

# SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

**COL. 1:15** Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

**16** For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

**17** And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

**18** 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.

**19** For it pleased *the Father* that in him should all fulness dwell;

**20** And, having made peace

through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, *I say*, whether *they be* things in earth, or things in heaven.

**21** And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in *your* mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled

**22** In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

**23** If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which *was* preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.

## NOTES

# Before All Things

Lesson Text: Colossians 1:15-23

Related Scriptures: 1 Kings 8:12-19, 27-30; Psalm 89:19-29;  
John 1:1-3, 14-18; Ephesians 2:11-22; Hebrews 2:5-10

TIME: between A.D. 60 and 62

PLACE: from Rome

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“[The Son] is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Colossians 1:17).

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## *Lesson Exposition*

### **CHRIST'S PREEMINENCE OVER ALL CREATION—Col. 1:15-17**

**Christ's identity in creation (Col. 1:15).** When the Son of God became a man, it became possible for human beings, in a sense, to see the unseen God. As the Father's "image," the enfleshed Son visibly and perfectly revealed the Father to a world that otherwise groped after Him in darkness (cf. John 1:18; 14:7-9).

Paul then referred to Christ as the "firstborn of every creature" (Col. 1:15). We usually associate "firstborn" with physical birth order, which might lead us to wonder whether Paul was teaching that Christ was merely the first created being. The very next verse, however, dismisses that interpretation by declaring that all things without exception were created through Christ.

Instead, we need to understand the term "firstborn" in light of its Old Testament background. Because a firstborn son held rights to the best part of his father's inheritance, "firstborn" came to refer to privilege in addition to birth order. Numerous times in the Old Testament, God called Israel His "son" (cf. Ex. 4:23; Hos. 11:1). When He put to death all the firstborn sons of Egypt, He redeemed His own firstborn son Israel. He then

required His people to redeem all their firstborn sons by a sacrifice as a symbol of His redemption of Israel (Ex. 13:2, 13). In Psalm 89:27, God referred to King David as His "firstborn" because of David's place as the highest king in all the world.

In the Old Testament, therefore, "firstborn" referred theologically to the status of God's chosen and preeminent person or nation. By calling Christ the "firstborn of all creatures," Paul acknowledged Him as the highest Being in all the universe.

**Reasons for Christ's identity in creation (Col. 1:16-17).** To prove his claim that Christ occupies that highest position, Paul further explained Christ's relationship with creation. He is not merely the greatest *in* the universe; He rules *over* the universe as its all-powerful Creator. Nothing in all creation was made apart from Christ.

Speaking into the Colossians' specific context, Paul added that Christ even created "thrones," "dominions," "principalities," and "powers" (vs. 16). Based on the use of those terms elsewhere in Paul and in contemporary Jewish writings, Paul was almost certainly referring to categories of powerful spiritual beings, not human entities or governments. The culture

in Colossae emphasized fear and worship of such beings. Paul understood that demonic entities were behind the worship of those false gods and posed a real threat to anyone coming in contact with them (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20-22).

Implicit in Colossians 1:16 was an argument frequently employed by the Old Testament prophets: The idols of the nations consist of materials that owe their very existence to the Creator. Therefore, they and the people that worship them have as much chance of disrupting God's plans as a grasshopper has of disrupting the plans of a powerful king (cf. Isa. 40:17-24). Paul encountered similar idolatry in Asia Minor (cf. Acts 19:23-41), but he understood that even the most powerful gods worshipped there were impotent in their Creator's presence. And Jesus Christ is that Creator!

The spiritual powers, along with everything else in the universe, were created not only *through* Jesus Christ but also *for* Him. The distorted goals of our fallen world will all fall away, and only those things that were done *for Christ* will endure (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 15:58).

Since Christ is the Creator, His existence does not depend on any part of creation; rather, all creation is dependent on Him. Notice that Paul does not say Christ *was* before all things, which we would expect if Paul was merely speaking about Jesus' chronological existence before creation. Instead, he says that Christ *is* before all things (Col. 1:17). Paul was speaking not only of Christ's preexistence but also of His self-existence above and apart from creation.

The flip side of Christ's independent existence is creation's moment-by-moment dependence on Him. Christ must be actively involved in every part of creation at every moment, because "by him all things consist" (vs. 17). His power holds all things together.

## **CHRIST'S PREEMINENCE IN THE NEW CREATION—Col. 1:18-20**

**Christ's identity in the new creation (Col. 1:18).** Most biblical scholars believe verses 15-20 were originally part of an early Christian hymn that Paul adapted for his letter. The first half of the hymn, which extols Christ for His creating work (vss. 15-17), is remarkably paralleled by the second half, which extols Him for His reconciling work (vss. 18-20).

In relation to Christ's creating work, Paul identified Christ as the image of God and the firstborn of creation (vs. 15). Now, in relation to His reconciling work, Paul identified Christ as "the head of the body, the church" and "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" (vs. 18).

By calling Christ the "beginning" in relation to His reconciling work, Paul implied that Christ's resurrection was the start of a new creation just as glorious as the original one. In this context, "firstborn from the dead" likely relates to both time and prominence. Not only was Christ the first chronologically to receive a resurrection body, but His resurrection also opened the way for every one of His followers to receive a similar resurrection body (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-23).

