

ROMANCING THE SAINTS AT COLOSSAE

Studies in the Book of Colossians

*“If Ephesians can be labeled the epistle portraying the ‘church of Christ,’
then Colossians must surely be labeled ‘the Christ of the church’”
unknown*

Text

Colossians 1:14-18

Topic

Paul communicates the deity of Jesus Christ
by twice calling Him the “Firstborn”

Title

“What We Have Here Is The Firstborn To Communicate”

Introduction

Studying this week I came across this quote attributed to Handley Moule:
“A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end.”

False teachers were telling the believers at Colossae that Jesus was not quite God. He was close to God - perhaps the first created being. But not God.

Cults and even Christians still try to diminish Jesus. They tell you outright He is not God or they claim it doesn't really matter in the long run.

Nonsense, says the apostle Paul. To emphasize that Jesus is indeed God Paul calls Him the “firstborn.” Being unfamiliar with the Greek translation of the word it almost seems to diminish the stature of our Lord. It doesn't. It's a strong word which, when understood, leaves no doubt that Jesus Christ is God.

Scan these verses and you see Jesus called the “firstborn over all creation” and the “firstborn from the dead.” Because He is firstborn the bridge between God and man is rock-solid. At the farther end you can expect to see God and be received into His glory.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Since Jesus Christ Is The “Firstborn Over All Creation” He Can Redeem You, and #2 Since Jesus Christ Is The “Firstborn From The Dead” You Can Reveal Him.

#1 Since Jesus Is The “Firstborn Over All Creation”
He Can Redeem You
(v14-17)

Everything you get involved with has its own unique vocabulary. It makes things easier for those involved but can seem confusing to outsiders.

Christianity has its own unique vocabulary. As we begin looking at these verses we’re confronted right away with the word “redemption.”

Colossians 1:14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

In our culture we talk about people ‘redeeming themselves.’ A receiver might drop a pass that could have gone all the way. Later in the game he makes a catch and ‘redeems himself.’

“Redemption” had a much more powerful impact in the Roman culture of the first century than it does today. It was a word used in the slave marketplace. There was no thought of redeeming yourself. A slave could only be set free if he or she was redeemed by someone else who paid the required price.

The human race is thus depicted as enslaved and needing redemption. How did we get sold into slavery? Adam and Eve made their choice in the Garden of Eden. They plunged us all into the consequences of disobeying God. They fell into sin and brought death upon us. They were enslaved. We, their descendants, are born enslaved to sin and can expect its awful consequence: death. If we are to be set free from sin and death someone must redeem us.

Someone has! “We have redemption through His blood.” The ‘price’ required to set a human being free from their enslavement is the “blood” of Jesus Christ. By “blood” we simply mean the death of Jesus. There’s nothing magical or mystical about His blood. It was His death that was required to redeem.

That’s the way things work in the universe. Sin requires the payment of death.

But something else happened in the Garden. God told Adam and Eve that He would come Himself and substitute for them. He would come Himself and die for them and for all their descendants. His death would redeem them.

Redemption is described as “the forgiveness of sins.” It literally means, *the sending away of sins*. Psalm 103:12 puts it this way: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

When Jesus died on the Cross it was the full, final price necessary to redeem us and send away from us the debt of sin. Nothing more need be done; nothing more can be done. Our relationship to God is thus restored.

The death of Jesus on the Cross was sufficient in its scope to redeem the entire human race. Those who believe on Him are actually redeemed and granted the forgiveness of their sins.

This is basic stuff, the simple Gospel. Paul wasn’t explaining anything to the Colossians. He was writing to Christians who had experienced redemption, the forgiveness of their sins. His point is going to follow and it is this: **You can only be redeemed and have the forgiveness of sins if Jesus Christ is God.**

Jews understood this. When Jesus was alive and forgave someone their sins the Jews would squawk, “Only God can forgive sins” (e.g., Mark 2:7).

Gentiles, like the Colossians, didn’t immediately understand that Jesus must be God and, so, Paul explained it from another vantage point they did

understand: Creation and the natural world. He's going to establish that Jesus is God by describing Him as the "firstborn over all creation."

Colossians 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

The Colossians may have had coins in their pockets and purses. If so, this word "image" could have been illustrated by those coins. It was the word that described the head of the Roman ruler minted on the coins. It was an exact likeness that represented the ruler depicted.

God is an "invisible" Spirit and cannot be seen. In the Old Testament when someone 'saw' God it was because He manifested Himself in a way that was visible to them. Theologians call those appearances theophanies.

Jesus Christ is the exact likeness Who perfectly represents "the invisible God." What is God like? Look at Jesus and you will see. He once told His disciples, "he that has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus doesn't merely reflect God. We do that. We are made in the image of God. But our representation of God is flawed and marred.

No, Jesus reveals God. He is the exact, perfect representation of God.

How can you be the exact representation of something that cannot be seen? J. Vernon McGee puts it this way:

He was born flesh. This is the way that He became the image of the invisible God. How could He be that? Because He is God. If He were not God, He could not have been the image of the invisible God.

