

Christ Over All

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[0:00] Our scripture reading tonight from which the sermon will be based is Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 23.

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.

[1:24] 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.

This is God's holy word. About eight years ago, my family and I took a trip to Seattle on the other side of the United States.

And while we were there, we thought, we were visiting some friends, and we thought, while we were there, we were able to stay in their house. We were going to take a trip up to Canada, and we would go up to Vancouver so we could ski for a day at Whistler. And as we were driving up, we'd hired a car, and we were going round Benz, and we came round this one particular corner.

And suddenly, I was driving, and in front of me, these mountains appeared, and they felt like they were so big, you could barely see the sky above them. And as I drove on, it felt like the mountains were tumbling down on top of me.

We've got mountains in Scotland, but I'd never experienced anything like this. It took my breath away, and I was driving. It made me feel actually a little bit dizzy, thinking, looking at how magnificent and glorious these mountains are as they towered up above us.

[2:36] My brain couldn't quite grasp the size and the beauty and magnificence of what was in front of them. Well, we're in a series in Paul's, the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Colossae.

And Paul's writing this letter because he's heard that there's false teachers interfering with the belief system, the things that the people know about, in the church know about Jesus.

So, later on in the letter, we get some hints as to what those things are. But whatever those things are, the precise mixture of false teachings that are being taught, Paul sees one fundamental problem.

It all boils down to the fact that whatever they're teaching is diminishing the sufficiency and the supremacy of Christ by making believers look somewhere else for the full fullness of God.

Not saying that Jesus isn't important, but saying that you need Jesus plus something else in order to receive this fullness. So, what have the Canadian mountains got to do with this letter that Paul writes to the church in Colossae?

[3:45] Well, I think that Paul tries to do, or does with words, what those mountains did to me with my eyes in real life. He paints this magnificent picture of who Jesus really is.

Paul doesn't sit down. He's written a welcome, a thanksgiving. He's written a prayer in this letter. And then he arrives at the meat, the content, and he doesn't say, listen, those guys who are coming in and telling you other things about Jesus, don't listen to them.

He doesn't do that. What does he do instead? He just paints this extraordinary, breathtaking picture of who Christ really is. And the result is sublime.

He presents this most stupendous word picture. And Christ is the theme. He doesn't begin with, don't listen to them.

He begins with, feast your eyes, your ears, your hearts on who Jesus really is, what he came to do, and what he's achieved. Because anything that you see that is not Jesus is insufficient.

[4:53] Rather than Jesus being in any way insufficient for the church. Once you see the glory of Christ, you'll never be fooled into thinking that you need anything else ever again.

John Owen was a Puritan, a 17th century theologian, and a church leader. And he said one of the greatest privileges that a believer has, both in this life and in eternity, is to behold the glory of Christ. So for Owen, seeing Christ's glory is one of the greatest privileges that a Christian can have. And this evening we're going to think about why that is from this section of Paul's letter that Corey read for us.

There's two big reasons, I think, two points. And the first is because Christ is supreme over all of creation. So verses 15 and 20, as Corey said, this is a hymn, a poem.

It certainly reads that way when you read it. We've gone from speaking about you to the second person, speaking about Jesus in the third person. And it feels like a distinct change in language.

[5:59] That's one hint that there's a poem here. But the language as well builds line by line on top of each other to build this complete picture. It begins with two titles stacked on top of one another.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, and he's the firstborn of all creation. So when we hear the word, we're Bible readers and we hear the word image, we probably immediately think back to Genesis.

Jesus, because when God made Adam, he made mankind, he made him in his image. And every creature is made in the image of God.

Every man is made in the image of God. And so that's why every life is so important. Every life is so precious, why we have to do all we can to protect it. Paul's got something bigger in mind when he applies this image to Christ.

He is man. Christ came into the world as a man, but he's not just man. Paul wants to reflect that for us. He's not merely saying that Jesus is like us.

[7:00] He's saying Jesus and the Father are completely alike. He's the image of the invisible God. Christ is the firstborn of all creation.

So now on first reading, that sounds like Christ has been created, like he's had a beginning. The firstborn of all creation. And in the fourth century, there's a guy called Arius who thought that was the case.

And he used this verse to argue that Jesus might be the most magnificent, the best of all God's creations. But he was a creation nonetheless. We know that God has no beginning.

