

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** Who Is Jesus?

**Text:** Colossians 1:15-18

**Date:** June 4, 2023

### **Verse 15**

One has called Paul's words in Colossians 1:15-20 "...one of the most extraordinary paragraphs in the Bible."<sup>1</sup> Many believe that what's contained in these verses constituted a hymn within the early church. If such is true, someone composed the verses of our passage within the church's infancy. The words were quite possibly passed from congregation to congregation and sung as a part of early Christian worship. Writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 3:16), Paul employed the song within his letter to remind his readers of foundational Christian doctrine concerning the person and work of Jesus. His intent was perhaps twofold in nature. First, he wanted to correct error in the church that was being taught by Judaizers, Gnostics, and mystics.

Second, he wanted to uphold the practice of Scriptural doxology in worship. From reading Paul's letter to the Colossians, it seems the church had slipped into some unbiblical forms of worship at their Lord's Day gatherings (Colossians 2:18; 3:16). Perhaps Paul was contending for what the Reformers and Puritans would later call "the Regulative Principle." He was, in effect, urging his readers to believe sound doctrine about Jesus and to worship Jesus according to Scriptural means and methods.

Paul's primary focus, however, was Christ. Notice how he began his description of our Lord in our text. He said, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). The pronoun "he" at the beginning of verse 15 referred back to Jesus Christ, one Paul had spoken of in verses 13-14. After having told of his prayer for the Colossians (Colossians 1:9-14), Paul turned to speak more specifically, directly, and doctrinally about the person and work of Jesus.

Paul did this because he knew the importance of correct beliefs concerning Jesus. Doctrine about Christ is never trivial. It is not something for strong and mature believers alone. It should never be relegated to in-depth Bible studies or seminaries. Truth concerning Christ is something for all Christians of all generations. One cannot be delivered from sin without an understanding of who Christ is and what Christ has done. Doctrine about Christ is always important, since what one believes about Jesus determines whether or not one is saved. It also shapes the direction of one's walk with the Lord.

For many of Paul's original readers the word rendered "image" in verse 15 was a clear reference to the first lines of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Greek word *eikón* was used in the Septuagint's (LXX) rendering of Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." By using language of Genesis 1, he intended to portray Jesus as being a part of the eternal Godhead. He would later argue for the deity of Christ in more explicit terms

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Mark G. *Let's Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 28.

(Colossians 1:19; 2:9). Contrary to the Gnostic conceptions and claims, Jesus was much more than a spirit emanation from a remote supreme being.

The word rendered “image” was the word form which we get our word “icon” (eikón). It was commonly used of stamps or imprints of images in the first-century world. In the Greek way of thinking, an “image” shared in the reality of what it represented.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that many Jews had such an abhorrence of Roman standards and icons in the Holy Land. A banner or coin bearing an image of the Emperor was tantamount to sacrilege. Since the Emperor claimed to be god, it was as if a false god had desecrated holy ground!

When Jesus instructed his disciples to look at a Roman coin in order for Him to teach them a lesson about paying government taxes, He asked, “Whose *likeness* and inscription is this?” (Matthew 22:20). The icon on the coin would have been of Caesar. Coinage bore his imprint, image, or likeness.

As used in our current text, the idea of Christ being the image of God indicated that Jesus was the exact representation of God because He was God! When one looked at Jesus, they saw more than a mere man. They saw God Himself! While on Earth, Jesus spoke of these things. He once said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

It is clear that Paul used the word “image” as a reference to Jesus’ divine nature when we consider how he qualified the concept. He said that Jesus was the “image of the *invisible* God.” Gnostics were fascinated with unseen realms of angelic beings (Colossians 2:10, 18). Paul would use the same word rendered “invisible” (aóratos) to speak of the Gnostic fixation on unseen spirit beings in his very next verse (Colossians 1:16). He wanted his readers to fix their attention on something else that was unseen — the God of Creation. Invisibility is a hallmark feature of the one true God.

