

Colossians 1:15-19
The Preeminence of Christ

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Introduction

The Bible is the book about the Lord Jesus Christ. The Old Testament records the preparation for His coming. The gospels present Him as God in human flesh who came into the world to save sinners. In Acts, the message of salvation in Christ begins to be spread throughout the world. The epistles detail the theology of Christ's work and His church. Revelation presents Christ on the throne, reigning as King of kings and Lord of lords.

2

Introduction

Colossians was written to counter the false teaching that had entered the area. These heresies are still around today. They center in the person and work of Jesus and how salvation is obtained.

This passage defends the true nature of Jesus' identity by viewing Him in relation to four things: God, the universe, the unseen world, and the church.

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Colossians 1:15-19

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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. ¹⁷ And He is before all things, and in 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 may have the preeminence.

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Jesus in Relation to God

Colossians 1:15

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Gnosticism taught that spirit is good and matter evil. From their viewpoint, it was impossible that God (spirit) could become human (matter). A common false teaching viewed Jesus as one among a series of lesser spirits descending in sequential inferiority from God.

Paul refutes that teaching with two powerful descriptions of who Jesus really is. First, Paul describes Him as **the image of the invisible God**. The Greek word translated “**image**” means “image” or “likeness.” From it we get our English word *icon*, referring to a statue. It is used in Matthew 22:20 of Caesar’s portrait on a coin, and in Revelation 13:14 of the statue of Antichrist.

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Some of the **cults** today try to downplay this verse by saying **man is also in the image of God**. It is true that man was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), but it is not a perfect image. We were made with personality, intellect, emotion and will so we could have a relationship with God. However, even this image has been warped and twisted by sin. We no longer properly reflect God’s image morally as He is holy, and we are sinful. **Man was never granted God’s incommunicable attributes**, such as omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, or omnipresence. We are human, not divine.

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As stated earlier, the **Fall marred the original image of God** in man. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were innocent, free of sin, and incapable of dying. They forfeited those qualities when they sinned. **When someone puts faith in Christ, that person is promised that the image of God will be restored in him or her.**

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). God will make believers sinless like Christ when He returns.

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Unlike man, Jesus Christ is the **perfect, absolutely accurate image of God**. He did not become the image of God at the incarnation, but has been that from all eternity.

Hebrews 1:3

who being the **brightness of His glory** and **the express image of His person**, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The Greek word translated “**express Image**” refers to an engraving tool, or stamp. Jesus is the exact likeness of God. He is in the very form of God (Phil. 2:6). That is why He could say, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In Christ, the invisible God became visible, “and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14).

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By using the term image, Paul emphasizes that Jesus is both the representation and manifestation of God. He is the full, final, and complete revelation of God. He is God in human flesh. That was His claim (John 8:58; 10:30–33), and the unanimous testimony of Scripture (cf. John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1). To think anything less of Him is blasphemy and gives evidence of a mind blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4).

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Paul further describes Jesus as **the first-born of all creation**. From the Arians of the early church to the Jehovah's Witnesses of our own day, those who deny Jesus' deity have sought support from this phrase. They argue that it speaks of Christ as a created being, and that He could not be the eternal God. Such an interpretation completely misunderstands the sense of *prōtotokos* (**first-born**) and ignores the context.

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Through “**firstborn**” can mean firstborn chronologically, it refers primarily to **position**, or **rank**. In both Greek and Jewish culture, the firstborn was the son who had the **right of inheritance**. He was not necessarily the first one born. Although Esau was born first chronologically, it was Jacob who was the “firstborn” and received the inheritance. Jesus is the One with the right to the inheritance of all creation (cf. Heb. 1:2; Rev. 5:1–7, 13).

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Israel was called God’s firstborn in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9. Though not the first people born, they held first place in God’s sight among all the nations. In **Psalm 89:27**, God says of the Messiah, “I also shall make him My first-born,” then defines what He means—“the highest of the kings of the earth.” In Revelation 1:5, Jesus is called “the **first-born of the dead**,” even though He was not the first person to be resurrected chronologically. Of all ever raised, He is the preeminent One. Romans 8:29 refers to Him as the firstborn in relation to the church. In all the above cases, **firstborn clearly means highest in rank, not first created**.

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The false teachings that Paul confronted are still around today. Both the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons deny the person and work of Jesus. They use the concept of “firstborn” to make Jesus a “created” being and deny the deity of Jesus.

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There are many other reasons for rejecting the idea that the use of **first-born** makes Jesus a created being. **Such an interpretation cannot be harmonized with the description of Jesus as “only begotten,”** in John 1:18.

John 1:18

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (NKJV)

(The NU manuscripts which are the basis of many of the Bible translations uses the word God in place of Son! The NU manuscript was used to translate the NIV, ESV, and NASB)

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made him known. (ESV)

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One of the early church fathers, Theodoret, was dealing with this same heresy. He asked the rhetorical question, “How if Christ was only-begotten, could He be first-begotten? And how, if He were first-begotten, could He be only-begotten? How could He be the first of many in His class, and at the same time the only member of His class?”

Such confusion is inevitable if we assign the meaning “first created” to “firstborn.” Further, when the “*Firstborn*” is one of the class referred to, the class is plural (cf. Col. 1:18; Rom. 8:29). Yet, “only begotten” is singular.

If Paul meant to convey that Christ was the first created being, why did he not use the Greek word for “first created?”

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Such an interpretation of “**firstborn**” is also **foreign to the context**—both the general context of the epistle and the specific context of the passage. **If Paul were teaching that Christ is a created being, he would be agreeing with the central point of the false teaching invading Colossae.** It is also out of harmony with the immediate context. Paul has just finished describing Christ as the perfect and complete image of God.

In the next verse, he refers to Christ as the creator of everything that exists. How then could Christ Himself be a created being? Further, verse 17 states, “He is before all things.” Christ existed before anything else was created (cf. Micah 5:2). And only God existed before the creation.

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So What ...

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Jesus is the perfect image of God. He is the preeminent over all creation. He both existed before the creation and is exalted in rank above it. Those truths define who Jesus is in relation to God. They also devastate the false teachers' position. But Paul is not finished—his next point undermines another false teaching of the false teachers. A question we each need to ask ourselves, “Where does Jesus rank in our lives?”