

This evening we will begin hearing the word of the Lord from Colossians 1:15-20. This section is about Jesus as the one who is at the heart of everything. Words fail to be able to express how central Jesus is to everything that exists. You have to be God to understand the fullness of what that means. But the words of this passage, since they are inspired by God, go as far as it is possible to go to express in human language the extent of the centrality of Jesus Christ to everything that exists. Everything that exists can be summed up in two categories. There is God on the one hand and there is everything that God created on the other, and Jesus is at the center of all of it.

The word “all” is used 7 times in this passage and there are a number of other expressions that mean everything. Just listen again as I read verses 15-16, “¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of **all** creation. ¹⁶For by him **all** things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—**all** things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷And he is before **all** things, and in him **all** things hold together.” That is why I say that this passage is about how Jesus is central to everything.

At the heart of everything that is wrong with us as sinful human beings is the fact that Jesus is not important enough to us. If Jesus is central to everything, and he is not central to our lives – that is a problem. The great problem with each of our lives is that Jesus is not important enough to us and other things including ourselves are too important. Every time we sin it is because Jesus is not important enough to us. Every time the primary desire of our hearts is anything other than loving and pleasing Jesus, we are robbing him of his rightful place in our hearts. And because having Jesus at the center of our love and delight is the way we were created to flourish, every time something is more important to us than Jesus, not only do we dishonor him, our lives are impoverished.

What this means is that the Christian life is about being interested in Jesus. And that is why a passage like this is so unspeakably precious. It is all about Jesus and how great and glorious he is.

First it says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. God is invisible. What that means is that God is unknowable from our side. The distinction between Creator and created is such that created beings can only know God by God revealing himself to us. And that is what Jesus does. “He is the image of the invisible God.” What that means is that he is the perfect reflection of God and so makes him known. The book of Hebrews says of Jesus, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature....” John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

Now this was already true in the OT. Jesus was not a man yet then, but he was eternally the Son of God and he has always been the one through whom God has made himself known. That is why he is called the Word in John 1. God reveals himself by his Word and the Son of God is identified as the Word. He is how God expresses himself. There is great mystery here of course, but it is enough for us to know that the Son of God makes God

known and knowing God is the most important thing in life. Knowing God is life. Not knowing God is a living death.

Now this idea of Jesus being the image of God is also true of Jesus as a human being. This is an amazing truth, and it is a wonderful fact that the God-man Jesus is still the image of God. Verse 19 of Colossians 1 says that “in him [and that is a reference to the God-man Jesus] all the fullness of God as pleased to dwell. So if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. The God-man Jesus is the apex of the revelation of God. In Jesus we see God’s power and his justice and his holiness and his righteousness and his compassion and his love. Remember what Jesus said to Philip in John 14:9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Think back of how Paul and Timothy had been praying that the Colossian Christians would grow in the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is necessary for life for human beings. We need to know God to be truly alive. We need to know God like we need air and food to be alive physically. That is why Jesus referred to himself as the bread of life. Apart from the knowledge of God we are spiritually dead. And the true life of joy and fullness comes from delighting in knowing God. And Jesus is the image of the invisible God. So to grow in joy and fullness of life you need to grow in the knowledge of the invisible God through growing in your knowledge of Jesus which is why this passage is so important.

It says next that Jesus is the first born of all creation. I’m going to refer to him as Jesus. Technically he is not Jesus before his birth. Before his birth he is the Son of God. He only becomes Jesus after he is born and Joseph names him Jesus according to the word of the angel. But the “he” in this passage refers both to the Son of God before the incarnation and Jesus after his incarnation. I will just speak of Jesus because the Son of God and Jesus are the same person. So Paul also speaks of Jesus as the firstborn of all creation.

Now this idea of Jesus as the firstborn of all creation has been wrongly interpreted to mean that Jesus was the first created being. That is a heresy known as Arianism which was dealt with in the first few centuries of the church. The term “firstborn” here does not mean that Jesus was the first being that was created. The next verse makes that clear. “For by him all things were created....” And verse 17, “And he is before all things....” The term “firstborn” has a very specific meaning in the Bible at least in some contexts. It refers to the first in rank or dignity. Psalm 89:27 refers to David in this way using the term “firstborn.” There God says of David: “And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” When the term “firstborn” is used in this way it means “highest.”

So Jesus is the firstborn over the whole creation. He is above the whole creation. He is supreme over all creation. That means, of course, that he is God. There are only two kinds of being in existence. There is God and there is the creation. So if Jesus is above the creation he is God.

The next verse goes on to make this clear. Verse 16, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created

through him and for him.” That is a very striking way of explaining how Jesus is supreme over the whole creation. He is the creator. Jesus is the one through whom the Father created. He is the Father’s agent in creation. And Paul here is multiplying words to emphasize as strongly as he can that there is nothing anywhere that exists independently of Jesus as the creator of all things.

