

The Excellence Of Jesus Christ

Introduction. The Bible is supremely 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, come 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 teaching of Christ's work and personification of Christ in His body, the church. Finally, Revelation presents Christ on the throne, reigning as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Paul's letter to the Colossian church was sent primarily to combat a growing threat of heresy among them. Paul never says exactly what the heresy is, but we can see that he refers to it as a type of "philosophy" (Colossians 2:8); it appears to have been an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught that the way to God was barred by a series of emanations. Getting past these emanations to the true God was through knowledge and a series of passwords which only the Gnostics could supply. This meant that salvation was limited to only a few intellectuals. The series of emanations in their totality were called the Pleroma (fulness). In most Gnostic systems the Pleroma consisted of 30 beings ranging from the highest God at one end to Sophia (wisdom) at the other end. They considered Jesus as only one of the many intermediaries between God and man. They frequently denied that He died on the cross (1 John 5:6-8), and some of them even denied that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John 2:23; 4:2-3). The Gnostics would have turned the gospel into a philosophy of which only a select few could be a part.

Although every part of scripture is about Jesus Christ (Luke 24:47), there is hardly any passage more significant than Colossians 1:15-19. This dramatic and powerful passage removes any doubt or confusion over Jesus' true identity. It is vital to a proper understanding of the gospel. Paul reveals our Lord's true identity by viewing Him in relation to four realities: God, the Universe, the unseen world, and the church.

I. Jesus Christ In Relation To God

- A. The "image" means "likeness". From it we get our English word "icon," referring to a statue (cp. Matthew 22:20; Revelation 13:14). Christ is the perfect, absolutely accurate image of God. He did not become the image of God when He came in the flesh, but has been that from all eternity (Hebrews 1:3). Christ reflects God's attributes, as the Sun's light reflects the Sun. 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.
- B. Jesus is also the "firstborn of every creature". Although the word can mean firstborn chronologically (Luke 2:7), it refers primarily to position or rank (Psalm 89:27). In both Greek and Jewish culture, the firstborn was the son who had the right of inheritance (Genesis 25:29-34). Jesus is the One with the right to the inheritance of all creation (cp. Hebrews 1:2; Revelation 5:1-7, 13).
 - 1. Israel was God's firstborn (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9). Though not the first people born, they held first place in God's view among all the nations.
 - 2. Even though He was not the first person to be resurrected chronologically of all the people ever raised, He is the preeminent One (Romans 8:29).

- C. Far from being one of a series of emanations descending from God, Jesus is the perfect image of God. He is the preeminent inheritor 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.

II. Jesus Christ In Relation To The Universe

- A. Paul expands on Jesus' role as Creator by giving an inclusive statement with important implications. This truth is affirmed by the apostle John (John 1:3) and the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 1:2).
- B. Because the Colossian errorists viewed matter as evil, they argued that neither the good God nor an emanation could have created it. However, Paul gives three reasons for Jesus' primacy over creation.
1. Jesus has primacy over the creation because it reveals His power, knowledge, and wisdom.
 - a) The sheer size of the Universe is staggering. The Sun has a diameter of 864,000 miles (100 times that of Earth's) and could hold 1.3 million planets the size of Earth inside it.
 - b) The star Betelgeuse has a diameter of 100 million miles, which is larger than the Earth's orbit around the sun.
 - c) It takes sunlight 8.5 minutes to reach Earth. Yet that same light would take more than four years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri.
 - d) Scientists estimate that the number of stars in the Universe is roughly equal to the number of all the grains of sand on all the world's beaches.
 2. Jesus has primacy over the creation because He is before everything. When the Universe began, He already existed (Micah 5:2; John 1:1-2; 8:58; 1 John 1:1; Revelation 22:13). Only God can be eternal.
 3. Jesus has primacy over the creation because He maintains the delicate balance necessary to life's existence. He literally holds everything together. He is gravity and centrifugal and centripetal force. He is the One who keeps all the entities in space in their motion. He is the energy of the Universe.

III. Jesus Christ In Relation To The Unseen World

- A. "Thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities" refer to the various ranks of angels. Far from being an angel, as the Colossian errorists taught, Christ created the angels (Hebrews 1:7-8).
- B. Jesus has been exalted above these heavenly beings (Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 1:21; 6:12; Philippians 2:10; 1 Peter 3:22).
- C. Scripture is clear that Jesus is not an angel; He is above the angels, who in fact worship Him and are under His authority (Revelation 5:6-14). Jesus' relation to the unseen world, like His relation to the Universe, proves He is God.

IV. Jesus Christ In Relation To The Church

- A. Christ is the head of the church.
1. There are many metaphors used in scripture to describe the church. It is called a family, kingdom, vineyard, flock, building, and bride.

2. But the most profound metaphor, one that has no Old Testament equivalent, is that of a body. The church is a body, and Christ is the head of that body (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18).
 3. This concept is not used in the sense of the head of a company, but rather looks at the church as a living organism, inseparably tied together by Christ (1 Peter 2:4-7). He controls every part of it and gives it life and direction.
 4. His life lived out through all the members provides the unity of the body. He energizes and coordinates the diversity within the body (1 Corinthians 12:4-13) and the mutuality within the body (1 Corinthians 12:15-27).
- B. Christ is the source of the church.
1. "Beginning" is used here in the twofold sense of source and primacy. The church had its origins in Jesus (Ephesians 1:4).
 2. His sacrificial death and resurrection provided our new life. As the head of the body, Jesus holds the chief position, or highest rank in the church because He is its originator (Acts 20:28).
- C. Christ is the firstborn from the dead.
1. Paul utilizes the word firstborn for the second time (cp. v. 15) in order to reemphasize the priority of Christ. Of all those who have been raised from the dead, or ever will be, Christ is the highest in rank.
 2. The resurrection of the dead was expected at the end of the age; Jesus' resurrection ahead of that time was seen as the beginning or inaugurating of that future event (1 Corinthians 15:23).
- D. Christ is the preeminent One.
1. As a result of His death and resurrection, Jesus has come to have first place in everything. Paul summarizes for emphasis in v. 18. He wants to drive home the point as forcefully as he can that Jesus is not merely another emanation from God (Philippians 2:8-11).
 2. "Fulness" was a term used by the later Gnostics to refer to the divine powers and attributes, which they believed were divided among the various emanations. Paul counters that false teaching by stating that all the fulness of deity is not spread out in small doses to a group of spirits, but fully dwells in Christ alone (cp. 2:9-10).

Conclusion. What should the response be to the glorious truths about Christ in this passage? It deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations, and our utmost diligence living in them. For if our future blessedness will consist in living where He is, and beholding His glory, what better preparation can there be for it than a constant contemplation of that glory as revealed in the gospel, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory (2 Corinthians 3:18)?