We know that Christ is God. And so that cannot be the case. But it's worth thinking about this just for a little second. Because it's got implications for us. Because this is not just theological error.

This is heresy. To say that Jesus is a created being means to say that Jesus is not divine. That Jesus is not God. So what's the difference between biblical error and heresy?

[8:05] Well, biblical error is things that we can differ on and still be Christians. So baptism is a really good example. So some people might think that we should baptize children. And other people think that we should not baptize children.

We should wait until they make up their own profession of faith. Those are biblical differences. The truth is, one of us has to be wrong. We can't both be right. But we can still have fellowship with those people and accept them as Christians, even when they hold a different point of view to us. But heresy is something different. Heresy is a fundamental doctrinal error that contradicts the essential truths of the Christian faith.

Truths that are necessary to preserve the biblical gospel. I borrowed that definition. So Arius wasn't simply making a mistake about Jesus.

He was denying the full deity of the Son. And then he's undermining, therefore, the entire gospel itself. But heresy leads people away from Christ.

[9:09] The only way to be reconciled with God. And that kind of teaching has eternal consequences. So it's not a small error. This is a huge deal.

And this view didn't end in the fourth century, sadly. There are still people who believe that Christ is a created being. But as we're going to look in Paul's letter, he points out very clearly, I think, makes a really clear argument why that is not the case.

So what's Paul doing here when he calls Jesus the firstborn? Especially in a letter that he's writing to convince the church not to listen to outside influences saying that they need anything else other than Christ.

Well, verse 16 means that we cannot accept, we can't misunderstand firstborn. Because it clearly states that Jesus created everything.

So logically, the creator cannot be created. He has to come before the things that he created. But leaving verse 16 aside just for a moment, The Bible gives us lots of information about what firstborn means in this context.

[10 : 14] So in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, Moses lays down rules for how a man who has two wives is to think about inheritance.

So he's got one wife who he loves and one wife who he doesn't love. And the unloved wife's son is older and the loved son's wife is younger.

And so the danger or the opportunity is for the man who loves this wife to give everything to the younger son. Because that's the son of the woman who he loves the most.

But Moses says, no, that's not what's going to happen. He says that the firstborn must receive his double portion. Because he's the first fruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

But what's significant here is not the order of who's born first, but the rights that are being protected. This isn't about biological facts, which are not being disputed.

[11 : 13] This is about legal status, the rank, the inheritance, and the authority that the firstborn has. So firstborn is not about primacy.

Primacy. It is about primacy, not about chronology. It's not about who comes first. It's about who is first over things. Then another example is in Exodus.

So God says to the entire nation of Israel, so Israel is a young nation. There's lots of nations around about them that are much older. And God says, Israel is my firstborn son.

But Israel was not the firstborn nation, not the first nation that was created. But it was given first rank, first inheritance, first importance in God's purposes. And then the final example is King David. So David's the youngest of Jesse's sons. And when Samuel's looking for which one God wants to make king, David's left in the field with the sheep because he's the youngest, the least significant in the eyes of men.

[12 : 15] He's got lots of older brothers, lots of brothers who are born first ahead of him. But in Psalm 89, God says of David, I'll make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.

So David was the lastborn, but in this verse, in his family, he was the lastborn in this verse, in this Psalm. It talks about David as first ranked in God's kingdom.

So birth order is not what we're talking about when we say firstborn. When Paul calls Christ the firstborn of all creation, he's not saying that Christ was created first, as though he was an item on a list that God went through.

It means that Christ has the rights, the authority, and the supremacy of the firstborn over all of creation. Everything that was made. He's not part of creation.

Creation belongs to him. In John Calvin's Institutes, he draws a pretty plain conclusion. He says, Christ's called firstborn not because he was made, but because the entire structure of the world finds its origin in him and no other.

[13 : 25] He's not the oldest creature. He's the one for whom and through whom and by whom creaturehood itself exists. And then that's exactly what we see in verses 16 and 17 in Paul's letter.

In the most totalizing language that Paul uses about anybody in any of his writings, he says that all things, so things in heaven, on earth, visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, rulers, authority, the very spiritual powers, which we find out later in the letter, one of the things that the false teachers are coming to try and lead people astray from the church, with, not one of them is a rival.

They're all created through Christ and for Christ. Each one, his handiwork made for his glory. He's before all things. And in him, all things hold together.

