Read: Colossians 1:15-29 (perhaps start at verse 13)

Last week we summarised the issue or the false teaching that was confusing the Colossians by saying Paul appears to be arguing against the idea that the Colossian believers they needed something more, some practice or some special knowledge, in addition to Christ. We saw some of the themes that will come up throughout the letter introduced in the thanksgiving and prayer in 1:3-14.

## Colossians 1:15-20

In this passage, and before Paul gets to the guts of his argument he introduces a hymn or poem about Christ. While it is possible that Paul composed this himself, the amount of unusual vocabulary in these verses, and the fact that some of the details are not immediately relevant in the context make it more likely that this Paul is using a hymn or a poem about Christ that may have been being used in the Church.[1] However, it is not possible to tell what was original poem and what has been added, modified or removed by Paul.[2]

Michael Bird describes these verses as 'one of the most sublime and profound descriptions of the person and work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.'[3]

Paul is using this hymn to say that Christ is all you need. He is supreme and he is sufficient.

Reading this in the Greek makes it easier to see the patterns in this hymn but let's read this hymn again from John Barclay's translation, which is overly literal here so that we can see the construction of the poem better (just because it is so awesome).

Some things to watch for:

1. The first stanza is about Christ's supremacy in creation
2. The last stanza is about Christ's supremacy in redemption. But even better, Christ's sufficiency, first in himself, and then in his work of redemption.
3. The middle verse and a half (1:17-18a) bridge the two stanzas, with the first line looking back to the first stanza, the last line looking forward to the last stanza.
4. Look for the repetition of πας (*pas*, translated as 'all', or 'each' or 'every') 8 times through these four verses

Who is the image of the invisible God,
the first-born (πρωτότοκος- *prototokos*) of all creation,
for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth,

[1] J. M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: T&T Clark. 2001), 59.
[2] M.F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), 48.
[3] Bird, 47.

visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions,
whether powers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things,
and all things hold together in him,
And he is the head of the body, the church.

Who is the beginning,
the first-born (πρωτότοκος- *prototokos*) from the dead,
that in all things he might be pre-eminent,
for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
and through him to reconcile all things to him(self),
making peace by the blood of his cross, through him,
whether things on earth or things in heaven.[4]

*How would you sum up what the poem reveals about Christ?*[5]

*How was—and is—Jesus supreme in creation (vv. 15–17)?*

*How was—and is—Jesus supreme in redemption (vv. 18–20)?*

*Are these the same things that are usually said of the Father?*

This hymn says some amazing things about Jesus.

First, Jesus is the image of the invisible God (1:15), and in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (1:19). In other words, 'all the attributes of God – his spirit, word, wisdom and glory – are perfectly displayed in Christ'.[6] In Christ, we see God.

Twice Jesus is described as the first-born (πρωτότοκος - *prototokos*). First in verse 15, on the surface, it could be read as Jesus being the first created being. But that is not how the word is being used here. Rather here it emphasizes Christ's

[4] Barclay, 60-61.
[5] Some questions are taken from T. Wright, D. Larsen, & S. Larsen, *Colossians & Philemon: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups* (London: SPCK , 2009), 20.
[6] P. T. O'Brien *Colossians, Philemon,* Word Biblical Commentary, 44 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 53.

sovereignty over creation. The word can also be used to emphasize pre-eminence.[7] In Psalm 89, which came to be regarded as a Messianic psalm, the same word is used in the Greek Old Testament about David, 'I will make him the firstborn [πρωτότοκον - *prototokon*], the highest of the kings of the earth.' [8] That is the sense here in Colossians 1::15 - Christ rules all of creation.[9]

In the fourth century, Arius claimed the 'there was once when he (Jesus) was not' – that is, that Jesus was a creation, not the creator. This led to the Arian controversy, and church leaders father at the Council of Nicea in 325 to answer this. The original creed of Nicea (not the same as the Nicene Creed, which was the result of the Council of Constantinople in 381) it says:

> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth[10]

*Can you see where the Christ-Hymn in Colossians had an influence on this statement of the creed?*

*If a Mormon or Jehovah's witnesses visited your house one day and tried to tell you that Jesus being the first-born shows that he was a created being, and not equal with God, how would you respond?*

The second time Christ is described as first-born (in verse 18), is that he is the first-born from the dead. There were others who were resuscitated, but when Jesus died and was raised again, he will not die again. And he is the first. We too will experience that resurrection of the body.

The resurrection of Christ marked the beginning of the End, the turning of the ages. However, the End had only begun; they [the early Christians] still awaited the final event, the (now second) coming of their Messiah Jesus, at which time they too would experience the resurrection/transformation of the body. They lived "between the times"; already the future had begun, not yet had it been completely fulfilled. This already/not yet perspective, in which they believed themselves already to be living in the time of the End, even though it was yet to be consummated, is the eschatological framework that determines everything about them- how they lived,

[7] Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and his Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 251.
[8] Ps 89:27 [88:28 LXX].
[9] C. E. Arnold, *Colossians* Second Edition, Vol. 44A, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic , 2025), 288–289.
[10] This is from Schaff's translation. Quoted in C. H. Talbert, Ephesians and Colossians (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 194.

how they thought, and how they understood their own place in the present world, which was now understood to be on its way out.[11]

All things were created in Christ, through Christ and *for* Christ.

