

You Were Raised Right

Studies in the Book of Colossians

Text

Colossians 1:15-23

Topic

Paul uses the word “firstborn” to describe how Jesus reveals the invisible God to us

Title

*“What We Have Here
is the Firstborn to Communicate”*

It’s common for churches to incorporate their city in their name. We do it - we are “Calvary Chapel of Hanford” (which we shorten to “Calvary Hanford”).

In some cases, however, it would be better to *not* reference your city:

- Half Way Baptist Church (Half Way, Missouri).
- Boring United Methodist Church (Boring, Maryland).
- Little Hope Baptist Church (Little Hope, Texas).

Some church names are just bad choices:

- James Bond United Community Church is in Toronto.
- Holy City Faith and Deliverance Ministries Center of Love, in Brooklyn.
- First Church of the Last Chance World on Fire Revival and Military Academy, in Dade City, Florida.

Thirty-three local churches are mentioned in the New Testament. They are mostly described as the church *of* or *in* a certain city, e.g. those Jesus wrote to in the Revelation - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia.

Reading through the letter to the Hebrews you encounter what sounds like a church name. It's found in Hebrews 12:23, "the general assembly and **church of the firstborn** *who are* registered in Heaven..."

That's a mouthful, for sure. We could shorten it to the Church of the Firstborn. It wasn't the name of any one local church; it's more a description of all churches.

It begs the question - Who is the firstborn? Turns out, **it's Jesus**. Look in our text at verses fifteen and eighteen:

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

Col 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.

As hipster-pastors like to say, we're going to "unpack" the word firstborn. I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 The Firstborn Creator Sustains The Universe For You, and #2 The Firstborn Conquerer Secured Heaven For You.

#1 The Firstborn Creator Sustains The Universe For You

(v15-17)

You might be the firstborn son or daughter in your family, but you're not necessarily the firstborn.

How can the firstborn not be the firstborn? Listen to how the Bible describes the two sons of the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, named Manasseh and Ephraim:

Gen 41:51 Joseph called the name of the **firstborn** Manasseh...

Gen 41:52 And the name of the second he called Ephraim...

Manasseh was the son born first. But listen to what Jeremiah said: “And Ephraim *is* My **firstborn**” (31:9).

Manasseh and Ephraim had been adopted by Jacob, father of the twelve tribes of Israel. When Jacob gave his blessing to his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, he chose to bless the younger Ephraim first, despite Joseph’s protests. In doing so, Jacob noted that Ephraim would be greater than Manasseh.

How is the son born second the firstborn? He is when the word is used to speak of preeminence and priority, and not birth order.

Another example: David was the youngest of the seven living sons of Jesse when the prophet Samuel came to anoint the next king of Israel. Samuel passed over the son born first, and each of David's older brothers, and identified him as the one God had chosen.

God later says of David, "Also I will make him *My firstborn*, The highest of the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89:27).

Firstborn doesn't always mean born first.

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 that was 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. He’s not simply godly, or god-like. He is the exact, perfect representation of God.

He is “the firstborn over all creation.” False teachers and cults twist the word “firstborn” to mean that Jesus was the first to be created by God. But we’ve already seen that isn’t what the word means.

If that isn’t enough, Paul will clarify what he means when he, in verse sixteen, says,

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.

The Creator of all things must have existed prior to all things and cannot Himself have been created. You are either the Creator or you are created. The two are mutually exclusive.

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.

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 that He had always existed.

"In Him all things consist" means that 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 force that holds everything together. Some call it "the strong force"; it is also referred to as "nuclear glue."

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. In the next set of verses, Paul immediately discusses the church.

He more than implies that Jesus created all things, and sustains the universe, so He can have a relationship with you.

Am I making too much of Jesus creating the universe with us in mind? If anything, *I'm making too little of it.*

I came across this quote by Dr. Hugh Ross:

What several decades of research has revealed about Earth's location within the vastness of the cosmos can be summed up in this statement: The ideal place for any kind of life as we know it turns out to be a solar system like ours, within a galaxy like the Milky Way, within a supercluster of galaxies like the Virgo supercluster, within a super-supercluster like the Laniakea super-supercluster. **In other words we happen to live in the best... the one and only, neighborhood that allows not only for physical life's existence but also for its enduring survival.**

SyFy writers, agnostics, and atheists assume that the vastness of the universe presents greater possibilities for alien life. **Just the opposite is true.**

The more we find out about the universe, the more improbable it becomes that life could occur anywhere but right here on earth.

Jesus created and sustains the universe so He can have a relationship with you. It's a backdrop, a stage, in order for Him to woo you to Himself.

It's not arrogant on our part to think we are unique. It's extravagant on the part of Jesus - to communicate how much God loves us.

#2 The Firstborn Conquerer Secured Heaven For You

(v18-23)

What is the Church of the Firstborn? In one sense, it is a new creation within creation. It is something beautiful and marvelous. It is all those who have believed on Jesus by grace through faith, therefore being transformed into something the universe has never before seen: Man as the dwelling place of God.

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, in this second context.

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 conquered death and Hell for us. "I *am* He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (the Revelation 1:18).

He was the **first** to be resurrected, but multitudes more 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.”

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.

Pastor 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. And He fills us with His Spirit to accomplish it.

“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*.

With a nod to Abbot & Costello, “Who” is not on firsts; Jesus is.

Colossians 1:19 For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,

What God “pleased” was that “in Him,” referring to Jesus Christ, “all the fullness should dwell.”

“Fullness” refers to all of God’s divine attributes. The word “dwell” means to be at home permanently. Paul’s sweeping statement does not allow for any other interpretation than this: In Jesus Christ the sum-total of divine attributes resides permanently.

