

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** The Name above All Names

**Text:** Colossians 1:18-20

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### **Verse 18**

Paul continued his discussion concerning Christ by saying, “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (Colossians 1:18). With his words, the apostle transitioned from talking about Christ as the Lord of creation (Colossians 1:15-17) to talking about Christ as Lord over the church. The imagery of a “body” was one of Paul’s favorite metaphors (1 Corinthians 12:12). It depicted the church as a living being that derived its life from Christ.

The Greek word for “church” (ekklēsia) was one that literally meant “called out.”<sup>1</sup> It depicted the church as being “called out” from the world to serve the Lord. As used by Paul in Colossians 1:18, the term refers to what is known as “the universal church,” that collective group of God’s people throughout the world, and throughout history, who experience union with Christ and communion with Christ and Christ’s people.<sup>2</sup> This “universal church” should be distinguished from “local churches,” local gatherings of God’s people who covenant together for purposes related to Christ’s kingdom.

In talking about Christ’s relationship to the church, Paul spoke of Jesus’ superior rank by using three different terms — “head,” “beginning,” and “firstborn.” He then provided a conclusion drawn from Jesus’ superior rank — “that in everything he might be preeminent.” First, Paul used the term “head.” The metaphor obviously depicted Christ as being the one with authority and leadership over the church (Matthew 28:18-20; Philippians 2:9-10; 1 Peter 5:4). However, the primary meaning of the metaphor in the context of Colossians 1:18 seems to have a different emphasis.

In modern society, many often think of a “head” as being the “boss,” one who exercises oversight, or one who is “in charge.” However, ancient people often thought of a head as being one who provided life-sustaining vitality. In the Greek way of thinking, the head and mind directed one’s entire way of living (Romans 12:2). As a result, Paul’s metaphor in Colossians 1:18 was intended to depict Christ as the one who provided the believers at Colossae with life, energy, strength, knowledge, and spiritual vitality. In Colossians 2:19, Paul would later speak of the way the body of Christ is “...nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments” and how it “grows with a growth that is from God” through the head of Christ.

The head metaphor was relevant to Paul’s readers at Colossae. They were being influenced by a teaching that taught spiritual advancement was experienced through interactions with angels. Paul wanted the church to be aware that Christ was the only sure source of spiritual vitality and life. The true believers at Colossae didn’t

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<sup>1</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 217.

<sup>2</sup> Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 103.

need to lose confidence in Jesus. They did not need to look to any other source for spiritual advancement. All that they needed was in Christ! John Calvin rightly noted, "...as in the human body...the life of the church flows from Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Himself taught on the way in which He provides life to His children. In using a different metaphor, He said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5). The "head" and "vine" metaphor are different ways of saying the same thing. Christ is the one who provides spiritual life to His people.

On top of using the term "head" to express Jesus' superior rank, Paul also spoke of Jesus as the "beginning." Use of such a word undoubtedly made most of Paul's readers think about the opening lines of the Hebrew Scriptures: "In the *beginning*, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Greek word for "beginning" in the Septuagint (LXX) of Genesis was the same one Paul used in Colossians 1:18. John famously used the word in the opening of his gospel account: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1).

Both Paul and John borrowed the term from Genesis in order to depict Jesus as being a co-equal with Creator God. John used the term similarly in Revelation 3:14. Hebrews 2:10 also used the term to highlight Jesus' role in creation. Why did Paul employ it in the context of Colossians 1:18? Well, the Gnostics claimed that Jesus was little more than a spirit emanation who descended from aeons of angels. They were wrong. Jesus was Eternal God. Paul had emphasized this reality in his previous discussion on creation (Colossians 1:15-17).

Though the term "beginning" spoke of Jesus' role in the original creation, it had an additional meaning as well. There isn't a single word in English that can rightly portray the full meaning of the Greek word. The idea behind the term is that of "first principle," "source," or "creative initiative."<sup>4</sup> As used in Colossians 1:18, the term referred to the way Jesus' life and work produced a new sort of creation for God's people (Matthew 19:28; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Whereas sin brought disaster and depravity to the Lord's original handiwork, Christ came to make all things new (Revelation 21:5). Paul's readers were being inundated by a philosophy that gave a non-biblical perspective for questions related to human origins, the nature of humanity's greatest problem, and the path to human renewal. Paul maintained a simple, straightforward, and scriptural approach — Christ made all things (Colossians 1:16), sin marred all things (Colossians 1:21-22, but Christ did a work to make all things new (Colossians 1:18).

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 152.

