

“He Is”

Text:

Colossians 1:15-20

“Who is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of every creature:
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:
And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

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.
For it pleased *the Father* that in him should all fullness dwell;
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.”

Introduction:

The immediate context of this passage is the thanksgiving given to God for having translated us “out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son”. Having given thanks that we have been translated into the kingdom of the beloved Son, he then begins to describe the Son. This passage tells us who the Son, the King of the Kingdom to which we now belong, is, and why we can have confidence in him, and why we need nothing or no one else because God has made “all the fullness of the Godhead to dwell in him.

This passage is one of the most studied, discussed, and written about passages in the entire Bible. More than one entire book has been written about these six verses. The reason for the interest in this passage is twofold.

The first reason, which I would consider to be the minor reason, concerns its form. The second, which is the major reason, concerns its content. I will briefly allude to the discussion of the form, but it is the content of the passage that will be our major concern.

A Hymn to Christ?

Many New Testament scholars have believed that they could detect in some of the New Testament's more elevated passages about Jesus Christ hymns that were actually sung to or about Christ in the early churches. The present passage along with Philippians 2:6-11 and I Timothy 3:16 are the Pauline passage most often included in this category.

This hunt for hymns, and fragments of hymns to Christ in the New Testament was prompted by references in the New Testament, and one well-known reference from outside the New Testament that indicate that singing hymns to Christ was a part of the worship of the earliest Christians. In this very Epistle to the Colossians in 3:16 Paul will exhort the Colossians to: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." And in I Corinthians 14:26 Paul gives us the earliest glimpse known into a 1st century church service when he writes: "How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."

One of the rare references to Christians in the Roman administrative literature from the earliest years of Christianity comes from Pliny the Younger who was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 AD. We have a whole set of exchanges of his letters with the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative political matters. The two most famous letters are those in which Pliny encounters Christianity for the first time. His problem is how to deal with the Christians who have been denounced. The entire correspondence is interesting, but the part that is of interest in light of the present subject is the part where he describes the defense of the accused Christians. This is what he says:

"They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition."

Now this passage is interesting because it is coming from someone who is not a Christian, and is not even sympathetic to Christians. He would have understood the part about singing a hymn

to Christ, because Romans sang hymns to their god's. The letter, like the New Testament passages previously cited, does seem to indicate that an essential part of early Christian worship was singing hymns to Christ.

A confession of faith

At this point we should observe that hymns to Christ in this context were not exactly the same thing as our hymns. They had two purposes. The first, and this is the original meaning of the word "hymn" was to praise, but second, and more important reason, was to confess. These hymns were sung confessions of faith; something like contemporary Christians singing the Apostle's Creed. This is the most important thing to understand about the present passage. Whether it was a hymn or not, and I am inclined to believe that it is not, but that Paul simply writes it as he writes the letter, perhaps alluding to some well-known lines from known hymns as a preacher might do in a sermon today. The passage certainly is confessional in nature. This is the major reason for its importance. It is a response to the question: "Who is Jesus Christ?" Everything in this passage is preceded by "He is". It might be more useful in understanding it to think of it as a catechism response, rather than a hymn. The question is: "Who is Jesus Christ?" These six verses are the answer.

This is, in my opinion, the most important question we may ask. It is the most important because the one ray of hope that exists in this dark universe is the light that Christ brought into the world. If the light of Christ really is light, can it lead us out of the darkness of despair? Does the universe really have purpose and meaning? Are we really going somewhere, or are we just an accident of nature? All of these questions are directly related to the question that this passage seeks to answer.

What I want us to do is to listen carefully to the answer that the Apostle gives to the question in this passage. We need to try to clearly understand each part, first as it applied to the original recipients of the letter, but more importantly as it speaks to us.

One of the reasons some have thought that this passage was a hymn is that it seems to be divided into two verses or strophes, and that there are repeated words, expressions, and themes. This certainly is true and it will be helpful to make a few simple observations before taking up the passage phrase by phrase. Here are some important things to notice:

- The fourfold repetition of "He is", and the use of second person masculine pronouns
- An apparent division into two major parts based on the double use of "firstborn". Christ is the Creator, the firstborn of all creation, and his is the Redeemer, the firstborn from the dead.
- The emphasis in both parts of the passage on the universal authority of Jesus Christ indicated by "all things", and "all things in heaven and earth"

We will structure what we have to say around the twofold division: Christ Creator, Christ Redeemer, and the repetition of “He is”.

I. Christ Creator

The Image of the Invisible God

The first thing affirmed about Christ in the passage is that he is the “image of the invisible God”. This corresponds to what John says at the beginning of his Gospel in another of the great Christological passages of the New Testament: “No man has seen God at anytime, the only begotten son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him” (John 1:18). Or as Paul says in II Corinthians 4:3-4: “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.”

God is Spirit. In his essence He is unknowable and incomprehensible, but in the incarnation he becomes visible. Christ came so that we might see God in a form that we could grasp. Therefore the best answer to the question: “what is God like?” is: “He is like Jesus Christ.”