First Paul says that by Jesus all things were created. Then he specifies everything in heaven and on earth. Then he includes both everything that is visible and everything that is invisible. And then he mentions that every throne, dominion ruler or authority is included as belonging to what Jesus has created.

Paul is obviously trying to make an impression. The scholars tell us that this section has characteristics of a poem or a hymn. It is thought that it already existed, and that Paul incorporated into his letter. Whatever the details are, it is clear that Paul is using language in order to make an impression. He wants his readers to not just know, but feel how utterly above everything Jesus is. There is nothing in the whole of creation that he did not create. He is the creator of the unbelievably vast immensity of outer space with its billions upon billions of stars and planets and galaxies. He is the creator of everything that we see around us on earth which is all awe-inspiring if you really pay attention.

There is a whole world of things that are invisible to us – things too small for us to see which are staggeringly complex. Jesus made all of that. But there is also a whole spiritual world that is invisible to us. There are angels and demons. This is at least part of what Paul means when he says that Jesus created thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities. Paul gives us an intriguing description of the evil side of this invisible world in Ephesians 6:12 where he writes, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

There is this huge dark hierarchy of spiritual beings that are invisible to us as well as a huge hierarchy of holy spiritual beings that are doing whatever they do in a realm that is invisible to do. Some of them are opposed to God. Others are servants of God. But not one of them exists independently of Jesus. They all belong to the “all things” that Jesus has created.

But those terms “thrones,” “dominions,” “rulers” and “authorities” also refer to the powers that are on earth. There are people on earth who have a lot of power and authority. They are in politics, but also in business or in the media or in entertainment. There are people who have great influence over the masses – the movers and shakers of this world. They all belong to the “all things” that Jesus has made. Even the most powerful people or spiritual beings who lead armies in opposition to God and attack his people – not one of them is an uncreated being. They all owe their very existence to Jesus. No matter how great and powerful a person or a spiritual being becomes they never are the source of their own existence – they are always dependent on Jesus to even exist.

It is important that we understand this, but also that we are awestruck by the greatness of Jesus. Paul expresses this idea in Ephesians 1:21 when he says that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”

Far above – way, way, way above – We get a sense of how far Jesus is above everyone else by thinking of the language that Isaiah uses to speak of God in Isaiah 40:15 “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales.” That imagery also applies to Jesus. And it is that sense of a vast contrast between Jesus and everything else in terms of power and glory that Paul is seeking to communicate to us in our text. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.”

We are to live with this awareness. This is reality. Living with this awareness is what it means to live in the light. Satan does everything he can to blind the minds of people to this reality that we are considering. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says of unbelievers, “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” And then he says of believers in verse 6 “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

These verses show how Satan does everything in his power to keep people from seeing the glory of Christ as it is described in our text and many other places. It also shows how God, in his work of saving sinners, gives light in our hearts so that we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But these things are not static. We can be sure that Satan does what he can to dull our awareness of the greatness of Jesus and that the Holy Spirit is working through the means of grace to increase our awareness of the greatness of Jesus.

It is important to the devil to hide it. And it is important to God to illumine it. Which means that how aware we are of just how great and glorious Jesus is is critically important. As I said at the beginning, life is associated with knowing God and death is associated with not knowing God. Satan is pushing us towards death. God is pushing us towards life.

David Wells has written about this in his excellent book, *God in the Whirlwind*. The subtitle is “How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World.” At one place he writes, “This is our goal in life, that we might be God-centered in our thoughts and God-fearing in our hearts, as J.I. Packer put it” (loc. 219). But then he goes on to discuss something that makes it very difficult for us to be God-centered in our thoughts. He writes of this challenge that we have in our modern world, “It is the extra-ordinary bombardment on our mind that goes on every day from a thousand different sources that leave us distracted, with our minds going simultaneously in multiple directions. How, then can we receive from Scripture the truth God has for us if we cannot focus long enough, linger long enough, to receive that truth? Every age has its own challenges. This is one of ours. It is the affliction of distraction” (loc 241).

This is really relevant to our text. Paul here is expressing as powerfully as he can how high above everything else Jesus is. And his purpose is that this reality of Jesus far above every single thing and power might be the lens through which we view everything as we move through this world. His purpose is that as we conceive of ourselves and the world around us, the far above-ness of Jesus might dominate the picture of reality with which we live. So when we think of the great powers of the world, we are also and always thinking of how Jesus is so infinitely above them in power and glory. And when we think of the powerful forces of evil in our society and in our world that we may also and always be thinking of how nothing exists apart from Jesus creating power. And when we think of invisible things, like the coronavirus we at the same time think that Jesus is the creator of the coronavirus. No matter what we look at and think about, Jesus is the most important thing about it because he could not exist apart from him.