<sup>4</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), 74.

The third term Paul used to express Jesus' superior rank was "firstborn." In particular, he spoke of Jesus as being the "firstborn from the dead." The title was undoubtedly a reference to the resurrection of Christ, a chief event and doctrine in the Christian religion (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4, 14). It is important to clarify that the reference to "first" should not be thought of in relation to *time*. Instead, the term should be regarded more in light of *type*. Obviously, there were some forms of resurrection that occurred prior to Christ's resurrection. Our Lord Himself miraculously raised others. Think about Lazarus (John 11:1-44) and Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43). Also, recall Old Testament resurrections (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37).

In calling Jesus "the firstborn from the dead," Paul didn't mean to say that Jesus' resurrection was the first in time. As with the term "firstborn" in verse 15, Paul's emphasis in verse 18 was on priority and preeminence. The people of Bible days often thought of "first" as referring to rank or superiority, not as the primary point in a linear progression of time. Evidence for this is found in the book of Revelation. John spoke of "the first resurrection" of God's people at the end of time (Revelation 20:6). Obviously there have been resurrections that have proceeded that resurrection. Remember the Old Testament saints who were raised at Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:52). John's point in Revelation was the same as Paul's point in Colossians 1:18. He meant to portray Christian resurrection as a special type of resurrection.

Christ's resurrection was different than all other resurrections in that others needed an outside agent in order for a resurrection to take place. Jesus on the contrary, had a personal part to play in His own resurrection. Such is made clear by some of His words in John's gospel. To His Jewish opponents, He once said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). On another occasion, He proclaimed, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:18).<sup>5</sup>

Paul meant to emphasize the priority of Christ's resurrection in God's program of redemption. The resurrection of Jesus was and is the means of securing all other forms of resurrection (Romans 8:9-11; Revelation 1:5; 3:14). Not only that, but it is the resurrection power of Jesus that supplies vital life to the church. Because the head of the church has been raised, the people of God have power to live in newness of life. This was Paul's point in Romans 6:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:20.

Paul had such resurrection truth in mind as he wrote to the Colossians. Secret knowledge and spiritual power weren't to be found through the new philosophies, religious rituals, or legalistic rules being propagated amongst the church. Christ's resurrection had priority over such things. Transformational life was found in Christ, the head of the church who had been raised on behalf of God's people.

After implementing three different titles to extol Jesus' superior rank, Paul drew a conclusion. He said, "that in everything he might be preeminent." (Colossians 1:18) In the original language of the text, the apostle employed a purpose clause.<sup>6</sup> He meant

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<sup>5</sup> Davenant, 223.

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 480.

to show that Christ's position as "head," "beginning," and "firstborn" served the purpose of making Him first above everything. One has said the word "preeminent" meant Jesus was to be first "in time and rank."<sup>7</sup> Another has said that the term carried ideas of "supremacy," "supreme importance," or "greatest authority."<sup>8</sup> Josephus used the term of a high ranking officer who had authority over a group of soldiers.<sup>9</sup> Paul's point for his readers was that Christ was first above all earthly and heavenly beings (Colossians 1:16). Jesus alone deserved worship and adoration, not angelic beings (Colossians 2:18). The Gnostics who minimized the person and work of Jesus were in error.

### **Verse 19**

Paul continued his exultation of Jesus by saying, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19). The word rendered "for" provided a transition from verse 18. It continued Paul's explanation as to why Christ should have preeminence in all things.<sup>10</sup> Namely, it indicated that Christ should be regarded as preeminent because He is the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

From studying Paul's letter to the Colossians, it seems that the Greek word for "fullness" was a popular one amongst the Gnostic heretics. One has said it was "A recognized technical term in theology, denoting the totality of the Divine powers and attributes."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the false teachers boasted of a "fullness" they received from interacting with secret knowledge and angelic beings. Paul used the pundits' cherished term against them. He maintained that all the fullness of God was found in Jesus.

Interestingly, there is not a word for "God" (théos) in the Greek New Testament. The word is implied.<sup>12</sup> However, as used in our text, the term "fulness" referred to a fulness of divine perfections.<sup>13</sup> In His incarnation, Jesus provided a human embodiment of all of God's glorious attributes. Paul promoted similar truth in Colossians 1:15 and 2:19.

Interestingly, the word rendered "fullness" was used in the ancient world of a ship that was dispatched from harbor with a full crew.<sup>14</sup> Paul employed the term to

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 480.

<sup>8</sup> Beale, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Beale, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Beale, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, 480.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 178.

