

The Supremacy of Christ  
Colossians 1:15-23

This is one of the Christological high points of the New Testament.

In hymnic language, the apostle Paul gives us a stunning portrait of Jesus Christ. [Pray]

I don't know if you know anyone like this: You can just mention a particular thing to him/her and it immediately triggers passionate and unending talk about that thing.

- You can mention a **67 Camaro** to uncle Jim, “**You really liked your 67 Camaro, didn't you**” and then sit back and listen for hours. “**It was this**” and “**It was that**”
- Or, you can bring up the debate about whether or not **MJ was better than LeBron**, and then listen to your friends debate. “**MJ was this and that**” “**Lebron could do this... that**”
- Or, you can bring up the superiority of **one barbeque to another: KC, TX, or Memphis, or NC**, and be entertained as foodies **discuss sauces, and burnt ends, and so on.**
- When I was in seminary, we had a professor that loved to talk about **Qumran**, where they found many ancient biblical scrolls. Whenever we didn't have our homework finished, we knew we could just ask him, “**Dr. Cole, didn't they find Psalm 42 in Cave 11,**” he could take the whole class period discussing it!
- Maybe you've seen the baseball movie **Sandlot**, where the new kid on the block (**Smalls**), is trying to be accepted by the neighborhood boys, takes a baseball from his dad's house to play with, since they needed a ball. The only problem was he took an autographed ball signed by Babe Ruth! But Smalls knew nothing about baseball. His buddies ask, “**Where did you get that ball?**”

Smalls: I don't know. Some lady gave it to him. She even signed her name on it... *Ruth. Baby Ruth.*

All: **BABE RUTH?!** (Everyone screams in horror and rushes to the fence)

Smalls: I was gonna put the ball back.

Squints: But it was signed by Babe Ruth!

Smalls: Yeah, you keep telling me that! Who is she?

Ham Porter: **WHAT?! WHAT?! [And then they just go off...]**

Kenny: The sultan of swat!

Bertram: The king of crash!

Timmy: The colossus of clout!

Tommy: The colossus of clout!

All: **BABE RUTH!**

Ham Porter:[emphatically] **THE GREAT BAMBINO!**

Smalls: [in shock and horror] **Oh, my! You mean that's the same guy?!**

Well its sort of that way with the apostle Paul.

After mentioned Christ's redemption in Col 1:12-14, it sets him off into praise to Christ.

- Notice the “**He**” - “**And He... And He ... And He....**” (1:15ff).
- He goes on and on about Christ's glory, Christ's creation, Christ's power, Christ's deity, Christ's church, Christ's cross...
- **We're like Smalls saying, “Oh my, You mean that is the same guy?!”**

Paul doesn't really recover from this exaltation of Christ for the rest of the letter, though it's not with that ease intensity as this passage.

As we look at this text, we should understand a few things about it.

1. **Contextually, this is an important text, as Paul is trying to support his thesis that Christ is sufficient.** You don't need Jesus plus something else.

- The **supremacy of Christ assures you of the sufficiency of Christ.**

2. **Practically, this text should inspire praise.**

Verses 15-20 are taken from an early hymn; or it is a piece authored by Paul that he puts in hymnic language. It is clearly in poetic form.

- NT Wright has pointed out **when talking about Christ's nature, many passages in the NT bear poetic/hymnic qualities because language is quiet simply inadequate.**

Shain Linne:

*Imagine it*

*I can't explain the half of it*

*Our brains can't even fathom it*

*And language is inadequate*

*To characterize the Lord on the throne*

*With spiritual eyes, His story is known*

*From Him and through Him and to Him is everything*

*Surely to God be the glory alone!*

This text tells us why we should praise Christ: Christ is worthy! He is supreme! So let's get into it.

**Why should we praise Christ?**

Allow me to give you five features of Christ, **with 5 "C's"**

(1) Christ's clarity, (2) Christ's creation, (3) Christ's control; (4) Christ's church, (5) Christ's cross.

Verses 15-20 really break down in two parts:

1. **Creation** (1:15-17)

2. **Redemption/New creation** (1:18-20); [reconciliation is further developed in 21-23].

Of the five features that I listed, the **first three fall under creation** (1:15-17), and the **next two under redemption/new creation** (1:18-23).

