

Sermon Series:

New Life in Christ

A study of the book of Colossians



THE GLORY OF CHRIST

(Colossians 1:15-20; Mark 9:2-8) Becky Douglass

Introduction

The disciples had been with Jesus for almost 3 years now. They thought they knew Him well. They had seen him do miracles – healing, feeding, even raising some from the dead! They had heard His teaching and realised that His understanding and authority was different to the other teachers of the Law. They knew He was good and wise and powerful. They even suspected He was the Messiah, but some things He did didn't fit into their ideas of what the Messiah was supposed to be and do – they were puzzled.

Jesus knew they needed something more. At least those closest to Him needed a new revelation. They might not understand at the time, but it would be something that they would remember as they headed into last final months of His time with them – months of increasing opposition and finally, His death. He knew there was victory on the other side, but they wouldn't understand that. Jesus wanted them to catch a glimpse – they couldn't handle any more than a glimpse! – of who he really was.

And so he took His three closest disciples – Peter, James and John – with Him when He went up the mountain to talk with His Father. There they saw something few have ever seen outside visions – Jesus in all His glory. I can't imagine what it must have been like. I'm sure I would be terrified like they were! And I would probably say something stupid like Peter did. But what a memory to carry through those dark days which would come before they saw Jesus once again, this time in His resurrected body. It would be something to hang on to when nothing else made sense. It was a gift to sustain them.

Paul was thrilled with how well the Colossians were doing but knew they would face opposition and possibly some dark days. In chapter 2, we will see that they were encountering people who wanted them to be involved in certain rituals and practices or to abstain from certain activities and food – all which were supposedly paths to higher knowledge and deeper spirituality. All of which would be confusing and could possibly pull them away from Christ and total reliance on Him. In order to show them why these things were not necessary and even dangerous for their spiritual health, he gives them a glimpse of who Christ really is.

Most people believe that these verses were some kind of early church hymn in praise of Christ. Paul might have used an existing hymn or possibly even written it himself. It consists of two stanzas or verses, the first which celebrates Christ as the creator of everything and the second which celebrates Christ as the reconciler of everything. It is like an early church version of 'The One True God' which we just watched, or 'In Christ Alone' which the team will share with us after the sermon.

As a song, it is not laid out like a theological treatise. However, there are some parallel ideas in the two stanzas which you can see by the repeated words. Both stanzas talk about what Christ has done in the past, what He is doing in the present, and who He has always been. First, we'll take a look at these ideas in each stanza and then summarise what we find so that we can get a clearer picture of who Christ is in all His glory.

Stanza #1: ... through him God created everything ...

1. Past (v16)

*... for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
 *such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers,
 and authorities in the unseen world.*
Everything was created through him and for him.*

This is like another passage which talks about Jesus and creation. In the beginning of his Gospel, John writes about the Word, or Jesus, and says:

*In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He existed in the beginning with God.
God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him. (John 1:1-3)*

God created everything and He did it through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Trinity was involved in creation. The Father initiated it, the Son accomplished it, and we read elsewhere that the Spirit gave it life, God's life.

This passage in Colossians adds two important aspects to our understanding of creation. First, we see that through Christ, God created everything in heaven and earth – seen and unseen. The Genesis creation account is focused on the creation of this world and its inhabitants, but Colossians has a unique focus on Christ's involvement in the creation of the unseen or spiritual world – the angelic beings whether good or bad. The Bible does not say much about those who inhabit the unseen world except to say that they exist and that they can affect what happens in the physical world that we inhabit. From these verses we get a picture of an organised hierarchy, but it is never explained in the Bible. However, Paul wants to make clear that they are just created beings as we are and are therefore subservient to Christ. This will be important later because it seems that some in Colossae were overly concerned with them.

Secondly, Paul makes the point that “*everything was created ... for Him*”. This is Christ’s world. Made by Him, and made for Him – for His pleasure and glory as He shares His life and love with it.

2. Present (v17)

*He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.*

We now move from Christ’s actions in the past to his actions in the present. He is not a God who creates and then loses interest; who sets the world in motion and then goes away and leaves it to run on its own. He actively, moment by moment, holds it together and keeps it going. We often celebrate those times when we see Christ’s spectacular intervention in our world – what we call miracles – but we should also be celebrating the fact that life goes on at all. If he took his hand off the world for even a second, it would fall apart and stop working – literally! This gives me hope for this world for I believe He will never allow it to destroy itself. That doesn’t mean we don’t have a responsibility to live in this world in a careful way, taking good care of the resources and environment God has given us. However, it does mean that God is involved and even when we do the wrong thing, it is still under His care and protection. All of creation is in His hands and under His care.

3. Forever (v15)

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

In both stanzas of this hymn to Christ, Paul is sure to show us how Christ is related to God. Here, the hymn starts with the affirmation that “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God”. Christ is the exact, visible representation of God. He takes God from the unseen world into the seen world where we exist. When we look at Christ, we are seeing God. Then Paul goes on to talk about Christ’s relationship with creation:

*He existed before anything was created
and is supreme over all creation,*

This is actually an attempt to get across the meaning of the phrase “*firstborn of all creation*”. In our minds, when we talk of something being ‘firstborn’ we tend to put the emphasis on ‘born’ and the idea of ‘coming from’. Some have thought ‘firstborn’ means that God created the Son first and then He created the world. However, in the culture of Paul, ‘firstborn’ was often used metaphorically to represent supremacy - just as the firstborn son was the most important child who inherited everything and became head of the family on the death of his father. The emphasis in the metaphor is on the ‘first’ aspect and could refer more than just one’s children. Because of this possible confusion, the New Living Translation focuses on that idea of supremacy and what came first. It means that Christ is eternally superior to anything in creation because he existed before creation occurred and He was the one who brought it into being and sustains it. Christ is supreme!