<sup>14</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.

depict Jesus as possessing full divinity when dispatched from heaven in the incarnation. Although Jesus emptied Himself in a figurative sense by humbling Himself in coming to Earth (Philippians 2:7), His deity was in no way compromised.

It is important to clarify that Colossians 1:19 does not imply that Jesus was not divine at some point. It is not as if Jesus was born a human and God chose to pour divinity into Him. Paul didn't mean to say that God was in Christ, but that, as one has said, "...all that God is dwells in Christ."<sup>15</sup> Christ is one-hundred percent divine and He has always been divine. He was fully God before His incarnation, in His incarnation, and after His resurrection. He is fully God now, seated at the right hand of the Father.

The word translated "dwell" was significant. One has said the word spoke of a "permanent abode."<sup>16</sup> As used in our text, the term indicated that Jesus never laid aside any of His divine attributes when He came to Earth. While living among us, he was completely, fully, and one-hundred percent divine. And He retains full divinity to this day, as He dwells at the right hand of God, interceding on our behalf. Fullness for the Colossians was not to be found in the teachings of the Gnostics or the Judaizers. It was to be found only through union and communion with Christ. All the fullness of God was fully in Christ. As a result, Jesus is the means through which God's people experience all the fullness of God, not vain human philosophies, empty ascetic practices, or the pursuit of mystical experiences.

Jesus' full divinity is integral to Christian salvation. John used the same word translated "fullness" in John 1:16, saying, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." If Jesus had not been fully God, we would have no hope of salvation. A mere man, or even a specially spiritually-endowed man, could never have made adequate payment for our sins. A God-Man who was fully God was required.

Paul indicated that the Lord was "pleased" for all the fullness of God "to dwell" in Jesus. His assertion highlighted the Father's will in the plan of redemption. Christian salvation is administered by the Heavenly Father (John 5:19-20), accomplished by the Son (Hebrews 10:10), and applied by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). Jesus made allusion to this divine order of salvation in Luke 4:18 and John 4:34.

## **Verse 20**

After promoting Jesus' divinity, Paul spoke of Christ's work on behalf of sin. He said, "...and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). The phrase "and through him" was significant. At first glance, it may seem like Paul made a repeated reference to Christ. From what he wrote in verses 18-19, it was obvious that Paul was talking about Jesus. Why did the apostle invoke the personal pronoun "him" in verse 20? It seems he meant to place emphasis on the person and work of Christ. He wanted to be unequivocal — Christ was the chief means and sole grounds of reconciliation with God. The customs, creeds, and supposed visions of false teachers in Colossae were profitless.

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<sup>15</sup> Beale, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

In Paul's perspective, the act of reconciliation was the heart of Christ's work. The word rendered "reconcile" is one that meant "...to exchange hostility for friendship."<sup>17</sup> One Puritan defined reconciliation as "...nothing else than to renew friendship broken asunder by some grievous offence, and so to restore the parties at enmity to their former concord."<sup>18</sup> Such reconciliation in salvation is necessary, since sin makes us natural enemies of God (Ephesians 2:1-3). Paul explained this aspect of salvation in passages like Romans 5:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

In the Greek of Colossians 1:20, Paul used a rather strong term. He employed a double compound word that gave the idea of "complete reconciliation."<sup>19</sup> Paul would use the same term later in verse 22. He also used it in Ephesians 2:16. Perhaps he utilized it in our current text because of the Judaizers at Colossae. Such religionists made Gentiles feel they weren't really close to God. They demanded devotion to Jewish ceremonial observances. Paul wanted all to know that the work of Christ had achieved "complete reconciliation."

Take note of Paul's description of the scope of Jesus' work. He spoke of it as providing reconciliation for "all things, whether on earth or in heaven." As in Colossians 1:16, Paul's intent was to focus on the entirety of the created realm — "earth" and "heaven." Paul's reference to "heaven" was undoubtedly a reference to the angelic realm. As mentioned earlier, the Colossians heresy placed major emphasis on interaction with angelic beings (Colossians 2:18). Paul wanted his readers to know that the angelic realm was not a means of reconciliation with God, as the heretics claimed. In fact, the angelic realm had need of reconciliation itself.