**Reasons for Christ's identity in the new creation (Col. 1:19-20).** At first glance, we might assume that Paul was referring here to the reconciliation of all things to God the Father. In other letters, Paul made that exact point (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24). Here, however, the phrase "unto himself" cannot grammatically refer to anyone other than the Son (Fee, *Pauline Christology*, Hendrickson). By speaking of the Son's role in reconciliation in such similar terms to the Father's role, Paul accomplished His goal of presenting Christ as equal with the Father in every way. As Christ is both the source and the goal of creation (cf. Col. 1:16), so He is both the source and the goal of the new creation.

The language of Colossians 1:19-20 revolves around Old Testament temple imagery. Just as the temple was the temporary dwelling place of God, so Christ is the permanent dwelling place of God. And just as people came to the temple to sacrifice animals and obtain peace with God, so people can now come to Christ, who shed His own blood to obtain peace with God.

Through His death and resurrection, Christ reconciled not just people but also the whole creation! As Christ is the Creator of heaven and earth, so He is the Reconciler of heaven and earth, restoring the whole creation to its original purpose of existing for His sake.

### **APPLYING CHRIST'S PREMINENCE TO BELIEVERS— Col. 1:21-23**

Paul reminded the Colossians that they were once as far away from reconciliation as they could get, “alienated” from Christ. The abrupt interjection “yet now” mirrored the reality of Christ’s interjection in their lives.

The language of being presented before Christ as holy and blameless reflects wedding imagery used elsewhere in Paul’s letters (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27). The church’s pure relationship as Christ’s spiritual bride is the goal of Christ’s reconciliation.

In Colossians 1:23, Paul gave a condition for reconciliation: continuing in the faith. One of the main ways to remain “grounded and settled” in faith is to set our hope on the gospel we have heard (1:23)—including the very truths about Jesus that Paul expounded in the preceding verses.

It might seem like an exaggeration for Paul to say the gospel had been preached “to every creature,” but this was similar to the way Luke (one of Paul’s fellow missionaries) portrayed the situation at the end of Acts. There Luke implied that Paul’s ministry in Rome, the epicenter of first-century

culture and commerce, fulfilled the book’s thesis statement that the gospel needed to reach “the uttermost part of the earth” (1:8). Since Paul wrote Colossians from Rome, he was likely reflecting that same theology in Colossians 1:23. By referring to all creation, Paul may have been emphasizing the cosmic impact of the gospel that he had already expressed in verse 20.

—Matthew Robinson

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How does Christ’s identity as the “image of the invisible God” affect humanity (Col. 1:15)?
2. How does the Old Testament help us understand what Paul meant by calling Christ the “firstborn of every creature” (vs. 15)?
3. What are the “thrones,” “dominions,” “principalities,” and “powers” Christ created (vs. 16)?
4. How does Christ’s resurrection relate to His identity as the Head of the church?
5. Why might Paul have emphasized creation’s reconciliation to Christ rather than to the Father?
6. How do verses 19-20 reflect Old Testament temple imagery?
7. How does the reference to heaven and earth in verse 20 connect Christ’s reconciling work to His creating work?
8. What does the wedding imagery in verse 22 tell us about the goal of Christ’s reconciliation?
9. What must believers do to ensure their faith is “grounded and settled” (vs. 23)?
10. Why was it not an exaggeration for Paul to say the gospel had been preached in all creation?

—Matthew Robinson

## PRACTICAL POINTS

1. If we want to know what God is like, all we have to do is look at Jesus, His perfect image (Col. 1:15).
2. We do not need to fear anything in the universe, because Jesus has power over it all (vs. 16).
3. Even on our worst days, the continuing existence of the world is proof of God's goodness toward us (vs. 17).
4. The life of the church comes from Jesus Christ, the Head of the body (vs. 18).
5. Jesus is the true temple of God's presence, so we can receive forgiveness and mercy when we turn to Him (Col. 1:19-22; cf. 1 Kgs. 8:27-30).
6. We can persevere in faith by regularly reminding ourselves about the good news of Jesus (Col. 1:23).

—Matthew Robinson

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. How might a non-Christian's despair over current events be a good launching pad for sharing the gospel based on Colossians 1:15-23?
2. In what ways have you felt pressure from today's culture to worship or fear something other than Christ? How can Christ's preeminence over creation help you withstand that pressure?
3. What truths in Colossians 1:15-23 can motivate us to move away from a self-centered approach to our faith and toward a Christ-centered approach?
4. What habits can you begin (or continue) that will help you treat your relationship with Jesus as the goal of your life?

—Matthew Robinson

## Golden Text Illuminated

**"[The Son] is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:17).**

Our golden text highlights two features of Christ that are necessary to know and understand in order to worship Him rightly and trust Him deeply.

First, Paul wrote that Christ is "before all things." By "all things," Paul meant all things in the universe without exception. This is the eternal preexistence of Jesus Christ. There never was a time when Jesus Christ was not.

Second, Paul declared that Christ is the One in whom "all things consist," which means that in Him all things hold together. Should He cease His continuous sustaining activity, "all things" would disintegrate. What a stunning thought! Who would have guessed that the blue-collar Nazarene, the carpenter's son, born in a dirty stable, who, in the eyes of the world, died an unfortunate death in the clutches of His enemies, is actually the One who holds the entire universe and maintains its existence?

Lofty thoughts of Christ produce deeper worship and deeper trust. You cannot truly worship what you are not exhilarated by. You cannot truly trust a Savior who is not supreme. In Christ, we find a Savior who is infinite, eternal, uncaused, uncreated, self-existent, and sovereign. What trial in life is not dwarfed by His majesty? What earthly treasure is not made dim by comparison to His beauty? What threat in life is not tamed by His supremacy? Therefore, let us trust and treasure the Christ who is before all things and upholds all things.

—Jerod A. Gilcher