The text goes from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows – from the cosmic Christ to the crucified Christ.

All of it should inspire praise.

**#1: Christ Clarity (1:15a)**

**"Image of the invisible God"**

- The image (*eikon*) is the visible aspect, accurately representing that which is invisible.
- **Jesus perfectly reveals the nature of God.**
- Paul can say that we have “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God *in the face of Jesus Christ*.” (2 Cor 4:6)
- **1:19, 2:9** – “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”
- **John 14:8.** Philip: “Show us the Father and that will be enough.” Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).
- **Philippians 2:6–7 (ESV):** though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men

**You want to know what the invisible God is like? Look at Jesus.**

- Jesus brings clarity to the question, *What is God like?*
- We don’t believe in just some God of our imagination; but the God of revelation — perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ.
- In Jesus, see who God is as **Creator** and **Redeemer**.
- **Calvin says, *in Christ*, God shows us his “righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self.”**

Human beings are made in God’s image (you can hear **Gen 1:26-27** in this passage); but **the Son is the only satisfactory likeness of God; he is the perfect image of God.**

- Later, Paul says that God is working in us to renew us in this image (**Col 3:10**).

## #2: Christ’s Creation (1:15b-16)

### “Firstborn over all creation” (15b)

- **Firstborn** does **not** mean that Jesus was created.
- The whole passage is supporting the pre-existence of Christ.
  - **Jesus always was “wasing”**
  - Next verse: Jesus created all things; so he was not then created.

This word “**prototokos**” (*firstborn*) has two primary meanings: (1) **having priority in regard to time** and (2) as **being supreme in rank**.

- Both are true: **Christ is before creation in time**, and he is also **he supreme over it**.
- But the main idea here seems to be the latter: status and superiority.
- **Psalm 89:27** referring to David... “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings on earth.” **Firstborn is a title of supremacy**.
- So it’s a metaphor distinguishing Christ from every created thing, declaring that he is supreme over creation.
- The **NIV** is helpful here, translating this verse, “firstborn **over** creation” rather than “**of** creation.” Christ is over creation.

He therefore **outranks all things in this world!**

- He is greater than **wealth, sex, power, sports, or pumpkin-spiced lattes, pumpkin spiced donuts, pumpkin spiced chicken wings...**

- There are many wonderful things to enjoy (Autumn weather, flannel shirts, beard oil, campfires, MLB playoffs, good day's work, friends, spouse), but not to be worshiped.
- We are made to know him and worship him and not created things (Rom 1).

**“For by him all things were created...” (Read all 16)**

This verse further explains **why Christ is supreme over creation.** It shows more of his majesty.

**A. His majesty is seen in the prepositions: “by” “through” and “for”**

- These prepositions lead us to praise Christ!
- They **help define Christ's creative activity.**
  - Created **by him** in that it was **origin or cause of creation.**
  - Created **through him** in that he was the **mediating agent through whom it actually came into being** (not angels or other intermediaries as some thought in Colossae).
  - Created **for him** in the sense that **he is the end or goal of creation**, all things are meant to serve his will, for his glory. (Cf, Romans 11:36)

**B. His majesty is also seen in the word “all” (twice)**

- Paul is going into every nook and cranny of existence and saying, all of it was created by him through him and for him!

**C. His majesty is expressed in his power over visible and invisible powers – things in **heaven and on earth.****

- These invisible powers are called **“thrones, powers, rulers, authorities”**
- Based on ch. 2: they may refer to **evil forces, or good, heavenly hosts, or both.**(v. 8,15)
- But Paul doesn't get into to detail about them.
- He doesn't get into *why were they created? How did some of them fall? And so on.*
- His point is simple: **Christ is sovereign over them all!**
- **He created them, and he has power over them all.**

And perhaps most importantly, **you don't need to fear them!**

- A big deal in 1st: century Greco-Roman world: **the fear of dark powers in things.**
- One historian said, **“The whole [pagan] world and its atmosphere was filled with devils and ruled by them”** (RD) – the earth was a hell.
- So you can understand the fear of people.
- **But if you understand who Jesus is, then it casts out fear!**

**Knowing who Christ is** makes a practical difference in your life, in **your emotions**, when you realize the supremacy of Christ.

