



**Sunday School Lesson for December 3, 2006
Released on November 29, 2006**

“Who Is Jesus Christ”

Printed Text: Colossians 1:15–23

Background Scripture: Colossians 1

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

Colossians 1:15–23

15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

17 And he is before all things, and by 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 might have the preeminence.

19 For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;

20 And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

21 And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled

22 In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight:

23 If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus. Although secular society continually attempts to exclude Him, He still seems to be everywhere. We see Him as a plastic dashboard statue in a passing car. We watch Him portrayed in Hollywood productions. We observe Him in many variations as the manger baby for Christmas. In spite of all of this attention, we sometimes neglect to ask the most crucial question: "Who is Jesus Christ?" The lessons for this quarter will explore this vital question.

It is not possible for any person to get to heaven without first answering the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" Since Jesus claimed, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6), we must recognize the tremendous significance of His words. Is He really the truth, or did He make extravagant claims that have no verification? We must settle this question in our minds, for if He truly is the truth, we must listen attentively to His words.

On the other hand, if Jesus was merely making extravagant claims, He cannot be the truth, and we have no need to pay any further attention to Him. If that is the case, however, where do we turn to find out how to get to heaven? There are multitudes in the world today who reject Jesus and His claims. Most of them have not thoroughly investigated Him and what He said.

This week we study some truths regarding who Jesus Christ is, but the text also reveals some of what He does. If you already know Him as your personal Saviour, use this time to learn deeper things about Him. If you are among those still questioning, use it to look for answers.

TODAY'S AIM

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Tell how the creation is dependent on the creator.
2. Explain why Paul emphasized the doctrine of Christ in his battle against heresy in the church.
3. Write a prayer that expresses worship for Jesus in His role as creator.

WHO JESUS IS—Colossians 1.15-18

1. What false teaching about Jesus was apparently being spread in Colosse?

There are some who consider Colossians to be the most Christ-centered book of the Bible. Although no specific heresy is mentioned in the book, Paul's material seems to indicate that some kind of false teaching was affecting the church in Colosse. Apparently, someone was teaching that while Jesus was part of a higher realm than mankind, He was still less than God. This affected the teaching regarding both His deity and His humanity. He was viewed as being at one level in a series of emanations below God.

2. What does it mean that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15)?

After greeting the church, commenting on their faith, and expressing his prayer for them, Paul stated that God has delivered us from the power of darkness through His Son (vss. 13-14). He then explained just how important and powerful this Son is. He is not less than God but instead is the very image of God.

This extraordinary verse is one of the most profound doctrinal statements of the entire New Testament. Yet it is susceptible to misunderstanding in at least two ways.

First, when Paul says Jesus is the *image of ... God*, he does not mean that Jesus is some type of "copy" of God. We know from our experience with copy machines that the copying process always causes degradation, and each copy is less perfect than the original. Such experiences do not apply here. Paul means that Jesus is "imaging" or revealing the unseen God, the creator who does not normally allow human eyes to see Him (compare John 1:18). Jesus is the visible expression of God. See also John 14:9.

Second, when Paul describes Jesus as *the firstborn of every creature*, he is not saying that Jesus himself is a created being. Rather, this is his way of saying that Jesus is the ruler over all creation. In the ancient world the firstborn son has authority over the father's household that is essentially equal to that of the father himself. The only one who can overrule the firstborn son is the father. Since there is complete unity of purpose between Jesus and His Father, the authority of the Son over creation is equal to that of the Father. The word translated *firstborn* here is translated "first-begotten" in Hebrews 1:6. There it is even clearer that Jesus enters the world of humans from the outside as an uncreated being.

Thus Paul begins the Christ Hymn with a robust statement of the divinity of Christ. He does this by affirming two mighty characteristics of Jesus: His role in revealing the true God and His authority over creation.