The rest of this section adds a few more thoughts that fill out a little more of what this all means. “ – all things were created through him and for him.” We have covered a tiny little bit of what it means that all things were created through him. Now notice those last two words of this sentence. “For him.” All things were created for him. That is an incredible thought! God the Father created through Jesus. Jesus is the agent of God the Father in creation. And the purpose of it all is “for him.” The same kind of language is used of both the Father and the Son in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, “⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

Everything that exists was made through Jesus and he made it for himself. The one who makes something decides what it is for. The creator gets to say what he creates is for. Here we learn that everything is for Jesus. And since Jesus is the image of the invisible God it is the same thing to say that everything is for God. That applies to the all things that Paul mentions so often in this passage. The all things in heaven on earth. The visible and the invisible things. The thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities – “All things were created through him and for him.”

That is kind of important when it comes to the meaning of life – the meaning of the whole creation. It is all for him. William Barkley puts it like this. “The Son is not only the agent of creation, he is also the goal of creation. That is to say, creation was created to be his, and in its worship and its love he might find his honour and joy.” The creation exists in order to fulfill the purpose for which he created it and that purpose is reveal his glory. Sam Storms in his comments on this passage puts it well, “Whatever is, is that he might be glorified and praised and enjoyed forever. He’s the reason, the goal, the aim, the intent, the point, the purpose, the end, the terminus, the consummation and the culmination of every molecule that moves.”

Now if Jesus were only a man, that would be selfish. A human being who is passionate about his own glory is very unattractive. There is something profoundly wrong about a mere human being focused on his own glory. But the reason for that is that a mere human being is not worthy of that kind of glory. A human being is what

he is because Jesus made him and gifted him. He has nothing that he has not received. Jesus on the other hand is worthy of being worshipped and honored and admired and glorified. It is the ultimate good that God be glorified because he truly is glorious. The greatest good is to give God his due. And the greatest evil is not to give God his due. It would be wrong if Jesus did not make everything for his own glory because he is worthy of glory.

And ... since we were created in order to bring glory to Jesus, the greatest joy and blessing that we can know is in loving and serving and enjoying and worshipping him. So Jesus creating everything for his own glory is at the same time an expression of love and generosity because he gives us the greatest possible blessing of knowing and glorifying him.

So all things were made through him and for him. And that is the perspective that must dominate our way of looking at the world and at our own lives. This is the purpose of our existence and the purpose of everything else including spiritual forces of wickedness on earth and in the spiritual realm as well as the coronavirus and everything else.

And there is a huge comfort in that. Jesus so dominates everything that everything fulfills his purposes. The last verse we are going to look at this evening says, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." He is before all things means that he is eternal. All things is everything but God. Jesus was before all things. Everything besides God that exists exists because he made it. And "in him all things hold together." That means that the creation continues to exist and to do what it does because Jesus is keeping it in existence and making everything happen that happens. The creation is absolutely not like a big machine that can be made and then left to run on its own. Nothing happens on its own. Jesus keeps it in existence from moment to moment and he is directly involved in the astounding activities that go on in our cells and everything else including the movements of the planets.

We need to live in the light of Jesus and his relationship to everything else as we have heard it described from this text. To live in the light of reality is to live with the awareness of Jesus as the one who created all things, who is above all things, who created all things for himself and who holds all things in existence from moment to moment. The more we live with this awareness, the more we live in the light of the truth and the more we experience life as it was meant to be lived. This is what makes life truly awesome.

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Table Meditation

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I invite you to think of the contrast between what we have been seeing about the unimaginable greatness of Jesus as the one through whom are all things and for whom are all things and what is in focus in the Lord's Supper. We cannot put into words and we cannot form the thoughts to do justice to how awesomely great Jesus is as the creator and sustainer and the purpose of the creation. And this

is the one who humbled himself to become a man and endured the hatred of human beings that he had made and allowed himself to be crucified in order that rebels like you and I could be delivered from our sins and restored into communion with God.

That great contrast shows something of the greatness of the love of God for sinners. God is unimaginably great. We are unimaginably evil and arrogant in our self-centered rebellion against God. And this Jesus about whom we have been thinking is unimaginably and wonderfully gracious and loving to put himself in our place so that he could suffer the penalty that we deserve so that we might be forgiven and renewed and restored to favor with God.

But sometimes it seems too good to be true. Sometimes the enormity of the evil of our sins overwhelms us and it just seems impossible that what Jesus did is really for me. Maybe we can see how it is possible for everyone else, but not how Jesus could ever forgive me because the particular repetitive perverseness of my sins. And it is for such struggles that Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is designed to help us to believe by making the gospel very simple and visible. The point is that as certainly as Jesus in the Supper offers me the bread and the wine so certainly is he offering what they represent – his broken body and shed blood. And as certainly as I receive the bread and the wine in faith – even weak trembling faith – so certainly do I receive what the bread and wine represent – all that Jesus accomplished for us by giving his life on the cross and shedding his blood.

“Take this” he says of the cup – “this is the new covenant in my blood. This is my body which is given for you. Take eat remember and believe that the body of Christ was broken and his blood was shed for the remission of the sins of all who receive them with a believing heart.”