- There are evil forces at work in the world, **but this is our Christ!**
- We flee to him; we trust in him; we serve though him; we enter the valley of the shadow of death knowing that this Christ is with us!
- This is why we can go to hard places; do hard things, endure hard things: This Christ is with us, in us, and for us.

### #3: Christ's Control (1:17)

**“And” is in the GK text, and reminds us that there is always more to Christ!**

- Translators may like to clean that up and not include this conjunction.
- But the “And” in v. 17, 18 suggests that there’s more of Christ than you think or imagine! Everyday there’s a new “And” for you.

Paul again asserts Christ’s supremacy saying, **“he is before all things”** meaning that he has precedence over all things in time and status.

But then he adds that Christ is like this “divine glue” or “spiritual gravity” who controls or sustains all things: **“in him all things hold together.”**

They have been held together, and they will continue to hold together; they cohere.

God didn’t create the world and then take his hands off of it; as deists claim. Christ sustains the whole universe!

- Garland: “He is “the operating principle controlling existence.”
- Lightfoot: He is the “principle of cohesion.”
- H.C.G. Moule put it this way: **“He keeps the cosmos from becoming chaos.”**

Hebrews 1:3:

**<sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.**

- Clinton Arnold: **“Not only does Christ keep the world from falling apart as the result of earthquakes, floods, plagues, and cosmic disturbances, he maintains a check on the awful workings of the demonic powers”** (a reflecting back on verse 16).

So what difference does this make?

- In ancient paganism, people suffered from anxiety because **they didn’t know if their gods or goddesses were in control.**
- One’s deities may not be as powerful as another deity.
- Even the deities were spoken of as having human features – **remember Elijah and the false prophets, he asks if their god was using the restroom or away on a journey!**
- No one knew if his/her deity was in total control and if any god held it all together.
- Chaos could happen at any moment.

You say, today we don’t believe in that old paganism stuff.

Today, many **want an answer to what holds the universe together that’s devoid of God.**

But Paul tells us: In him, all things hold together.

Jesus Christ sustains the cosmos moment by moment.

This doesn’t mean there aren’t **disasters, tsunami’s, earthquakes, etc.**

**But why are they so limited? Why doesn't everything fly off into nothingness?**  
In him, all things hold together.

Therefore, **life is not meaningless, and the world is not in chaos.**

And if Jesus Christ can sustain the cosmos, he can **sustain us in our trials and despair.**

Gadsby hymn, *Immortal Honors Rest on Jesus' Head*:

Immortal honors rest on Jesus' head;  
My God, my portion, and my living bread;  
In Him I live, upon Him cast my care;  
He saves from death, destruction, *and despair.*

In him we live; upon him (the one who sustains the cosmos), we cast our care; he saves from death, destruction *and despair.*

**The Christ who sustains the cosmos will sustain you in your chaos.**

- We don't have a puny little Christ.
- **Dinner early in our marriage: "This is not enough."**
- We should never say that about Christ. [Nor about my dear bride's meals!]

#### **#4: Christ's Church (1:18)**

Now we are at the **redemption/new creation** segment of the text.

**"And he is the head of the body, the church"**

- Notice "He" – v. 15, 17, 18 – Christ alone is the head of the church.
- To be **"the Head"** of the church is to be the **Lord over it.**
- There may also be the suggestion that he **gives life to it.**
- But the primary focus is that Christ is the **Leader, the Chief, the Sovereign over it.**
- **Christ** guides and governs his church, **the redeemed people of God.**

**"Body"** points to at least three truths:

1. That there is a **mysterious and intimate union between Christ and his people.** (1:24).
2. The church is a **living organism, made up of members joined together.**
3. The church is the **means by which Christ carries out his purposes on earth.**

**18b** gives us one of the grounds, or reasons why he is the Head of the Church:

**"He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead..."**

- In Gk, the first word is a relative pronoun (*hos*), essentially saying, **"because he is..."**
- He is the Head of the church **because he is "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead"!**

**"Beginning"** can be taken as (1) supremacy, (2) as precedence in time, (3) or as the creative initiative.

- The third is most likely.

- Christ is the origin and source of life of the church, the fount of its being.

“**Firstborn**” (*prototokos*) this word we said can mean precedence in regard to time, or supremacy in rank.