THE INVISIBLE GOD

Most religions in the ancient world worship gods represented by idols. Yet the God of the Bible refuses to be represented by an idol of any kind; He commanded that His people not make "any graven image" (Exodus 20:4). When the Romans first occupied Palestine, some officers entered the Holy of Holies in the temple and were dismayed that there was no image there. Because there was no idol present, they concluded that these Jews did not worship any God at all and thus were atheists.

Today many people doubt God's existence because they cannot see Him. Yet in other areas of life we readily accept what we cannot see. We cannot see carbon monoxide, but we know that this gas can be lethal. We cannot see love, but we feel its presence and power. We cannot see radio waves, but that does not stop us from tuning in our favorite stations. Even though all these things are invisible, we still order our lives around them because we know they are real.

God too is real. And Jesus is the image of God!

-James B. North

Jesus: Creator and Sustainer (vs. 16, 17)

3. What two important points does Paul emphasize to the Colossians regarding Jesus' role as creator (v. 16)?

Paul expands upon Jesus' role as creator by giving an inclusive statement with important implications. First, *all things* were *created* by Him. Paul makes sure that his readers do not exclude anything from this broad statement. There are no exceptions. Paul wants the Colossians to know that this includes both the physical realm (*in earth*) and the spiritual realm (*in heaven*).

Paul also insists that all things were created *for him*. This, of course, further excludes Jesus from the realm of created beings and things. While the full purpose of creation is not laid out here, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that creation was undertaken by God for His glory. Paul includes Jesus in this goal; there is no separation of purpose.

4. What does Paul's statement "he is before all things" tell us (v. 17)?

Paul's mighty statements about Christ continue at an intense pace. In this verse he asserts the preexistence of Christ. The affirmation that Jesus is *before all things* tells us that the divinity of Christ is not limited by time or space. This statement is similar to Jesus' own claim that "before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

Paul goes on to declare that Jesus is not only the creator but is also the sustainer of all things. The word translated *consist* has the sense of "continue to exist." The Bible never sees God-the-creator as some kind of divine clockmaker who makes the clock, winds it up, and then abandons it. Christ continues to be involved in the ongoing affairs of the created order. Without this involvement the world would quickly cease to exist.

5. What relationship does Jesus have with the church (v. 18)?

Since Jesus, the image of God, is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, it stands to reason that He is also the sole authority over the church.

Paul used the human body as a metaphor for the church. We each have a head that, through the brain, controls the functions of our body. In the same way, the direction and activities of the church are to be under the control of Christ.

In regard to Christ's relationship to the church, Paul lifts up three important concepts. First, Christ is *the beginning* or originator of the church. He founded the church (Matthew 16:18) and purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

Second, Jesus' resurrection is the crucial doctrine of the church. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the faith of Christian believers is futile and useless (1 Corinthians 15:14), and the church is based on fraud. The doctrine of the resurrection emphasizes the flesh-and-blood side of Jesus. As a man Jesus died, but God raised Him *from the dead*. As *the firstborn* of the resurrection, He will lead all believers to victory over death.

Third, Paul states that all of these things work to establish Christ's *preeminence*. This word means first place or highest rank. There is no authority in the church that exceeds the authority of Christ in any matter. It is His church, not ours. We must remind ourselves that we exist as the church for His service and for His glory.

WHAT JESUS DOES—Colossians 1:19-23

6. What does it mean that the fullness of God is in Jesus (v. 19)?

We noted earlier (ans. #1) that it was being taught in Colosse that Jesus was less than God but greater than man. It was believed that there was a series of emanations down from God, with each level being slightly less divine. Jesus was thought to be one of the highest of those emanations. As MacArthur pointed out, Paul refuted this teaching by stating that all the fullness of God rested in Jesus. He is the complete embodiment of all of God's attributes. While being a man, He remains wholly God and thus divine in His person.

That is why God could use Jesus to reconcile to Himself everything that had become sinful. Years ago a popular song referred to a "bridge over troubled waters." Jesus is the bridge that closes the gap between sinful mankind and holy God. Because of the entrance of sin into the human race, what God created became corrupt and distanced from Him. Reconciliation means the restoration of that which became alienated, and it is only Jesus who can reconcile sinful people to their heavenly Father.