Stanza #2: ... through him God reconciled everything ...

We now move into the second stanza of the hymn and the focus moves from Christ work in creation, to His work in reconciliation. But this begs a question: Why did it need to be

reconciled? In the first stanza we learn that creation was made for Christ and he is supreme over everything. What went wrong?

This hymn doesn't answer that question. But in the verse right after the hymn, Paul says: "*You were His enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions.*" (v21) This doesn't answer all the questions about what happened – Paul assumes they know this from other teaching – but paints a picture of a creation which has turned its back on its Creator and not only has gone its own way but is actively hostile towards its Creator. It is into this world that God sent His son, Jesus Christ.

1. Past (v20)

*... through him God reconciled everything to himself.
He made peace with everything
in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross.*

Jesus came into this world for two purposes – to reveal God to humanity and to reconcile humanity to God. There are a couple of things to notice here. Firstly the scope of Christ's reconciling work is "*everything in heaven and on earth*". It is a cosmic reconciliation. We tend to think that Christ came into the world to save sinners, which is true, but this says He came into the world to save all of creation, not just humanity. In Romans 8, Paul affirms that "*all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.*" (Romans 8:20,21) The renewing of all creation is bound up in our salvation, just as its decay came as a result of our sin as we saw in Genesis 3. The Bible doesn't give us all the details, but somehow God is bringing the whole of creation back into the state of peace, or wholeness, that God originally intended. This is the Biblical idea of *shalom* we have talked about before. Salvation is for us, but the impact of that salvation will eventually affect the whole of creation. Christ's work brings peace between humanity and God, between person and person, and between humanity and the rest of creation. It is all-encompassing.

Secondly, this reconciliation is won in a shocking way – through a shameful death on a cross. Today we see the cross as a symbol of love and hope. In Paul's day, it was the worst way you could die. It was used by the Romans to not only execute, but to bring as much shame and humiliation as possible onto the one being crucified and their family. The early church did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith until several centuries later because it was too shameful. The contrast between the glorious, exalted Creator and the shamed, lowly Crucified One was extreme. And yet both are integral to Christ's work and identity.

2. Present (v18a)

*Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.*

But Christ didn't just do the work of reconciliation in the past. As with creation, His work continues into the present. Today, Christ is the head of the church – the community, the family of those who have been reconciled to God. The idea of headship involves authority - it controls the body, deciding what to do next and ordering the body to accomplish what is needed. However, the head is also the source and sustainer of the body's life. It monitors its condition, reacts in pain to injury and causes it to seek out the food, rest and protection it

needs. Just as Christ sustains all of creation, Christ, as head of the church, sustains the church. Christ did not die, rise again and go back to heaven with his work done. We read that He intercedes for us, He directs the work of the Spirit in our individual and corporate lives, He is preparing a place for us, and He loves us with an everlasting love. Christ sustains His church.

3. Forever (v18b-19)

*He is the beginning,
supreme over all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.*

*For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,*

This stanza also focuses on Christ's relationship to God the Father. Christ made the invisible God visible because "*God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ*". There was no part of God which was not present in Christ. He was fully and completely God. He was also fully and completely human – something which we cannot ever fully understand but must trust it is true because God tells us it is so in His Word. Christ was God – Paul wants there to be no doubt about it.

We also learn here about Christ's relationship with those He has reconciled to God. Through Christ's death on the cross, our sins have been forgiven, paid for, we have been redeemed. Through Christ's resurrection, we have new life in Him. We have risen from the dead and now walk in newness of life. Christ led the way and so he is "*firstborn from the dead*", the inaugurator of a new humanity which has been reconciled to God. Christ is supreme!

In summary, we have seen ...

Christ is the full and visible image or expression of God.
When we look at Him, we see God.

Christ is the Creator and Reconciler of everything in heaven and earth.
Everything thing is from Him and for Him.

Christ is the source, sustenance and supreme leader of creation and the church.
He holds all things together.

What difference does this make?

There are many lessons we could take from these verses. Paul will go on to use these ideas to show the Colossians that they don't need anyone or anything else to have a relationship with God. As I have thought about this passage, two things have stood out to me.

If He holds all creation together, sustaining it and nurturing it, how much more will he hold and sustain and nurture His church which he has created at great price with His own blood?

I believe that we have seen this in our own situation over the past 18 months. The failing of our minister couldn't tear us apart. A global pandemic couldn't cause us to falter. Our own human frailty hasn't stopped us from loving Him and each other. Why? Not because we are exceptional Christians! We're just ordinary. But Christ has held us together and given us His

life. Christ has guided us as we have asked Him what to do. And Christ will continue to do this as long as we stay focussed on Him. He is all we need.

Life only makes sense when we acknowledge Christ in ALL of his glory:

- *Christ, the Creator and Reconciler*
If He is just a disinterested creator, what hope does He offer to us sinners?
If He has only come on the scene after we messed up, where is His power?
- *Christ the eternal one and the incarnated one*
If Christ is just a distant eternal God, what does He have to do with our real lives on earth?
If Christ is just a man, how can He mediate between us and God?
- *Christ, the Mighty God and the Suffering Servant*
If Christ is all powerful but not loving, why would he care about us rebels?
If Christ has only suffered the penalty for sin, but not defeated the power of sin, we have no hope of peace, *shalom* or wholeness in this life.

But because Christ is all these things, we do have hope. He is all we need. This is the glory of Christ!