Or, in short, Jesus Christ the human being is at once fully God.

Colossians 1:20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

Look to the end of the verse first. It was “through the blood of the cross” that Jesus was able to “reconcile” and make “peace.”

It goes back to the beginning. When Adam and Eve sinned God discussed what was necessary for them and their descendants to be reconciled. Blood had to be shed. By “blood” we mean death.

But not just any death. No mere man could die for the sins of the human race:

- First of all, no mere man could live a life to God’s perfect standards.
- And second of all, even if one could, he would only be able to die for himself and not for anyone else.

Only God in human flesh could reconcile the human race with God.

Paul tells us that reconciliation applies to “all things... whether things on earth or things in Heaven.” The entire creation was thrown into turmoil when Adam and Eve sinned. The entire creation is reconciled by Jesus in the sense that by His sacrifice on the cross God the Father is able to fulfill His stated plans for the universe.

Notice that “peace” is a result of reconciliation. It is foolish to talk about lasting political peace or personal peace apart from Jesus Christ. History is moving towards the Great Tribulation. We must factor-in prophecy when developing our worldview.

Colossians 1:21 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled

Colossians 1:22 in the body of His flesh through death...

Paul was addressing believers in a church. Before they met Jesus they were “alienated” from God. The word means *foreigner* or *stranger*. It describes everyone in their natural birth. We are born earthly, not heavenly.

We are citizens of a fallen planet, descendants of a fallen race. We are aliens when it comes to citizenship in Heaven.

Our hostility is revealed both in our “mind” and by our “wicked works.”

- By our “mind” is meant the fact that we think selfish, evil thoughts. If that’s too harsh for you it also means that our thinking is earthbound, fleshly, worldly, and material even though the universe is essentially spiritual.
- By our “wicked works” is meant the fact we act selfishly and for our own benefit. If that’s too harsh for you it also means that we are not loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

“Yet now He has reconciled [us] in the body of His flesh through death.” It’s the only possible solution. And it’s been accomplished by Jesus Christ because God “pleased” it.

God has never been your enemy. He has been at work in eternity and in history to reconcile you so you may be at peace with Him.

Five great Bible words that describe what God “pleased” for you:

1. In **justification** you stand before God guilty and condemned but God “pleased” to declare you righteous.
2. In **redemption** you stand before God as a slave but God “pleased” to grant you freedom.
3. In **forgiveness** you stand before God as a debtor but God “pleased” to pay your debt and forgive you.
4. In **reconciliation** you stand before God an enemy but God “pleased” to make peace with you.
5. And in **adoption** you stand before God a stranger but God “pleased” to make you a son.

One day all of this will be fully, finally realized in Heaven. In fact, Jesus will personally present you in Heaven.

Colossians 1:22 ... to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight...

The ultimate purpose of God the Father, what He “pleased,” was for His Son to one day “present you” before Him in Heaven.

The word “present” means *to stand beside*. The Lord, Jesus Christ, will stand beside you and present you to the Father.

It sort of reminds me of bringing home your fiancée to meet your parents - except without any of the drama or doubt as to what they might think of your choice. The Father can't wait to meet you in Heaven.

How will you look to Him?

- You will be “holy.” Inwardly, internally, you will be perfect. No sin. No intrusive thoughts. No fears. No doubts. No ‘nothing’ that plagues us so much now.
- You will be “blameless.” It can mean *without blemish*. Outwardly, externally, you will be perfect. You will have been raised from the dead in a glorified body, or raptured off of the earth in one.
- You will be “above reproach.” Upwardly, eternally, though you will have free-will, there will be no

possibility of future sin or selfishness. You will enjoy perfect, unbroken fellowship and communion with God and with every other saved individual.

Colossians 1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

- Read *casually* this seems to say you can easily cancel-out everything God has done and desires yet to do by falling short in your obedience.
- Read *carefully*, however, it reinforces your security in Jesus Christ and underlines the truth that He that has begun a good work in you will complete it.

Paul was using an analogy that we don't immediately see, but that those in Colossae would have seen. If we understand it we will have a better idea what he intended.

Colossae was in a region known for severe and devastating earthquakes that would level the buildings reducing them to rubble.

Think Coalinga 1983. So Paul used the analogy of a building that could not be destroyed by an earthquake.

The words “grounded,” “steadfast,” and “moved away” are all architectural terms:

- “Grounded” refers to the foundation of a structure.
- “Steadfast” refers to the structure itself.
- “Moved away” can be rendered *shifting* or *shaken*.

The analogy is of a house built on a solid foundation that would endure the very worst earthquake.

We’ll come back to the analogy in a moment. First let’s understand what the rest of the words in this verse mean.

The “hope of the Gospel” is the message of eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The method God had determined to communicate the Gospel was that it be “preached to every creature under Heaven.”

That doesn't mean it had already been preached to every creature - only that preaching is God's way of getting the message out to the world.

So here is what Paul was saying. The simple Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul preached was like a house that was built on a rock-solid foundation and could not be shaken. It didn't need any 'additions' or a 'second story.'

All that a Christian need do is "continue" in "the faith," in the doctrine of the apostles, that he or she had "heard" and received when they were saved.

The Colossians should, therefore, "continue" in the sound doctrine they had already "heard" and not be shaken by any teaching that they were falling short of spiritual truth.

So should you! Whatever city name attaches to your local church, you are safe and secure in the Church of the Firstborn because Jesus conquered sin and death to give you eternal life.

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Colossians 1:15-23

“What We Have Here is the Firstborn to Communicate”