7. How did Jesus provide for the reconciliation of sinners (v. 20)?

Briefly stated Paul teaches that Jesus' death on the *cross* was an act that paid the price for human sins; it thereby returned all creation back to God.

There are many aspects to the doctrine of the atonement, and Paul draws on three of them here. First, the cross of Christ served as a type of peace offering to God. The biblical concept of *peace* can mean more than lack of hostilities. In the Old Testament peace (Hebrew *shalom*) could be used in the sense of "satisfaction of a debt." For example, a landowner who failed to cover a pit, thus allowing his neighbor's ox to fall to its death, was obligated to give the neighbor a new ox. To do so was to make peace with the neighbor (see Exodus 21:34, where the idea of payment is represented by the Hebrew *shalom*). Elsewhere, Paul teaches that Christ is our peace, having breached the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles and between God and humanity (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Second, Paul uses the concept of Jesus' death as a *blood* offering for sins. The Bible teaches that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22). This is the essence of Paul's "preaching of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18), that the blood of Jesus serves as an ultimate, once-for-all sin offering (see Hebrews 10:10).

Third, this verse speaks of the atonement in terms of reconciliation. Two parties who were once on good terms but who have been alienated from one another need to be reconciled. They are reconciled when the cause for alienation is removed. We were alienated from God because of sin but reconciled when Jesus' death covered our sin (see Romans 5:10). What is even more remarkable is that Jesus' death does more than *reconcile* humankind with God; it also reconciles all of creation—*all things ... whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven*—with its creator

8. Colossians 1:20 identifies the cross as the means through which peace entered the world. How do you explain this to an unbeliever? What roadblocks might you expect?

In 1 Corinthians 1:23 Paul identifies the crucifixion as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. That skepticism and confusion still exists. As He has done on other occasions, God used a very unusual procedure to accomplish His purposes.

Possible roadblocks are almost too numerous to mention. Many will not see the relevance of much of anything that happened 2,000 years ago. Whatever the resistance we need to help the non-Christian to see that it was only the shedding of Christ's blood that allows us to come back into a proper relationship with God. This is so because Jesus' death paid the penalty for sin that God had decreed. No matter what illustrations or analogies we use in our discussion, this core idea must be present.

9. How does God provide reconciliation for those who are actively opposed to Him (vs. 21,22)?

Paul reminds his readers of our side of the problem: we are the ones who caused the alienation by our sin (*wicked works*).

In spite of the fact that we, the alienated enemies of God live in active opposition to Him, He has provided a means of reconciliation through the substitutionary offering of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross in the place of sinners. The actual means of this transaction comes through "the body of his flesh through death" (v. 22). The penalty for sin is the death of the one committing the sin. God, in His grace and mercy, sent His Son to earth in a human body so that He could die in our place, making the payment for us.

The result of this death on our behalf and our acceptance of it is our redemption. When we are *reconciled* to God through the blood of Jesus, He is able to present us completely restored before the throne of God. We are *holy* (cleansed of sin), *unblamable* (without fault), and *unreprovable* (not accused of any wrongdoing).

In a practical sense, we remain blameless and above reproach by always dealing with sin as soon as we become aware of it. When we are convicted because of sin in our lives, we should immediately "confess our sins" because "he is faithful and just

to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). It is possible for us to live in genuine communion with God by never letting sin go unconfessed. This is the means by which we can know the joy of the Lord in our hearts on a daily basis.

10. In our new relationship with Christ, we are to be "holy and unblamable and unreprouvable." What are some difficulties that these standards have caused for you? How did you (or how will you) overcome these problems?

This new walk with Christ is certain to be misunderstood by friends and those who do not understand the calling we have received. Folks are going to be watching to see how quickly we will fall from the standards we have accepted. They will be quick to note what they see as hypocrisy. They may resent our holy choices or exclude us from their activities. They may accuse us of being "holier than thou."

We may also kick ourselves when we stray from doing what we know is right. However, we should notice that the passage refers to being blameless in God's sight. As much as we want to create a good witness, it is God's approval that is most important.