The New Testament often uses Paul’s word for “invisible” to speak of the Lord’s fundamental essence (Romans 1:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). One has noted that “it was a central point of Jewish theology that God cannot be seen.”<sup>3</sup> He is spirit and He is invisible. He is like a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29) and an unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). God cannot be reduced to a physical conception. Those who worship Him must approach Him as Spirit (John 4:24) and they need divine revelation to understand who God is (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 13:12).

While Paul’s use of the word “image” was certainly intended to promote the Divine nature of Jesus, it seems Paul had a dual meaning in mind. Colossians 1:15 perhaps provide as much support for a doctrine known as “the hypostatic union” as any other passage of Scripture. Plainly stated, the hypostatic union maintains that the incarnate Jesus was one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man. The Gnostics denied both realities. As a result, Paul promoted both truths succinctly and powerfully in verse 15. He did so through the concept of “image.” The word was

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<sup>2</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 461.

<sup>3</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

associated with both Jesus' role as "the invisible God" and "the firstborn of all creation."

In calling Jesus "the firstborn of all creation," Paul did not mean to say that Jesus was created by God. His intent was not to speak of time. The very next verse in Paul's letter would reveal that he did not regard Jesus as a created being. Rather he meant to portray Jesus as having priority or rank over all created things. In the first-century world, the meaning of Paul's use of the word "firstborn" would have been clearer, as society had a strong affiliation with the privileges of firstborn status. Paul did not apply the term to Jesus in order to depict Jesus being created by God, as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Muslims might maintain. Rather, he meant to promote Jesus' superiority, sovereignty, and supremacy over all created things.

The author of Hebrews also used the Greek word for "firstborn" (*prōtōtokos*) in his writings. Interestingly, he did so in order to promote Jesus' superiority over the angelic realm. He said, "And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'" (Hebrews 1:6). Paul wanted the Colossians to be aware that Jesus was the priority of all creation. Though there was certainly a place for a discussion concerning spiritual warfare and the angelic realm (Ephesians 6:10-20), but the Gnostics' teachings in Colossae were off-center from orthodox Christian truth. Paul wasn't out to deny the presence of the unseen realm, he just wanted to uphold a vision of Jesus that made Jesus Lord of all. He wanted his readers to remember the truth of John 1:1 — "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Although the concept of "firstborn" should not be interpreted to mean that Jesus was created by God, the term surely evokes imagery of the incarnation. Jesus was indeed born for a specific purpose at a pivotal point in human history (Galatians 4:4). "He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:2), but He willingly "...emptied Himself... even to death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). Through His incarnation, Jesus was "the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14, KJV). Such was necessary because the first humans failed to live up to the image of God mandate of Genesis 1:26-31.

Paul used the exact same Greek word from Colossians 1:15 to speak of the image of God in man when he wrote to the Corinthians. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, he spoke of mankind as "...the image and glory of God..." (1 Corinthians 11:7). The first man and woman were made to reflect the "image" of God through three different domains of human experience: the structural domain (Genesis 1:26a), the relational domain (Genesis 1:26); and the functional domain (Genesis 1:28). Because of sin, the image of God was marred in all three of these domains (Genesis 3:8-13, 17-19) and humans were estranged from God (Genesis 3:22-24).

What's more, Adam and Eve's transgression brought sin to the entire human race. All exist as shells of God's original intent. Though they contain the image of God, that image is marred and messed up because of sin (Romans 5:12-14). In His plan of redemption, the Lord sent the God-Man, Jesus, to live and die for human transgressors. Because He had no sin (1 John 3:5), He was the perfect embodiment of the image of God. As the perfect image bearer, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for people who do not perfectly reflect God's image. The goal of such things was to redeem a people for God who might fully experience and exhibit His image once again (Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:1-2). Paul would later emphasize this point as he urged his

readers to "...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10).