- Here it is the idea of *precedence* that seems to be view: **Christ is the first to come from the dead in true resurrected life** (**never to die again**).
  - (Though of course he is supreme, as the risen Christ, ruling the church from his throne!)
- Perhaps you can think of it like “**trailblazer**,” “**pioneer**” or the “**pathfinder**” or something like that. That’s the idea.
- **What is true for Christ, will be true for his people!**
- **What is true for the head, will be true for the body!**
- In verse 17, Christ can deal with **your despair**, as he sustains all things.
- In verse 18, Christ can deal with **your “death,”** as he is the firstborn from the dead.

*Trailblazer.* Michael Green gives an analogy in the book *The Empty Cross*. (ht: R. Davis)

- In the Middle Ages they debated over the possibility of a sea route to India.
- There was much debate in political/economic circles over this.
- Was there a way to the rich land of spices and perfumes around the tip of Africa?
- No one knew for sure, but all attempts had failed
- The cape at the tip of Africa was called “Cape of Storms” because there were so many wrecks.
- But one sailor succeeded.
- He rounded the Cape, and reached the East, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama – the first European to reach India by sea.
- Ever since he sailed back, it has been impossible to doubt that a way to the Orient exists; in fact the Cape was renamed the “Cape of Good Hope.”

Green says: It is sort of like that with Christ, as the Firstborn from the dead.

- He is the **first in sequence!** More will follow!
- **Is there anyway through death!? Can you go into death and back out in life? Yes!**
- Jesus took the **voyage into the darkness, and came out in resurrection power!!!**
- And he can take your hand and my hand and say, I will take you through the darkness; **I’ve been there; and I will lead you out!**
- **1 Thess 4:14:** “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.”
- Jesus said “As I live, you also will live” (John 14:19)

**18c** summarizes everything from v. 15 onward: **that in everything he might be preeminent.**

- Regarding its closest referent, the resurrected Lord reigns over all things.

## #5: Christ’s Cross (1:19-23)

You can feel the descent from the heights above to the lowest of lows now.

**19:** A restatement about the deity of Christ.

“all the fullness of God” was “pleased” to dwell in Christ.

- Some in Colossae were arguing that Christ was one among many supernatural beings that God used to create the world.
- They may have suggested he was powerful, but not fully divine.
- But Paul says, no, he is fully divine; he is not one among many other spiritual beings. He is the unique Son of God.

We affirm this today regarding other religious leaders.

Jesus is not just one option among many other; he is in a category by himself as the fully divine Son of God.

“dwell” implies permanent residence, not temporary sojourn.

- The fullness of God dwells permanently in Christ.

This one, the pre-existent, fully divine Son of God, who created all things, and upholds all things...

20: ... came to earth and died on a cross.

“pleased” must be supplied here again in verse 20, God was “pleased” through him to reconcile all things to himself... through the cross.

The cross is the main focus of verse 20-23.

His reconciling work happens through the work of the bloody cross.

He speaks of (a.) cosmic reconciliation, and (b.) personal reconciliation.

### A. Cosmic Reconciliation (20)

In the beginning God chose to create the world through the Christ; and in the end, God will reconcile the world through Christ.

Notice the scope of it – “all things” – the whole created order.

Jesus is Lord of some spiritual never-never-land, but one who took on flesh and will redeem it all.

This is similar to Romans 8:20-23.

- The whole created order is groaning, and needs to be pacified – it’s out of sink; it’s affected with futility, and it needs to be restored to its proper order.
- And it will! It will be restored in glory. This is why we sing at Christmas:

*No more let sins and sorrow grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found.*



- The hostility of land and sea will be no more.

And **even this cosmic work is through the blood of the cross!**

### David Garland:

The death of an obscure Jew on a seemingly God-forsaken hill in a backwater of the Roman Empire attracted no notice from the historians of the era, but it was the event that reconciles heaven and earth. The world may be corrupted, disordered, and ravaged by sin, but God still loves it; and God intends for it to fulfill its destiny in Christ. Sin has defaced Christ's work in creation, but he came to undo its consequences and to bring concord in a universe out of harmony with God.

How did he make peace in a conflict-ridden world?

**“by the blood of his cross”**

- This is Paul's way of speaking of Christ's atoning sacrifice.
- It has a cosmic dimension.