11. What does it mean to be grounded and settled in the faith (v. 23)?

Paul indicated to the Colossian believers that their perseverance in the faith was evidence of their salvation. If they continued in their faith, grounded and settled, and did not move away from what they had been taught, they would be living proof of what God can do for sinners. To be grounded meant they had a solid foundation on which they were building their faith. To be settled meant they could not be swayed or driven away from what they believed.

To not be moved away meant they were not changing from one system of beliefs to another but were staying put in their understanding. They had found true hope in the gospel that had been preached to them, and it was this gospel that was now being preached everywhere ("to every creature which is under heaven"). Since Paul was the leading missionary of his day and therefore the one taking this gospel far and wide, he could authoritatively make the claim of its validity. The Colossians were on the right pathway.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is first and foremost God, having all the attributes that God the Father has. He is the Creator of the universe and the one who keeps it going. He is the one to whom believers look for guidance in this life, for He is the Head of the church, which is also presented in Scripture as His body and bride. He is preeminent over everything and everyone throughout the universe.

What does Jesus do? He restores to God all sinners who admit their lost condition and confess their need for Him. Because of His death on the cross, He is able to present to God all those who accept Him as personal Saviour. He helps all who hold fast to the truth they heard when they responded to the gospel message of salvation. The hope that we have of eternity with Him keeps us going when times become hard.

12. How do you embrace as your own Paul's calling as a "minister" to preach "to every creature which is under heaven"? Or do you see this calling to be relegated to a select few rather than being a general call to all Christians? Explain.

There is no doubt that Jesus called Paul to a unique apostolic ministry. Some things that Jesus required Paul to do were for Paul and Paul alone.

Yet Jesus issues general calls to all Christians today through the pages of Scripture (Matthew 28:19, 20). There undoubtedly are specific calls that God lays on the hearts of some Christians to serve in unique ministry roles. God's call for a fellow Christian to serve as a long-term missionary in a far-off land is not necessarily God's call for you to do the same. (God may be calling you to support that missionary financially.) We can discern God's call to us in a general way through His Word. Discerning a specific call to a particular ministry takes much prayer and an awareness of open and closed doors of opportunity.

CONCLUSION

The Ageless Jesus

"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). Some things about the church must change as culture and society changes. For example, no churches in the first century had Web sites or parking lots. However, the church has no need for new, updated doctrines about Jesus. Those doctrines as taught in the New Testament were adequate for Paul's churches and they remain sufficient for ours.

Church history tells sad stories of teachers who wanted to redefine what the church taught about Jesus. Gnosticism and Arianism were only two of several threats that the church battled to retain "the faith": the true doctrines concerning Christ. Until Jesus returns there will be false Christs (Mark 13:22). These may be flesh-and-blood impostors. They may be teachers presenting warped views of the nature of Christ and His work of salvation. Church leaders should always be on guard against the infiltration of such false teachings into the congregation (see Titus 1:9).

The Christ of Christmas

Paul never tells the Christmas story of baby Jesus, either in his letters or in his recorded preaching in the book of Acts. (The closest he comes is in Galatians 4:4.) Yet Paul would agree that the basic story of a baby born in Bethlehem is essential to our understanding of who Jesus is.

Jesus did not appear on the scene as a full-grown man, like gods of Greek mythology. The story of Jesus is an account both of human frailty and of divine, awe-inspiring power. He was born on the road and cradled in a feed trough. Yet He was worshiped by wise kings, and His birth was heralded by an angel choir. Even at His birth He was truly God and truly human.

PRAYER

Father God we stand in awe of the true nature of Your Son, Jesus Christ. May we rest assured in the knowledge that Jesus' blood has purchased our salvation. We pray this in the name of Jesus, amen.

Thought to Remember

Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

God has spoken to us through His Son. Study Hebrews 1:1-14 in anticipation of a lesson on what God said about Jesus.

Lesson Summarized By

Willie Ferrell willie@jesusisall.com