Yes, the image of God concept in Colossians 1:15 promotes the Divine nature of Jesus; however, considering the Jewish background of the concept from Genesis 1:26-27, it seems likely that Paul also mean to uphold Jesus' human nature. Again, the Gnostics denied both the divine and human nature of Jesus. Thus, Paul wanted to promote both, extolling Jesus as the God Man who came to redeem a people who would one day fully display the perfect image of God in the New Heaven and New Earth.

### **Verse 16**

Paul upheld Jesus as being the "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), but he also extolled Him as being the means of all creation. He said, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). The opening words of verse 16 — "by him" — were significant. Paul had already used similar language in Colossians 1:2, depicting His readers as being "in Christ." Now he depicted all of creation as having its being "by" or "in" Christ. Contrary to the Gnostic claims, Jesus was not a mere intermediary spirit dispatched from a supreme being to impart special knowledge. Paul, as one has said, intended to say that all "...the laws and purposes which guide the creation and government of the universe reside in..." Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is no created being. He is Creator God. He is one with the Eternal Godhead. While on Earth, He Himself spoke of the way in which He had always existed with the Heavenly Father (John 17:24). John affirmed the role of Jesus in creation at the outset of his gospel, saying, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3).

In our current verse, Paul used what is known as the "theological passive" voice in speaking of Jesus' role in creation — "all things were created by him."<sup>5</sup> His intent was to be crystal clear — Jesus was God and Jesus was the means of creation. He was not Himself created; rather, He was the instrument by which God created all things. Paul's teaching was in alignment with Proverbs 8:22-31, a passage that depicted the Anointed One as the eternal embodiment of God's wisdom. In that passage, Christ was revealed to be the instrument of God's creation.

The account of Genesis 1 also gave witness to the presence of Christ at Creation. Genesis 1:2 spoke of the way "...the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." The Spirit of God is none other than the Spirit of Christ (John 16:14-15; Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11), so the presence of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2 was the presence of Christ. In addition, the Genesis account provided a clear Trinitarian reference in its account of the way God made the first man and woman. Genesis 1:26, said, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....'" The use

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<sup>4</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 71.

of the first-person plural pronouns — “us” and “our” — give witness to the Three-in-One nature of the Lord. Within those terms, one sees the presence of Jesus in the making of Adam and Eve.

On top of these things, the gospel writers were careful to portray Jesus as Creator God through their narratives concerning Jesus’ miracles. In accordance with Hebrews 2:3, all of Jesus’ miracles contained “signs” that were intended to communicate heavenly realities concerning His ministry. It is not without significance that Jesus performed miracles in all domains of the natural and supernatural realms. He exhibited power over the human body (Mark 1:20), angels and demons (Mark 1:21-28), and the elements of nature (Mark 6:45-52). His works in such domains were intended to demonstrate that He was the Creator and Lord of humans, of angels, and of all nature.

Paul explained the rationale behind Jesus’ role in creation any saying, “...all things were created through him and for him.” In the original language of the text, Paul used a perfect tense verb. His intent was to depict a one time event that had continuing results. One could translate his words as meaning all things “stand created” or “remain created.”<sup>6</sup>

In describing Jesus’ role in creation, Paul spoke of several different created beings. He mentioned “things...in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.” It is first helpful to discuss what Paul meant by “things...in heaven and on earth.” The division between heaven and Earth is perhaps the most standard, broad-based categorization of created things. The Bible begins with the statement, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The things of Earth included land and water, the plant kingdom, and all living things on Earth (Genesis 1:9-13; 20-27). All other created matter can be consigned to the heavens (Genesis 1:3-8; 14-19).

Though not mentioned explicitly in the account of Genesis 1, the creation of angels is implied. Job 38:7 tells us that angels witnessed the Lord’s created work. Since they are heavenly beings, it seems that they were created at some point between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:3. This is true because the first verse of the Bible tells us that the Lord made all that is in the “*heavens* and the Earth” within the creation account of the Bible’s first chapter (Genesis 1:1). Moses affirmed this reality in his giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:11).