So every atom, every law of physics, every heartbeat in the room right now, it is all being held together moment by moment by the same Christ who was laid as a baby in a manger.

We take away Christ's sustaining power over all things. For an instant, there'd be nothing left. So there's an important principle for us to take from this, I think.

[14:44] I saw this this week from the writer, Pastor David Tripp, Paul Tripp. He, David's his middle name. He said, and I wonder if you can resonate with this, he said, I've got the scary ability to look at my life and not see God.

What do I see instead? Writing deadlines I need to meet, details of my flight I need to remember, appointments I need to show up for, family vacations I need to plan, groceries I need to purchase, meals I need to prepare, bills I need to pay, rooms I need to clean, broken furniture I need to fix, birthday gifts I need to purchase for my kids.

Tripp doesn't dismiss this, not seeing God as absent-mindedness or a result of his busyness. He says it's scary. He's not being tempted by heresy, but when you think, when you forget for a moment that you're a created being, you take your eyes off Christ and all he has done and all that he has achieved, you start behaving as you yourself are sovereign.

You think that everything depends on you. You think that you have to hold everything together yourself. You think you have to fix everything. You think you have to change yourself.

You think you have to control your circumstances. But Colossians 1.17, what tells us, he's before all things and in him all things are held together. You don't hold your life together.

[16:15] Christ does. Okay, so that leads us on to our second point. Christ is supreme over the new creation. So we saw that Christ is supreme over creation.

He's also supreme over the new creation. Had Paul stopped at verse 17, we would have been left with a staggering picture of who Christ is as the creator of the world.

The eternal creator who rules over everything that's been made. this completely refutes any claim anyone could possibly make that Jesus is not God.

But Paul's not finished. Because while this letter is rich in theology and Christology, the study of Jesus, it's also a letter to a struggling, tempting church.

And they need to be reminded that Christ who made the cosmos is remaking the cosmos. In verses 18 to 20, Paul introduces a second firstborn.

[17:13] He's already called him the firstborn of all creation. And now he calls him, he says he's the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

And here Paul's not talking about primacy of rank in an abstract sense. He's talking about the very event that took place right at the center of history when Jesus went to the cross, when he died and was resurrected for believers.

Again, firstborn can't just be about timing because Jesus wasn't the first person who was raised from the dead. We read about this all through the Bible. There was a son of the widow of Zarephath who was raised by Elijah.

There's a son of the Shumanite woman who was raised by Elisha. There was an unnamed man who was put into, whose dead body touched Elisha's bones after Elisha had died and he came back to life.

There was the widow of Nain's son, Jairus' daughter. Famously, there was Lazarus who Jesus raised himself. So we know that Jesus is not the first human to come back from the dead, from the grave.

[18:22] So what is Paul saying? Well, Paul's telling us that Christ is the ascended son of God. And because he's the ascended son of God, he's first born of a new creation that was launched at his resurrection.

First born isn't about temporal order. It's about Christ's sovereign rule over all things. Just like Christ was the creator who sovereignly rules over creation, Christ sovereignly rules over the new creation too.

The one who made everything is making everything new. Paul wrote other letters to other churches. In his letter that he wrote to the church in Corinth, there is a passage that is kind of very similar to the language that we have here.

But in Corinthians, he doesn't call Christ the firstborn, he calls him first fruits, which is a slightly different term. But it's obviously a harvest metaphor, a farming metaphor, but it's not a random metaphor.

There's something really important, I think, that it reveals to us. There's a theologian called Richard Gaffin who helped me to see this. I think he puts his finger on something that's got real implications

for how we understand what's going on here.

[19:42] So we read about Christ's resurrection and we read about the fact that we will be resurrected at the end of time. We see that in scripture. And we're tempted to think about those things as two separate events.

So we think there's Christ's resurrection and then there's this other event, this other thing that's our resurrection and those things are connected somehow by a promise. But first fruits, they're not just a sign of a harvest, they're not just an indicator of a harvest, they're the beginning of it.

They're the same fruit, the same crop, the same field. Do you see what Paul's saying here? The resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers are not two separate events.

They're two episodes of the same harvest. So why is this so important for us? Why do we need to think about it in those terms? Well, if Christ's resurrection and our resurrection are not just similar events, but our future resurrection is not just a hope.

They're not separate events, they're one event. That's already begun. The same resurrection that raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, right now, already is underway and everyone who's united to him by faith.

