



“Paul to the Colossians”

Colossians 1:15-20; Colossians 2:6-15; Colossians 3:1-4, 12-24

Who is Jesus? This is the question on the lips of the Colossians. In Colossae, as in our world, false claims about Jesus were put forward by some.

This letter is Paul's response.

It is always the question: Who is Jesus? It must be asked and answered in every culture and every age. Paul preached the truth of Jesus in a pagan, polytheistic world. We proclaim Jesus in a world that is increasingly secular, believing itself to have the answers to its manifold problems. But the truth about Jesus is no less potent now than it was two millennia ago. For if our claims about Jesus aren't true, than Christianity means nothing and we've put our faith in a lie. But if it is true, as it is everything. There is no middle ground. So let us begin with the great Christ-hymn from Colossians chapter 1.

Who is Jesus? (1:15-20)

The first passage is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul's point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the Lord God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite — all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God's desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of all things and all powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God's fullness¹ dwells.

And what is God's purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday — that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus' death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is true.

Steering clear of deception (Colossians 2:6-15)

Sadly though, Americans are becoming increasingly ignorant of the most basic teachings of the Christian faith, including many Christians. We've talked for years about the growth of a competing “faux christianity” — similar in name and form to the real thing, but a fraud. Further, there has been an unending stream of competing gospels, each telling its own story of how we can be rescued, what we must do to save the planet or save ourselves, build a world of peace and harmony, and so on.

¹ Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

We, in our time, tend to believe that the answer lies within ourselves. Paul faced much the same problem in his day. People put their trust in many complicated schemes by which they might get right with the gods and indulged in much deep thinking about the whole thing. So Paul wrote the Christians in Colossae and urged them to “see to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ” (Col. 2:8). Paul had worked mightily against a competing gospel in Galatia – embrace the Law of Moses if you want to be a true follower of Jesus, the opponents said . . . Paul didn’t even try to be nice to the pushers of that fraud. Similarly, in Colossae there are some who wanted to add-on this and that to the simple gospel of Christ. Paul would have none of it.

So, he reiterates what he said earlier in 1:19 – “All the fullness of deity lives in Christ’s body” (Col 2:9, CEB), or in the NRSV, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” And then without even pausing, Paul goes right on to say, “you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” N.T. Wright illuminates these simple but world-altering verses for us:

What he means, simply, is that Jesus was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is); not simply a man remarkably ‘full of God’ (though he’s that as well). He was and is the bodily form taken by God himself, God in all his fullness. He isn’t a demigod, half divine and half human. He doesn’t have a human body and a divine spirit, or mind. He can only be properly understood as the human being who *embodies*, or ‘incarnates’, the fullness of divinity.

This meant, of course, that all the pagan deities and divinities were at once upstaged. The pagan world sometimes spoke of demigods, or heroes who became divine around the time of their death. Jesus wasn’t like that. He was the real thing. But it also meant that Paul was cutting the ground away from any potential attack from the Jewish side. Jews, including Paul himself, believed that God was one. Many, perhaps Paul himself in his pre-Christian days, would have said that therefore Jesus couldn’t be divine; that the best that could be said of his followers, particularly the ex-pagan ones, was that they should now go on to discover the true God, the creator, the sovereign Lord of all. Not so, says Paul: if you want to find the true God, you need look no further than Jesus himself. Verse 9 is perhaps the sharpest and clearest statement in all his writings of his belief that Jesus quite literally embodies the one true God, God in all his fullness.

If you possess Jesus, therefore, you are already ‘fulfilled’ in him, and no rule or authority can go, as it were, over his head and impose itself on you. He is the head of them all. The church in our own day still needs to recapture that vision of the supremacy of King Jesus over all other authority.²

If you start with this claim, that Jesus embodies fully the Creator of all that is, then the rest of Paul’s claims begin to fall into place. How could we need anyone other than Jesus? To say that there is a way to go to God that doesn’t include Jesus is illogical. To say that Jesus is not enough is to say that God is not enough! Jesus is sufficient in all things, for all things. His grace is sufficient. His love is sufficient. As Paul would say elsewhere, we can endure all things through the power of him who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

But Paul doesn’t stop even there. He wants us to grasp that in a very real way, we have already died with Jesus and been resurrected with him (v. 12). Already, we are new creations. Already, we have been born anew. Already, forgiveness is ours. All this because Jesus obliterated all our debts, our wrongs, our trespasses by nailing them to a cross. What powerful and direct words and phrases. Is Jesus enough? Is his grace sufficient for all things? The “yes” that is our answer, is the answer the world longs for but doesn’t know it or won’t hear it.

What does it mean for us? (3:1-4)

It means that through Christ we have been made right with God. Here, Paul wants us to grasp the “already”³ aspect of this claim. Thus, as Christ has died, we have died. As Christ has been raised to new life, so have we been raised to new life. But, we might expect, Paul also works in the “not yet” – we will be revealed with Christ in glory when the truth of Christ is revealed to all of creation. As Michael Gorman puts it, we identify with both the exalted, cosmic Christ and the humble, crucified Christ.⁴ Thus, having been raised “already,” we are to set our minds on the things of God, for that is where the truth lies. And if we can train our minds to focus on God, then our hearts will flood open to God.

² Wright, N.T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 167–168). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

³ Here it is again. This “already/not yet” reading of the New Testament is inescapable.

⁴ from Gorman’s excellent introduction to Paul and his letters, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, Eerdmans, 2004.

What should be our response? (3:12-14)

We have been chosen by God. We are God's beloved, set aside and made holy for God. The appropriate response is straightforward. We are to clothe ourselves in Christ. We are to live out Christ's compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are to bear one another's burdens, as Christ has borne ours. We are to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us. We are to dress ourselves in love, for only then can we find the unity and harmony that is to characterize the body of Christ. We are to love as God has loved us.

We don't live in this way because we have something to gain nor because others might expect it of us. We live in this way, clothed in Christ, because we have been raised with him and our lives, therefore, must reflect what is so. To the extent that our minds and hearts do not embrace the truth about Jesus, then we can never hope to embody the love of Christ.

Why we do what we do matters. Is Jesus the image of the invisible God? Were all things created in, through, and for him? If not, we are left to our own devices, making our way through this world with only each other to depend upon. But if, as Paul claims, God truly resurrected Jesus, then our hope lies in God, not in ourselves. What *really* matters is what is true.

Christians proclaim to the world that the renewal that Paul speaks of in Colossians 3 is real. It is as concrete as Jesus' own death and resurrection. But we also know that we still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God's way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as being renewed in 3:10. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God's kingdom has come already, but not yet in all its fullness. We have been renewed and we are being renewed. We have been saved and we are being saved. Praise God!!