Paul’s readers were affected by a sub-Christian teaching that placed undue emphasis on the angelic realm, the things “in heaven.” The teaching also reduced Christ to the level of such a spirit being. Paul refuted such false doctrine and extolled Jesus as the very one who created all angelic beings. He wanted his readers to know that there was indeed an unseen realm of angels and demons, but such entities were all in submission to Christ.

In addition, the Gnostics held to erroneous beliefs concerning the things “on earth,” as they claimed that all physical matter was inherently evil. Though Paul would have certainly affirmed that human flesh had been tragically impacted by sin (Romans 7:18), he did not share the same opinion of the Gnostics. Jesus made the flesh of all

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<sup>6</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 478.

living things and Jesus had redemptive purposes for the flesh. He Himself embraced flesh in order to provide salvation for God's people! The Gnostics didn't need to maximize the importance of heavenly beings, and they didn't need to minimize the plans God had for the redemption of the flesh.

After considering what Paul meant by "things...in heaven and on earth," it is necessary to consider what he meant by "visible and invisible" things. It seems his terminology was another way of speaking of the heavens and the Earth. The Bible speaks of three different types of heavens — the atmosphere around the Earth, outer space, and the immediate presence of God (2 Corinthians 12:2). Within all three realms of the heavens, there are a multitude of "invisible" things. The naked human eye cannot fully discern the presence of spirit beings in the Earth's atmospheres, the essence of celestial entities and stars in outer space, or the presence of God in the Third Heaven. Such things are "invisible." However, there are visible things. These include created matter on the Earth — the plant kingdom, birds, fish, animals, and other humans (Genesis 1:20-27). Paul's point was that Christ made all things contained both within the visible and invisible realms. All created things are subordinate to Him.

Next, Paul spoke of "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities." The first two terms likely referred to angelic positions or ranks. The last two likely referred to power wielded by angelic beings who occupied such positions of power.<sup>7</sup> Paul referred to such a classification of angels in Ephesians 6:12 — "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Daniel gave witness to such things as well. He told of the way a certain heavenly angel was resisted by another angelic being who seemingly exercised a greater level of power (Daniel 10:13).

All around us in the invisible realm of the Earth's atmosphere (first heaven) there is an unseen system of angelic beings (2 Kings 6:17) contenting for the souls and minds of humankind (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Peter 5:8). God's people shouldn't be inordinately fixated on such things, nor should they be perturbed by such things. Christ made every angelic being and none can operate outside of His sovereign parameters (Job 1:8-12; 2:1-4). Any attempt to provide details about the angelic realm that goes beyond the bounds of what is plainly outlined in Scripture often leads one into error. Such was the issue at Colossae. The Lord wants His people to have a general awareness of the angelic realm (Ephesians 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8), but he wants them to place their primary focus on pursuing the Lord through the Lord's means of grace (Ephesians 6:13-20).

Though the words "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" undoubtedly referred to angelic and demonic beings in unseen places, it should not be lost on us that the first-century Jewish mind regarded such beings as having real involvement in the physical realm. It was commonly and correctly believed that unseen spiritual forces had a hand in influencing visible, physical people. In Jewish tradition, it was the Spirit of the Lord that ordained and directed physical rulers (Proverbs 8:15-16; Romans 13:1). In fact, a famous story from the Old Testament told of the way spirit beings directed

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, 72.

prophets to prophesy falsely in order to mislead a king (1 Kings 22:19-23). Paul surely had such things in mind. Though the Gnostics boasted of a special knowledge of the spirit realm, they themselves were unwittingly led astray by “doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1).

Paul continued his discussion on Christ’s role in creation by saying, “...all things were created through him and for him.” Whereas the phrase “through him” depicted Jesus as “the immediate instrument of creation,” the phrase “for him” upheld Christ as “the goal of creation.”<sup>8</sup> Many in the ancient world held to a cosmological view of the universe in which they believed God created angels and that angels then created the stars and all life on Earth.<sup>9</sup> The Gnostics erred through teaching beliefs steeped in folklore. They reduced Jesus to a product of the created order, the handiwork of aeons and angels. Such a system of belief was harmful to souls in the church at Colossae. Jesus was the one who deserved supreme worship and glory, because Jesus was the one who made all things.

