



COLOSSIANS
RECONCILED
COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

MAIN IDEA

Transformation is the result of the reconciling work of Jesus as we give Him first place in our lives.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

- **What is the wildest conspiracy theory you've ever heard?**
- **Why do you think people buy into things like this?**
- **What are some things people believe about Jesus? Did you believe anything odd about Jesus before you met Him?**

Conspiracy theories have been around as long as people have. From presidential assassinations to the existence of aliens, some people are unwilling to accept things at face value. They believe there must be some deeper and more meaningful truth that can be found if we just learn to look hard enough.

In the first century, some of these people were called Gnostics, and they taught that the physical world was evil. They believed Jesus could not have been God because God would never have become a man with a physical body.

One problem with this view is we cannot be saved by merely a good man, we need something more. We need a big, biblical view of God.

- **Describe a time during which you identified something in your life that was taking too much priority.**

- **What signs led you to realize it was becoming an issue? How did you adjust?**

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, reminding them of the magnitude of Christ. In warring against numerous other religious systems, Paul taught that Christ is God in His fullness. Christ is not only the model for how Christians are to live but also the ultimate image of the invisible God, coming to earth to reconcile us to Himself.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> Have someone in your group read Colossians 1:15-16.

- **What does it tell you about God that He would go to such incredible lengths to reveal Himself to you?**

 - **Why do our beliefs go off the rails when we have an improper or incomplete view of Jesus?**
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- **When you read the Gospels, how do the accounts of Jesus’s physical life inspire you to live like Him? How does the gift of reading about the physical life of Christ help you understand the invisible God?**

Paul transitioned from a prayer for the spiritual growth of the Colossian believers in 1:9-14 into a hymn-like collection of verses that focused on the doctrine of Christ. Paul started the section with the grandest possible explanation of who Christ is. Specifically, “He is the image of the invisible God.” Paul also described Jesus in this way in 2 Corinthians 4:4. The perfection of the revelation of God in Christ stood in stark contrast to humanity who, though created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), displayed only a marred version of the image of God. In His incarnation, Jesus displayed the glory of God in a way that fallen humanity could not. However, He also provided an inspirational glimpse of what humanity would become when renewed at Christ’s return.

- **How would the original audience of Paul’s letter have understood the significance of being first born? How might Paul’s understanding be different than ours? What rights come with being the firstborn?**

- **If Jesus is the Creator of all things, what rights does He have over creation? What changes about our lives when we see Jesus as over all things?**

If Jesus was not God, then we have no reason to obey Him. When we look at Jesus (the image of the invisible God), we see God. If we disconnect the image of Jesus from the image of God, then we don’t treat Jesus as God. Instead we push Him off to the corner where we can’t see Him. But if we see Jesus for who He is, we recognize that He is radically in charge and give Him the place of greatest importance in our lives.

Not only is Jesus the picture of God, but He is also the prototype of creation and the pattern of resurrection. In Adam every person died, but in Jesus, all who trust in Him will live (Romans 5:12-15). Jesus was there when it all started: He is the pre-existent Son of God with all the rights and privileges given to the Creator. Jesus is in control over everything that happens, yet He cares for us personally.

He made a way for us to be reconciled to God through faith in Him. All of this is possible because Jesus is one with the God of creation (Philippians 2:6). When we see Jesus as God, we find a God who cares for us personally and relationally. The care of God is expressed to us in the picture of Jesus Christ.

> Have someone in your group read Colossians 1:17-18.

Reaffirming his earlier teaching, Paul summarized the teaching of verses 15-16 in the brevity of verse 17. In saying that “He is before all things,” Paul emphasized once again Christ’s distinction from creation. There was no possibility of a point in eternity past when Christ was not. The fact that Christ was before all things means not only did He exist before anything was created, but He is also superior to all of creation (especially the angels, in refutation of the Colossian heresy).