[21:05] So in Christ's resurrection, God's began to fulfill the promise that we will be resurrected too. So when is the resurrection going to happen? Well, it's already begun.

And I think that gives us great hope as we think about work on Monday morning or we think about the things that we're going through right now that are difficult and hard and feel like they're crushing in on us.

If you're a believer today, God promises to raise you from the dead. And while you wait, you don't have to wonder if it will happen because Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the promise God made to raise you from the dead has already begun to be fulfilled.

Okay, this is a two-part, a two-point sermon, but actually, there's probably a third point in here, but we don't have enough time to draw them all out. But let's finally look at verses 21 and 23 together. They come after this hymn, this poem that Paul has shared with us because Paul turns from thinking about the cosmic reality to think about the personal reality.

[22:17] So the cosmic Christ has accomplished cosmic reconciliation through the cross. The Christ who holds the universe together is the Christ who died to bring you back into communion with God.

And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, you're now restored to God in him and presented holy, blameless, and above reproach.

And then we need to look at verse 23 because if we look at this verse just in isolation, take it away from the rest of Scripture, it seems at first glance to fly in the face of the rest of Paul's letter.

Because remember, Paul's written this letter to remind the church that you don't need anything else apart from Christ. That is all they need. But then verse 23 introduces an if.

As if there's a condition that people have to meet. Are the false teachers right? Is there something that you need to add to Christ's work, Christ's finished work, in order to be reconciled with God?

[23:22] Well, the answer is no. Paul isn't saying that Christ's done 99% of the work and you just need to supply that final 1%. He's saying that those whom Christ reconciles, he also keeps.

And one of the ways that he keeps them is by calling them to continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast in the truth of Christ, which they've heard. This is perseverance.

Perseverance isn't the price that you pay in order to be saved. It's the fruit of the grace that saves you. Not some believers have been united, reconciled with God, but they might mess up or they might slip away.

But rather, not everyone who claims to be a Christian, who says that they follow Christ, is really a Christian. But if you believe that Christ really is the one who came to save sinners, then your salvation, your resurrection, your reconciliation with God are secure.

The Apostle Peter helps us to understand this. He wrote a letter. He wrote two letters. He writes that there's a wonderful inheritance that's been reserved for believers and they're being kept by the power of God for that inheritance.

[24:39] So we can interpret verse 23 maybe as the same points as verses 15 to 20, but from the opposite point of view.

So 15 to 20, paint this glorious picture of Christ as preeminent over creation, preeminent over the new creation. And then verse 23 is a call to remain grounded and settled in this glorious Christ.

Don't be moved away from the hope of the gospel. And the word hope is important for us to get our heads around also because when we say hope today, we think that there's something, we think about it as something that we're trying to grab onto that we're hoping will come true.

That's not what's happening here. This is an expectant confidence that the good news that Christ, the maker, God, the ruler of the cosmos, who entered into time and space, who died and rose again, the ruler of the new creation, he has come to reconcile everything on earth and in heaven to God.

Paul's message is this. If Christ's this much over creation, over powers, over death itself, over the whole of your alienated, hostile, once evil doing hearts, then he's more than sufficient for whatever something more the world could ever offer.

[26:09] So much more sufficient than your own doubts or the things that false teachers might try to teach you or your own weakness to hold on to the things that you think you need to.

There is no fullness beyond him. There's no rival power that's stronger than Christ. There's no valley, no dark valley of your own life in the present or in the past that can keep you from being reconciled through the blood that was shed on the cross for believers.

So if you're in Christ this evening, already, not someday in the future, but already, you're caught up in this resurrection life, being presented holy, blameless, and above reproach before God who has made you and who's still remaking you.

And if you're not yet in Christ, if alien and hostile is maybe a better way to describe the way that you are honestly feeling right now, the same blood that holds the promise for others has been held out to you right now and it contains everything that you would ever need with nothing held back.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for Jesus Christ, the creator of heaven and earth, of everything that is seen and unseen.

[27:45] We thank you for this picture that we have of Christ in Colossians, this picture that shows us our Lord, the only begotten Son of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father through whom all things were made and the one who rules over all creation, the one who ascended to the right hand of the Father, upholding, ruling, reigning.

Lord, help us all see clearly this glorious picture of Christ, our Savior, our ruler and let us live lives with joy as we await our resurrection when we will see him face to face.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.