Near the beginning of time, a certain group of angels rebelled against God (Job 4:18; Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:1-10; 1 Peter 3:20). As a result, the angelic realm needs restoration and reconciliation with God. Peter spoke of such realities in 1 Peter 3:18-22. It is important to note that there are mysteries here that are hard to comprehend. We must remember that we see through a glass dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Attempting to be too exact and precise with the Lord's mysteries may lead us into error. May we always remember that there are divine mysteries we can't fully understand (Deuteronomy 29:29). Also, may we remember the point of Paul's words to the Colossians — our focus is to be on Christ primarily, not a mysterious secondary or tertiary doctrine of the faith. Furthermore, our spiritual vitality, peace, and joy in life comes from Jesus alone, not our ability to peer behind the veil of divine mysteries!

In our discussion of Colossians 1:20, it is important to not mistake the apostle's words as support for a universal atonement. Ultimately, only those who trust in Christ's death and resurrection will be saved. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear that some will face eternal punishment for their sins (Matthew 7:21-23). Other passages of Scripture — 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, Revelation 20:11-15, and many more — make it plain that not all will be saved. Though the church can openly proclaim that the atonement is available to all, Christ's atonement only applied to those who truly

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<sup>17</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.

<sup>18</sup> Davenant, 234.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, 481.

know Christ's salvation. However, there is a sense in which "all things" will experience reconciliation with God.

The atonement has application for God's people (Ephesians 2:16), but it also has implication for the angelic realm (1 Peter 3:18-22) and the realm of nature (Romans 8:19). The whole of the created order will be restored at the end of time. The prophets often spoke of how all things, all realms of the created order, will one day be reconciled to God (Isaiah 11:1-6; 65:25; Ezekiel 34:25; Hosea 2:18).<sup>20</sup> Paul also emphasized this truth when writing to the Ephesians, speaking of the way God's plan of salvation worked "...to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10).

Truth concerning such reconciliation was important for Paul's readers. They were plagued by a false teaching that made angelic intermediaries a means of salvation. Paul argued for biblical truth. Christ is the only means of being reconciled to God. Seeking reconciliation via angels or any other thing in the created order is vain. In fact, such things themselves find their own reconciliation in Christ!

The term "earth" referred to created things belonging to our planet — humanity, animals, plants, vegetation, land, water, fish, and birds. In Paul's mind, "heaven" was the realm of celestial bodies and angelic beings. In the context of Colossians 1:20, Paul's point was that both of these domains — "earth" and "heaven" — were affected negatively by Adam and Eve's first sin. One has noted, "...sin somehow has put the universe out of joint."<sup>21</sup> Humans, nature, and the angelic realm were all impacted by the fall. However, Paul wanted his readers to know that both domains would one day be made right with God. The means of such restoration was Jesus, not the philosophies, mysticism, and legalism of the heretics at Colossae.

Paul further explained the nature of reconciliation by speaking of how Christ's work had a way of "making peace." The word rendered "making peace" (*eirēnopoieō*) is only used here in the New Testament. The term was a compound one that literally meant "peace making." Paul used the two words that comprised the compound word in Ephesians 2:15 to express an idea similar to the one found in our current verse. He said, "...by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace."

It is worth mentioning that the words translated "reconciliation" and "making peace" are found in Ephesians 2. If you are familiar with that passage, you know that it dealt with the way Christ's work secured salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. Like the Colossians, the Ephesians had been infiltrated by a Jewish false teaching that made Gentiles feel inferior in the faith. In both of his letters, Paul used terms for "reconciliation" and "making peace" to highlight the way Jesus' life provided complete salvation for both people.

According to the Hebrew perspective, a perspective that Paul and many of his readers maintained, the concept of "peace" had a far richer and more robust meaning than it does amongst modern minds. One has described the nature of peace for first-century Jews, saying such peace, "...is more than an end to hostilities. It has a

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<sup>20</sup> Beale, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Robertson, 481.

positive content, pointing to the presence of positive blessings and concerned with the spiritual blessings and prosperity of the whole man.”<sup>22</sup>

Take note of the means of Christ’s reconciliation. Paul placed weight on “the blood of the Cross.” Since Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Lord has required blood to make provision for sin and its consequences (Genesis 3:22-24). The author of Hebrews said, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). In God’s spiritual economy, blood is a symbol that provides the forgiveness of sins in God’s eyes. This is true because blood is that substance which carries life-sustaining nutrients throughout the human body. Leviticus 17:11 said, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”

Paul emphasized the blood for a reason. Gnostic teachers held to a belief now known as “docetism.” The doctrine maintained that Christ didn’t have a real physical body. It asserted that Christ appeared as a mere phantom or celestial substance on the Earth. Paul held up the real physical body and blood of Christ as the means of redemption. If Christ didn’t assume real flesh, we would have no hope of salvation for our real flesh.

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<sup>22</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 461.