- **What does it mean to you personally that in Jesus, “all things hold together”?**
 - **What does it mean for us, as a group, that Jesus is the head of the body of Christ?**
 - **How have you seen the unifying impact of Christ’s presence evident in the church? What parts do reconciliation and peacemaking have in discipleship?**
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Once you are in Christ, He is your primary identifier because He holds supremacy over everything else. Not your race. Not your gender. Not your economic status. The things society uses to identify one another are not most important for Christians. Those factors are not irrelevant, but they don't give us our identity either. They also don't give any one group a spiritual upper hand.

Even though the Jewish people were God's covenant people, they did not experience a deeper spiritual reality with God than the Gentiles who trusted Jesus. Because Christ defines us, He also unites us. We don't overlook our differences and distinctions. God made all of us unique, but we are all made in His image. We can be both unique and unified at the same time under the banner of Christ as we walk in His direction.

- **During the moments in your life when everything seems to be spinning out of control, how does Paul's reminder that all of creation is maintained by Christ impact your anxiety, frustration, and distress?**

Everything and everyone holds together in Christ. It doesn't matter that the people of His day didn't think He was all that special; all of history, even the history of those very people, points to Jesus. It doesn't matter what it looks like or how insignificant you or your circumstances seem. Jesus is the center point of the history of the world, and He is the center point of your past, present, and future too. As such, He should forever hold the first place of importance and priority.

- **What does it mean to you personally that Jesus "might come to have first place in everything"?**
- **What patterns or attitudes need to change for you to experience the full benefits of His supremacy?**

> Have someone in your group read Colossians 1:19-20.

The verbiage in verse 19 points back to the divine pronouncements about Jesus during His baptism by John the Baptist and the Transfiguration (Matthew 3; 17). During both of those events, the voice of the Father spoke affirmingly of the Son, saying specifically “with whom I am well-pleased” at His baptism. At the zenith of this hymn, Paul referred once again to God’s pleasure with regard to the Son and His divine work.

- **What difference does it make to know that part of the reason God was pleased to have all His fullness in Christ was so that Jesus could reconcile all things (including you) to Himself?**
- **How does seeing Jesus as our Reconciler lead us to pursue reconciliation with one another? What peace can we find in Jesus we can’t find anywhere else?**

The redemption of humanity as a focus of Christ’s work is clarified in verses 21-22 that follow. However, as Paul pointed out in other writings, such as Romans 8:19-22, the redemption of all creation, which groans in anticipation of the renewal through Christ’s redemptive work, is wrapped up with the reconciliation effort. That reconciliation was procured through the shedding of His blood.

As Peter wrote, “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you” (1 Peter 1:20). That Christ was the agency through which all things were created in the beginning and was foreknown before the foundation of that creation means there was never a moment in which Christ was not the plan for the redemption of all things.

APPLICATION

The implications of God's image being at its fullness in Christ are profound and far-reaching. The language Paul used is lofty and theologically rich. If we aren't careful, it is easy to read through such a passage acknowledging that it is correct without considering the depths of what it teaches.

- **What are some ways that you minimize Jesus in your life? How would those situations be different if you allowed Jesus to stay front and center?**
- **How can we keep from succumbing to subtle temptations to diminish Christ's centrality in our lives?**
- **Why is recognizing Christ's supremacy is so important for battling anxiety, fear, and frustration? How have you experienced that? Give an example.**
- **Who in your life has best demonstrated a devotion to seeking reconciliation with others? How did that person confront the awkwardness of those difficult conversations? What part of his or her example have you implemented?**

PRAY

Thank the Father for Jesus, who is the revelation of His full image. Thank God that Jesus is holding all things together, even now. Pray that your eyes and heart would continually be fixed on Christ as the center of your faith.

Historical Context of Colossians

Purpose

Paul wrote to counter the “Colossian heresy” that he considered an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The false teaching is identified as a “philosophy” (2:8), presumably drawn from some Hellenistic traditions as indicated by the references to “his fullness” (1:19); the “elements of the world” (Gk *stoicheia*, 2:8, 20); “wisdom” (2:3, 23); and “self-made religion” (2:23). In addition, the false teaching contained Jewish elements such as circumcision (2:11; 3:11); “human tradition” (2:8); Sabbath observance, food regulations, festival participation (2:16); the “worship of angels” together with “access to a visionary realm” (2:18); and harsh human regulations (2:21–23). Paul addressed this syncretistic philosophy by setting forth a proper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and by noting appropriate implications for Christian conduct.