But it also has a personal dimension... adding three more verses...

### B. Personal Reconciliation (21-23)

Notice a new “And” – And “**You**” (it's emphatic)

- We have been reading, “**And He**” “**And He**”
- Now it is “And, **You**.”
- It's not just cosmic, worldwide, whole created order reconciliation in view; but also a personal reconciliation in view.

This Christ cares about **you**.

- He will reconcile **you** to the Father.
- He will take **you** to be in this new creation.

Isn't that astonishing!?

- I've told you before about my friend Rodney, who is a designer; he's designed a number of logos for professional teams, including the Charlotte Hornets. And he was on the phone one day, and all of a sudden he heard the voice of Michael Jordan, saying, “Hey Rod, it's MJ.” He was floored by the thought that this legend knew him.
- Now what if Rodney would have said, “Okay. This is Rodney” and then hang up!
- Hey, you can't hang up on Michael Jordan!
- No, he couldn't believe that MJ was talking to him!

Here is greater wonder – This Cosmic Christ has come for **you**.

Notice the nature on Christ's personal reconciliation:

- The **Means**: He has reconciled (**v. 22**). Not us reaching up, but him coming down.
- The **Effects**: holy and without blemish, free of accusation (**v. 22**)
- The **Extent of its impact**: to every creature under heaven (**v. 23**)

- The Gentile Mission was at work in the world (1:6ff)
- **This shows us the scope of our mission field.**

Notice the past, present, and future dimensions.

- **Past (v. 21):** ... what you once were
  - Alienated from God relationally
  - Hostile toward God in regard to your thinking
  - Your life was marked by evil deeds
- **Present (v. 22):** ... *now* he has reconciled... and given you right standing with God.
  - After telling us of our terrible, dark condition without Christ; Paul then gives us a the highest, noblest vision of humanity in any religion: holy/without blemish, and free of accusation!
- **Future (v. 23):** “*If*” you continue in the faith...
  - True faith is persevering faith.
  - Genuine faith is seen in patience and steadfastness,
  - Counterfeit faith withers and dies, showing that it never was real faith.
  - Don’t take your new status for granted, but press on, being rooted in the faith: “As you received Christ, so walk in him” (Col 2:6-7).
  - What inspires this patience and perseverance? “Not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.”
    - We are encouraged by our great hope of glory (Rom 5:1-5).
    - You can hear 1:4–5. That’s what inspires perseverance: heaven!

**In this little insignificant town in the Lycus Valley, Paul says this Cosmic, Sovereign Christ, is for you too.**

With all the splendor of Jesus in this passage, **it ends with the blood of his cross.**

**The glory of God is seen in the Jesus of *the Old Rugged Cross*.**

Isaiah said he was so disfigured that his appearance did not seem to be that of a man. (Isaiah 53) – **this too is part of the majesty of Christ!**

Paul shows us not only the cosmic Christ (creating, controlling, originating, sustaining all things), and the conquering Christ (who triumphed over the grave), but he also shows us the crucified Christ (the mangled Jesus) – glorious in all these ways!

**1:27:** This Christ is “in you.”

- The Christ that is above you, beyond you, and for you, is also *in you*.

**What should all this mean for us?**

Our lives should be Christ-centered.

- We should praise him.

- We should rely on him.
- We should live to his glory.
- We should be filled with hope.

Why? Because he is preeminent.

**18:** “that in everything he might have the supremacy” (v. 18).

**“Everything”**

- He must have first-place in everything.
- First-place in our relationships.
- First-place in our homes.
- First-place in our vocations.
- First-place in our church.
- First-place in our studies.
- First-place in our time.
- First-place in our finances.
- First-place in our conversation.
- First-place in our pleasures.
- First-place in our worship... in our lives

May this Cosmic and Crucified Christ thrill you more than anyone or anything.

There’s no one like him.

If you have him, you have enough! You are rich!

I like the story of an Englishman who was showing a visiting minister his large estate.

The owner said, “You see that farm? That’s mine. You see that house down that way? That’s mine too.”

The minister said, “You see that little village down there? There’s a poor lady in that village that can say more than all of this.”

“What?, How?!” The owner said. “What does she have?”

The minister replied, “She can say ‘Christ is mine.’”

Can you say that? Oh the riches of his glory.