Through his composition of Psalm 148, the Psalmist gave testimony to how creation calls for praise to the Lord (Psalm 148:1-14). Paul highlighted these realities elsewhere in the New Testament. Writing to the Romans, he said, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36). To the church at Corinth, Paul said, “...for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6). The author of Hebrews similarly referred to Jesus as the one “for whom and by whom all things exist” (Hebrews 2:10).

### **Verse 17**

Paul continued his thoughts regarding the supremacy of Jesus by saying, “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). The original language of verse 17 was strong. Paul placed the pronoun “he” in the emphatic position at the beginning of his sentence.<sup>10</sup> His aim was to depict Jesus alone as having supremacy, superiority, and sovereignty over the created order.

In part, Paul’s words in verse 17 provided a restatement and summary of what he shared in verses 15-16. In speaking of Christ being “before all things,” he meant to repeat the idea found in the second part of verse 15 in which Paul called Jesus “the firstborn of all creation.” The apostle wanted to unequivocally portray Jesus as having supreme rank over “all things” (Colossians 1:16b) in the created realm. Such is true because “by him all things were created” (Colossians 1:16a).

Paul, however, extended his argument further. He didn’t just depict Christ as being supreme over all things in verse 17, he also depicted Christ as being the sustainer of all things. He did this by saying, “and in him all things hold together.” In

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<sup>8</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

<sup>9</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 191.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

the original language, Paul used a perfect tense verb. He wanted to depict the permanency of Christ's work of sustaining the universe.<sup>11</sup>

The apostle's words touched on the subject of God's providence. The Christian doctrine of providence is the "...understanding of God's continuing action by which all creation is preserved, supposed, and governed by God's purposes and plans for human history and for human lives."<sup>12</sup> According to Paul, Jesus is the means by which the Lord performs His acts of providence in human history. One has explained, saying that Christ "...Himself is the principal cohesion in the universe, the unifying band which encompasses everything and holds it together. This applies not only to the largest things of the universe, but also to its smaller things."

Pastor and author R.C. Sproul used to famously say "there are no maverick molecules" in God's universe.<sup>13</sup> God is not the god of the Deists. He is more than the proverbial clockmaker who wound up the cosmos and left it to its own devices. He is actively engaged in His creation and He governs it according to His sovereign purposes. He retains supremacy and sovereignty over all. This truth is affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament. When preaching in Athens, Paul declared, "...for 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:28). Jesus' spoke of the Heavenly Father's work in providentially sustaining the universe: "My Father is working until now, and I am working" (John 5:17). The author of Hebrews affirmed Christ's role in such things: "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. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). Commenting on such things, one Puritan author said, "Every creature, whether earthly or heavenly, visible or invisible, would sink back again into its former nothingness, if the Divine preservation were withdrawn."<sup>14</sup>

Paul's readers were being influenced by a false teaching that claimed the Universe was created by an unknown, distant angelic realm through various aeons — long ages and indiscriminate periods of time. They also claimed that physical matter was evil, repudiating the idea of God's goodness and common grace in the created order (Acts 14:17). Paul refuted such anti-Christian teachings. He promoted a biblical approach to human origins. God made all things through the instrument of His Son at the beginning of time. Initially, all that God made was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Though sin had impacted society in cataclysmic ways, the God-man appeared in flesh that was undefiled by sin in order to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Christ is now at the right hand of God and He is sustaining the cosmos by His sovereign hand.

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<sup>11</sup> Wright, 73.

<sup>12</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 226.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/ultimately-with-rc-sproul/no-maverick-molecule>

<sup>14</sup> Davenant, 203.