Author

The Apostle Paul is identified as the author of Colossians (1:1; 4:18). The church fathers unreservedly endorsed Pauline authorship (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3.14.1; Tertullian, *De Praescr. Haer.*, 7; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 1.1; cp. Justin, *Dialogue*, 85.2; 138.2). A close reading of Colossians reveals a considerable number of lexical, grammatical, and theological similarities with the other Pauline writings (1:9, 26; 2:11–14, 16, 20–21; 3:1, 3, 5–17). Also favoring the authenticity of Colossians as a letter of Paul is its close connection with Philemon, an epistle widely regarded as Pauline.

Setting

During his ministry in Ephesus (Ac 19:10), Paul sent Epaphras to spread the gospel in the Lycus Valley. Epaphras subsequently established the church at Colossae (1:7; 4:12–13). The city’s population consisted mostly of Phrygians and Greeks, but it also included a significant number of Jews. The church, likewise, was mostly composed of Gentiles (1:21, 27; 2:13), but it also had Jewish members (2:11, 16, 18, 21; 3:11). When Epaphras (Phm 23) informed Paul of certain heretical teachings that had spread there, Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians as a theological antidote.

Special Features

Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae is one of the prison letters (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon). Paul’s desire with this letter was to correct the false teachings that were cropping up in the church. In doing so, Paul presented a clear picture of Jesus Christ as supreme Lord of the universe, head of the church, and the only one through whom forgiveness is possible.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

1:15. Paul employed a hymn to emphasize Christ's sovereignty. The apostle may have composed it, or he may have quoted a hymn Christians used in worship. Heretical teachers in Colossae contended Christ was merely one of many powers between people and God. In 1:15-17, Paul refuted their teaching by presenting Christ as Lord of the universe. Paul asserted that Christ is the image of the invisible God. The Greek term rendered "image" conveys the idea of a perfect representation (exact likeness). In Matthew 22:20, Jesus used the word of a ruler's image or likeness stamped on a coin. Because God is Spirit (see John 4:24), the human eye cannot see Him. He has made Himself known perfectly in Christ. The phrase "the firstborn over all creation" does not indicate that Christ was the first created being; it indicates His status. In the Old Testament, the firstborn son occupied a position of honor, privilege, and supremacy; he was first in priority. Here, the term expresses Christ's preexistent deity.

1:16-17. Christ is Lord over creation, for by Him everything was created. Christ is vastly superior to all created powers. He was the agent of creation; all things were created through Him. Creation was God's idea; Christ implemented the process. Christ also is creation's goal. For Him literally is "unto Him." Creation moves toward Him and His purpose for it. The phrase "before all things" emphasizes Christ's preexistence. He was the agent of creation, and He also maintains it in the sense of giving it stability. Christ sustains creation and gives it harmony.

1:18. In 1:18-20, Paul stressed Christ's lordship over the church, His body—His people who actively extend His ministry in the world. The preexistent Lord over the universe is also the church's head—the source of the body's life, who governs it and gives it unity. The word "beginning" stresses Christ's priority in time and power. In addition, He is the originator of life in God's kingdom—new life made possible by grace. The phrase "firstborn from the dead" refers to Christ's resurrection as the revelation of the new quality of life He gives: resurrection life that extends beyond death. Christ's victory over death proved that He has first place in everything.

1:19-20. The term "fullness" could mean "full measure" of deity, meaning that Christ is fully God. God's purpose is to, through Christ, reconcile everything to Himself. Everything includes humans and the universe (see Rom. 8:19-23). The word "reconcile" has the sense of restoring a relationship, of creating unity. Christ alone (through His sacrificial death) was God's chosen way of bringing about reconciliation. God made peace possible through Christ's blood—His death on the cross. The phrase "things on earth or things in heaven" refers to the whole universe, material and spiritual.