The Firstborn of all Creation

This term has been a source of confusion, both historically, and at the present. Because it contains the word “born” some assume that it means that Christ had a beginning. This is of course in direct opposition to what John says at the beginning of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

In the Fourth century this idea divided the church, brought about the Council of Nicea, and the Nicene Creed which stated about Jesus Christ: “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

This short statement was the conclusion of a long battle between the Arians led by Arius, and the orthodox Christians led by Athanasius. Arius said that God created Christ and then, through Christ, He created the world. He summed up his beliefs in one famous short statement: “There was a time when the Son was not.” Athanasius, who understood the Old Testament better than Arius, understood that the term “firstborn” was not so much about birth as about

position. To say that Christ is the “firstborn” is to especially say that he is first, first in position. This corresponds to what Paul says at the end of verse 18: “that in all things he might be preeminent” or what he says in Phil 2:11 “He (God) has given him a name (a position), that is above every name (position). Simply put as the term “firstborn”, applies to Christ the emphasis is on “first”, and not on “born”.

Athanasius understood what we must understand. There are only two orders of existence; the created and the uncreated, and Christ belongs to the uncreated. Therefore he stated in his orations against the Arians: “But if all the creatures were created in him, his is other than the creatures, and he is not a creature, but the creator of the creatures” (*Orations against the Arians, ii. 62*).

By this term Paul wants us to know that the beginning and end of all things is Christ, and that is a reassuring truth.

The Creator and Sustainer of the Universe

In stating that Christ is the creator of all things Paul wants to assure the Colossians that nothing is outside of Christ’s control. A key to understanding this part of the passage is the part that is probably the most incomprehensible for us: “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”. The Colossians, like many of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire believed that the creation was not all good, that the heavens were inhabited by angelic beings which could be good or evil, and that their destiny was controlled by these beings. Paul is assuring them that all beings have been subjected to Christ, that the universe is under his control, and that they have nothing to fear.

We may not be troubled by the same fears that troubled the Colossians, but our fears may be even worse. If we accept the conclusions of many of our contemporaries that the universe is of entirely material composition, and that all that exists is the product of chance, then we are ultimately bound to accept the meaninglessness of the universe and, hence, the meaninglessness of our own lives. If there is no creator, no one is in charge, and we are at the mercy of chance. But we are assured that Christ not only created the universe but that he sustains it. We can have confidence because we know that our destiny is in the hands of the one who “loved us and gave himself for us.”

II. Christ Redeemer

The Head of the body, the church

In other passages where Paul likens the church to a body like I Corinthians 12 he emphasizes the interdependence of members, but here he is emphasizing the headship of Christ. As Christ is sovereign over creation, so he is sovereign over the new creation, the Church. Nature has been disordered by sin, but Christ is reordering it, bringing all things back under the sovereign reign of God, and he is doing it by breaking the bondage of sin by his redeeming, liberating death and his victorious resurrection.

To be a part of his body, the church, is to be a part of the new humanity, and to have for head the victorious one, the one who created and preserves the cosmos, but also the one who has reconciled the disobedient planet to God and is bringing order back to the world through his redemptive death.

The Beginning, the Firstborn from the Dead

As Christ is the firstborn of all creation, he is also the firstborn from the dead. As such he is the head of the new humanity, which is presently represented by his body, the Church. God's ultimate will and purpose, as we have seen previously, is to bring all things under the rule of Christ. The beginning of God's ultimate and final victory is the resurrection of Christ. As Christ sets all things in motion at the beginning by creating the world, he initiates the beginning of the end by his resurrection from the dead. In John 14:19 Jesus says to his disciples: "Because I live, you also shall live." Our hope of eternal life resides in Christ's resurrection. He is the firstborn. He is sovereign over life and death. No one else, no other thing can give us that hope, for he, and he alone, has vanquished death. It is he who holds the keys of death and of hell and delivers us from the fear of both. This is the point the Epistle to the Hebrews is making when it states in 2:14-17:

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through **death** he might destroy him that had the power of **death**, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through **fear of death** were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on *him the nature of angels*; but he took on *him* the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto *his* brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people."

The fullness of God

The world of the Colossians was populated by all kinds of emanations of God, angelic beings that contained something of God, but not all of God. Paul says that these beings should be of no concern to them. They should neither fear them nor revere them. They should not look to them for hope or revelation for God has put all of his revelation of himself in one being, the Son. All the fullness of God dwells in him and in him alone. As we have been emphasizing throughout this study of Colossians; “in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” We may not share the worldview of the Colossians, but the message is the same for us. All of God’s revelation is communicated to us in Christ. All of God’s blessings flow to us through Jesus Christ. To search elsewhere for any treasure of wisdom or knowledge is to search in vain and to be disappointed.

The one who Reconciles all Creation through his Death

In the last verse of this passage Paul speaks of the work of Christ in the broadest possible terms. It is not just the individual sinner who has been reconciled to God by the cross of Christ, but peace has been brought to the entire cosmos. He has made peace, and reconciled all things “in heaven and on earth” to God through his violent death on the cross. The end of the cosmos is not chaos, but order and peace. Its ultimate ruler and king is not confusion, but Christ.

Conclusion

This passage begins by talking about a kingdom, the kingdom of God’s dear son, the kingdom into which we have been translated out of the domain of darkness. From the kingdom it moves to the king for no kingdom ultimately is any better than its king. Paul wants us to know that our king is the King of Kings, he is the final King, the unconquerable King; not even death itself could defeat him. He is the Lord of Creation, the Ruler of the Universe, the reconciler, and peace maker. Is He your King?