Mounce says:
The point is the supremacy of Christ in creation, not only did he create all things, but he created all things for himself. Now we know from Philippians 2 that when everything is subjected to God the Son he will in turn, turn it over to God the Father. But when you talk about the supremacy of Christ, not only did he create it, but he created it for himself. That's why all that we do, we do to the Glory of God. There's a strong doctrine of creation that's going on in here. All things find their purpose and their meaning in Jesus because all things were created for him.[12]

*There is a lot more in this hymn, and we are only scratching the surface. What other things jumped out for you?*

*What are the ecological implications of this passage?*

## Colossians 1:21-23

Read: Colossians 1:21-23 again

One time., Abby got lost in a mall in Singapore. She was trying to get to an art gallery, and the MRT stop was inside a mall. Once she got off the MRT, Abby could not find her way out of the mall. After an hour or so, she gave up.

Tom Wright likens these verses to a map in a mall, with a big arrow saying you are here!

Paul is aware, I think, that the poem he's just set out in verses 15–20 is quite overpowering. Many ordinary Christians might read it, or hear it read out loud, and think, 'Well, that sounds impressive, but what's in it for me?' So at once he brings things into focus. This section might be headed 'You Are Here'. If the poem is like a map of the entire cosmos, the whole story of creation and redemption, the present verses indicate where the ordinary Christian is located on the map.[13]

[11] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 51.
[12] Bill Mounce, https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/academy/nt120-survey-of-the-new-testament/nt120-24-colossians-and-philemon
[13] T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2004), 154.

We could divide the next few verses up as follows:

1. What you once were (verse 21)
2. Where you now stand (verse 22)
3. How you must go on (verse 23)[14]

## 1. What you once were (verse 21)

The Colossians are Gentiles, and because of that, were not 'on the map' to begin with. The same sentiment is expressed in Ephesians 2:12

> [12] You were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the community of Israel, strangers to God's covenants and the promise that goes with them. Yours was a world without hope and without God. (Ephesians 2:12 REB)

## 2. Where you now stand (verse 22)

If we assume that the Colossians were being encouraged to add something to their faither in Christ, special knowledge or rituals, then this verse reminds them what Christ has done for them. He has reconciled them and presented them without blemish or accusation.

Here the picture used is reconciliation. In verse 20, Christ is said to have reconciled all things to himself. Here the Colossians are included.

## 3. How you must go on (verse 23)

And now a warning.

This verse confirms our understanding of Paul's meaning. The position the Colossians occupy before God as 'acceptable people' depends upon one condition—continuance in the faith. This continuance is then defined as faithfulness to the gospel. The gospel is then defined as:

> (i) the gospel they had already heard, *i.e.* which had already proved itself to be living and powerful;
> (ii) the gospel the world was also hearing, *i.e.* which had already proved itself 'catholic' or universal;
> (iii) the gospel Paul had received and served, *i.e.* which had already proved itself to be apostolic.

The duty of the Colossians to this gospel is expressed in fine words, whose precise meaning epitomizes the appeal of the whole Colossian letter.
*a*. They are to be *stable*, literally, established or well-founded in the truth. To move from the gospel is to move from the foundations on which Christ has built his church, and therefore to lose Christian 'stability'.

[14] R. C. Lucas, *Fullness & freedom: the message of Colossians & Philemon* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 60.

*b*. They are to be *steadfast*. This is the great call of 1 Corinthians 15:58, where apostolic truth was again at stake. It means loyalty to the truths by which they were saved.
*c*. They are not to *shift*. A unique New Testament word, it literally means that they are not to be *dissuaded* from the hope of the gospel.[15]

*What difference does our understanding about Christ make?*

*How would you explain reconciliation (with God) to a non-Christian friend?*[16]

**For personal reflection**
*What are one or two ways in which your life is different since you were changed from being alienated from God to being reconciled through Christ's death (vv. 21–22)?*[17]

For further reading / thought

In relation to the earlier question, what are the ecological implications of this passage (the Christ Hymn), something to get you thinking:
In effect the world's ecosystems, do not exist for the use and convenience of humans, but have value in themselves, existing through Christ and for the *pleasure* of Christ. [emphasis mine]
This insight is even more clearly expressed in Romans 8:19-22 …
It is clear that Paul sees human salvation as being inseparable from the salvation of the created universe. As (Granberg-Michaelson, 1981 16) puts it: 'Christ's death and resurrection reconcile us not only to God but to creation. Our new life in Christ consists of a restored relationship to both God and creation'.[18]

[15] Lucas, 62–63.
[16] Some questions from *Adult Questions for LESSONmaker* (Col 1:15–23). (Logos, 2024).
[17] Question from Wright, Larsen, & Larsen, 21.
[18] R.J. Eyles, *Voices of Hope in a Suffering World: Reflections of ecologically sustainable lifestyles* (Wellington: The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1991), 31.