He is "the firstborn over all creation." We might initially read that like the false teachers to mean He was the first to be born, or created, by God. *That's not what the word means at all.*

It's a word that indicates priority and sovereignty.

- By priority we mean prior to. It means Jesus existed prior to creation.
- By sovereignty we mean He was the originator of creation.

If Jesus existed prior to creation and was its originator, He cannot Himself be a created being. If He was the first created being He cannot also be the “firstborn over all creation.” The two are mutually exclusive.

He must be God! And He is, as Paul points out in the remainder of his description of Him as firstborn.

Before we look at that, let’s understand how important this is. Remember the need for redemption? No mere human being, himself enslaved, can redeem another. No angel or created being can redeem a human being. Only God coming in human flesh can redeem the human race as its substitute and sacrifice. If Jesus is not God in the flesh you cannot be redeemed. You remain enslaved to sin and death.

Colossians 1:16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

“By Him” is literally translated, “in Him.” It means that both the plan to create and the power to create resided in Jesus.

“All things” means everything in time and space, including all things “that are in Heaven and that are on the earth, visible and invisible.” All of creation.

Then Paul specifically mentions that Jesus is the creator of all spiritual beings. It was an especially important point to make to the Colossians because the false teachers had reduced Jesus to some sort of created spirit-being in a long-line of spirit beings.

Colossians 1:17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

This is a much more powerful statement than you might first realize. It doesn’t read, “He was before all things,” but says, “He **is** before all things.” It is the way you would refer to God, the One Who has existed eternally. It’s similar to Jesus referring to Himself in the Gospels by saying, “I AM.” He was taking upon Himself the name of the eternal God and declaring He had always existed.

“In Him all things consist” means it is Jesus who is holding everything together. He is preserving the universe. Physicists look into the atom and conclude there must be some invisible atomic ‘glue’ that holds everything together:

Neutrons have no electrical charge on them and act as a sort of nuclear glue, holding the protons, and thus the nucleus, together.

It’s the Lord! He’s the reason “all things consist” to this day.

Beyond the incredible importance of the doctrine of His deity, all of this is quite precious on a devotional level. Creation exists for Jesus. It is His to enjoy and delight in. We ruined it in the Garden. He came to redeem it and that is the history of the world as we know it - the unfolding drama of redemption until the Lord finishes His work. We like to call it the romance of redemption because it is essentially a love story on a cosmic scale.

Why the choice at all in the Garden? You can’t ask that question if you understand what love is. Love cannot be forced or demanded and remain ‘love.’ It requires choice. Adam and Eve chose badly. But God, Who is love, acted to redeem us. He proved His love on the Cross. He woos us, He wins us, He loves us to Himself.

Paul, the great definer of doctrine, makes the devotional connection in verse eighteen.

#2 Since Jesus Is The “Firstborn From The Dead”
You Can Reveal Him
(v18)

There is a new creation within creation. It is the church of Jesus Christ - all those who have believed on Him by grace through faith and have experienced redemption.

Colossians 1:18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

Let's tackle the word "firstborn" again first. We've been discussing Jesus' death on the Cross to redeem us. He's not on the Cross anymore. He's not in the grave. He is risen from the dead, seated in Heaven.

He is "firstborn from the dead" by virtue of His physical resurrection. When Jesus was on the earth He raised many a person from the dead. But those resurrections were really restorations. Those people lived to die another day.

When the Lord rose from the dead it was something entirely new and different. He rose in an eternal, glorified, incorruptible physical body. He was the first to be so raised but many will follow. All whom He has redeemed and who have received forgiveness will be raised incorruptible as well.

It is in that very amazing sense that Jesus is "firstborn from the dead." He is "the beginning" of this new creation, the church. What happens between the Day of Pentecost and the day the Lord returns to resurrect the dead and rapture the living is absolutely unique. The church is a mystery revealed in the New Testament.

How unique? Our relationship to Jesus is like that of a "Head" to its "body."

A head and a body sort of go together! They can't be in two places at one time. Jesus is in Heaven. We are on the earth. But if we acknowledge Him as our Head, and follow His leading and guiding, than we collectively act upon the earth exactly as Jesus would act if He were here.

Don McClure uses as an e-mail signature, "Jesus has come and never left." Jesus ascended into Heaven. He is seated at the right hand of God. But He has never left because He left us - His body - on the earth to continue the work. He gave us His Spirit to accomplish it.

It's ours to reveal to others. All in the context "that in all things He may have the preeminence." The word "may" or might means Jesus became something He was not previously. He was God for eternity and in His death and resurrection He became the "head of the body, the church."

The word “preeminence” is only found here in all the New Testament. it means *to have first place*. It refers to everything that has been said in these verses:

- Jesus is to have first place over all creation.
- Jesus is to have first place over His new creation, the church.

Ask yourself: Does Jesus have first place? Or do I think I am tied for first with Him?

We may not deny His deity. But we need also to not deny His priority.

“A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end.” Our Savior is God and the bridge remains rock-solid.