, and glory and goodness all around. All of it thanks to Christ, our creator and sustainer. But at the same time there is also much that is not right. Creation has been corrupted. Even the most rosy-eyed optimist eventually has to admit this reality. The amount of violence and suffering which will occur in our world just today – *just in this one day!* – is staggering to consider. And none of us escapes it in the end. All of us know pain and loss. All of us know death, and will one day know death firsthand, the decay of these bodies we now try to prop

up for as long as we can. All of us know the insidiousness of sin in our lives, our selfish natures that enslave us in habits and attitudes which run counter to the good designs of our good Creator.

Now, some people say that creation is so corrupt that the only solution is to dispose of it and try to get out to another, better place. Other people say no, while admittedly there are problems with our world, it's really not all that bad. In fact, if all of us would just pull together hard enough we can get this world fixed up. Neither response is the truth. Creation is corrupt to the core, whatever goodness there is has been tainted. But it is also not worthless. Instead, it is of infinite value. It's Christ's world after all! Therefore, the response of Christ is neither to resolve to accept the corruption of the world or to minimize it's pervasiveness. The response of Christ is to redeem creation, to set it free!

You see, the bold and unflinching testimony of the Christian gospel is that Jesus Christ is not only the creator and sustainer of this world, but it's savior and redeemer. That at just the right time, the creator himself entered into his creation, took on human flesh and became one of us. To quote John 1 again, **“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”**⁹ He didn't live above us, as a king in a palace or a priest in a temple; he lived *among* us, taking to himself all the pain and suffering of this world, even death, even the most shameful death of all.¹⁰ Jesus took all the sin, corruption, evil, and death of our world to himself at the cross, and into the tomb, and into hell itself. But then three days later he was raised from the dead, having conquered it all.¹¹

From that point forward, the resurrection parade¹² began, Christ leading the way, the Grand Marshal. In other words, what we see happen with Christ, from crucifixion to resurrection to glory, is what we will see happen *to all of creation*, beginning with us, because of Christ!

This is what Paul means when he writes in verse 18, **“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...”** Jesus is certainly the head of the church because, like a head with a body, he directs and guides his people in every way. But he is also the *headwaters* of the church. Just as Jesus is the perfect image of God, he is also the perfect image of humanity. If you want to see what humans are supposed to look like, there is no better place to look in

⁸ See Romans 3:23 – **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

⁹ John 1:14

¹⁰ See Philippians 2:5-11

¹¹ See what Paul writes later in Colossians 2:13-15.

¹² I'm stealing this phrase from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this text in *The Message*.

this world than the life of Jesus. He is the blueprint, the prototype, for humanity. The way he lived and loved is the way we were meant to live and love. And because of his death and resurrection, this life is now possible through Christ.

That's what Paul means when he says that Jesus is **“the firstborn from the dead”**. All those who follow after him, who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior enter into this life as well. Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:29: **“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.”** God's restoration of creation begins with those who have trusted in Christ, with us, the church, as by his grace, and over time, he conforms us to the image of his Son, the image of God which has always been God's original design for us.¹³ The world is supposed to look at the church and get a glimpse of how Christ is making all things new again.

But it goes beyond just the church. In verse 20 Paul writes, **“and through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”** The redemption of Christ doesn't end with human souls, or even human bodies, but extends to all creation which Christ loves because Christ created. Remember, he is not only firstborn of the dead, but firstborn over all of creation. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse in *The Message*: “All the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.” This is what the Jews called shalom, perfect peace, wholeness and completeness, not just in the physical universe, but in all relationships, between us and God, between us one to another, and even between us and the natural world. This is the destiny of creation because its creator and sustainer is also its redeemer.

It always comes down to Jesus Christ. Amen? It always has. It always will. Christ is absolutely central and supreme. Christ is the image of God in creation. Christ is the author and sustainer of creation. Christ is the redeemer of creation, all of creation. Can we pause just for a moment to consider the implications of this reality? *Silence.*

All this demands a response. Does it not? I can't help but think of how C.S. Lewis famously put it in *Mere Christianity*: “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can

shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.”¹⁴ He cannot be for us simply a wise teacher, a beautiful mentor, or a bold prophet. The things he said and did, and the things those closest to him testified about him, will simply not allow for it. He was either a lunatic, a liar, or he was and is Lord. Those are our only options.

This is essentially what Paul says in the final verses of this passage. Listen to them again, starting with verse 21:

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

These words are not addressed to the world. They are addressed to us, to the church. What if all this is true about Jesus Christ? What if he actually did find us with our backs turned permanently against God, cut off from the source of life itself, and yet gave himself in death as a sacrifice to bring us home? And what if he actually is working even now to redeem and restore our lives, and not just our lives but all of creation, to one day present us as holy and blameless and irreproachable before God? What if it is his intention that our lives one day look like Jesus, and not only that but that we will share in the inheritance – all the blessings, all the riches, all the favor! – that the Father has reserved for the Son? What if it is in Christ that we see what God is truly like? What if he creates us, and sustains us, and redeems us out of love? And what if he has done all this not only for us, but for every creature under heaven? If all this is true, what is our response?

You see Paul's response. He has become a willing and joyful servant of Christ. You also see what Paul says should be our response. Who walks away from a gift like this? Who ignores it, or minimizes it, or trivializes it? Who receives a gift like this and remains unchanged? Who discovers that they are in possession of such a priceless treasure and does not willingly turn and give everything in their life in joyful service to the giver of such treasure?

¹³ Genesis 1:26 – “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind[a] in our image, according to our likeness.’”

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1952), 52.

This is why Paul says we must continue to be steadfast in our faith. We must never become distracted or deceived by all the shallow triviality and all the false messages around us in this world. A firm foundation has been laid for us in Christ. Now, with God's help, we must build on that foundation brick by brick, stone by stone, that our lives may come to bear the image of the one who created us.

It always comes down to Christ. It always has. It always will.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage Colossians 1:15-23 again. There is so much here. What stands out to you initially?
2. To you, what is the most striking or impressive thing that is declared here about Jesus?
3. To you, what is the most mysterious or difficult to understand truth about Christ that is presented here?
4. Jesus is the image of God in creation. What does this mean to you? Why does it matter?
5. Jesus is the author and sustainer of creation. What does this mean to you? Why does it matter?
6. Jesus is the redeemer of creation. What does this mean to you? Why does it matter?
7. How do you personally respond to the person of Jesus Christ as presented here in these verse?
8. Take time to pray as a group in response to what you have just read, focusing on worshipping and praising the one who creates, sustains and redeems us.

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Who is Jesus Christ? People give all sorts of answers to that question. What do you say? Why do you believe that about him?