



Supreme In Providence

Colossians 1:15-20

David Sunday December 8, 2019

Lord Jesus Christ, You are lovely. Christ, You are very lovely. Christ, You are most lovely. You are always lovely. You are altogether lovely. My great Redeemer, I don't have a thousand tongues to sing Your praise today, but I pray that You, my God and King, would unloose the one tongue I have to give praise to You through Your Word, to do expository exaltation today. As Your Word is open before us, may we worship You in it and may You use the teaching and preaching of Your Word to equip us, Your people, to spread the honors of Your name through all the earth abroad. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Please open your Bibles to Colossians 1. We're taking a deep dive during this Advent season into verses 15 through 20. We're just going to focus on these wonderful verses all the way up to the Sunday before Christmas. I want to tell of the matchless worth of Jesus Christ, His pre-eminent splendor, His supreme majesty and His incomparable glory, because this season every one of us is going to spend time with someone who has no idea what's so great about Jesus. In fact, we're going to meet a lot of people who aren't even thinking about Jesus.

Even though His name is mentioned in so many of the songs of this season, we live in a world that is determined to live as if we can get along fine without Him. But the Holy Spirit, Who is always at work, is stirring in hearts. He's always working to shine the spotlight on Christ and working in someone you know today. It might be someone you'll sit around a dinner table with at Christmastime. It might be a neighbor, a friend, someone at school, a coworker.

Here's the catch. No one is ever going to ask you a question like "What's so great about Jesus?" unless they can see that Jesus is great to you, that Jesus is great in you and through you. No one ever asks me, "What's so great about NASCAR?" because I've never once given a hint to anyone that I'm interested in NASCAR. But if they ask my brother Eric, it's clear that he does like NASCAR racing. If you want people to know that Christ is great, you need to ask God to make your life a living advertisement of Christ's supremacy. They've got to see that Jesus Christ has first place in your life before they're ever going to be curious why He should become great in their lives.

And that's why God gave us Colossians. God gave us this letter to Christians who were looking for something more than Christ. In the book of Colossians, God the Father is opening up the windows of heaven and giving us a glimpse of the glory He sees in His Son. He's telling us, "When I gave you Jesus, I gave you all I could possibly give. What I have done for you in Christ, My Son, exhausts all I could ever do for you." When you have Christ, you have all you need. There's nothing better, there's nothing more—Christ is enough.

He's telling us what's so great about Jesus so you and I will never want to move away from Him; so we will always aim to help everyone in our lives to take the next step toward Christ. So see and savor the breathtaking glory of your Savior as we read this magnificent passage. Worship Him as you hear His glories extolled, beginning with Colossians 1:15:

*¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Praise God for His living Word.

What's so great about Jesus? Let's unpack four phrases in verses 15 through 17 that showcase His splendor.

Christ is the image of the invisible God (verse 15a).

The first phrase is at the beginning of verse 15: Christ is the image of the invisible God. Now, in order to grasp this, we need to think about the Trinity. If you take away the Trinity, you're tearing out the heart of the Christian faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is the quintessential Christian doctrine.

What do we mean when we confess the Trinity? What we mean is that God is one essence and three persons. So how many Gods are there? There is only one God. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4)-9. Okay? Then how many persons are God? Three. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

Now, some people reject the doctrine of the Trinity because they think it's contradictory. They say, "If you have one, you have one. If you have three, you have three." And those who

ridicule the Trinity would be right, if Christianity was saying that God is one person and three persons, or if we said He is one divine essence and three divine essences. But that's not what Christianity is saying.

Frank Hamilton wrote a book called Made Man and I like how he simply and clearly defends the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: "Christianity says that God is one essence in three persons which is not contradictory" In other words, there's one divine being about Whom we can say, "He is God." Christianity says that God is one essence in three persons. So this one divine being is tri-personal. Hamilton goes on to say, "It's mysterious, it stretches the bounds of our language and our ability to conceptualize, but it's not contradictory." This is our God.

And in His divine essence, God is invisible. That means more than just He's unseeable. It means He's also unknowable. No one has ever see the Father, no one has ever seen the Holy Spirit and no one saw God the Son either—until the incarnation. That's when God the Son united His eternal divine nature with a human nature. He remained what He always had been—the eternal God—but He became something He was not. He became a man and in doing so, He brought humanity into the Godhead.

Now God the Son and Jesus the man are forever united in one Person Who is at the same time both fully human and fully divine. That's why we sing, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity. Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." God with us. John 1:18 says, "*No one has ever seen God...*" The one and only Son Who is Himself God is at the Father's side. The Father has revealed Him.

Now, after the incarnation, the invisible God has been made visible, the unknowable God has become knowable and the untouchable God has become holdable and huggable. That's amazing! Jesus Christ is the only point at which the invisible, unknowable God can be seen and known. That four-letter word "only" is what really trips people up. Jesus is the only point at which the invisible, unknowable God can be seen and known.

If you want to know Who the true and living God is, you must begin and end with Jesus. You could study all the religions of the world, learning some true and beautiful things, but you'll never learn anything about God that is true apart from Jesus. If you take Jesus out of the picture, you lose God altogether. And you'll never find anything true about God in addition to what He has already revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is not only the best source of knowledge about the living God, He's the only source, the only way, the only truth and the only life Who can make the living God known to us (John 14:6). Richard Bewes put it like this: "There are many roads to Jesus, but there is only one road to God and that is Jesus." Anyone searching for God must find Jesus. Are you searching for

God today? Find Jesus. Hear Jesus. Look at Jesus as He's revealed in God's Word. No one has imaged God like Jesus does.

If you read the beginning of the Bible, you'll see that we human beings were created to be image bearers. We were made in the image of God to reflect His glory, to representing His reign and rule in the world. But all the history of humanity proves the fact that we are flawed image bearers.

There's a wonderful book on Colossians in which Richard Chinn reflects about how much we care about our image. To illustrate how obsessed we can be with how other people view us, he told of how in 1954, an artist named Graham Sutherland was commissioned to paint a portrait of Winston Churchill for his 80th birthday. Twice serving as Britain's greatest prime minister of the 20th century, Churchill wanted this portrait to portray him in regal splendor, showing the gravity and solemnity of his great lion of Britain. But when the portrait was unveiled, it showed him slumped over in a single wooden chair with a strange scowl on his face, surrounded by bleak and wintery tones. Churchill despised it! He said, "This makes me look like a down and out drunk who has been picked out of the gutter in the Strand River." But somewhat amusingly, his wife Clementine said, "The portrait was really quite alarmingly like him." Yet in the end, they never hung it in the Houses of Parliament, then after he died, Mrs. Churchill had it burned.

We're a lot like Churchill. We want people to see a glorious image of us. We care about what people say behind our backs. We try to project this image on social media that puts us in the best possible light. We fight all the way to church, then we experience a miracle in the parking lot. All of a sudden we look like the holiest family in the Fox Valley. But there's always a gap between the way we wish to be seen and the way we really are. We all have sinned and we always fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We're His image bearers, but we are flawed and fallen.

In comes the incarnate Christ, truly God made truly man—the perfect image of the invisible God. Every other human being has dismally failed. Israel as a nation has dismally failed. But Jesus? Jesus represents the Father so perfectly when Philip said, "Show us the Father" Jesus could say, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*" (John 14:9). He's everything God ever was forever; He's everything humanity was created to be.

Michael Reeves says, "You look at Him and you have to say, 'Here is a Man truly alive, unwithered in any way...'" He's not crouching down. He doesn't have a scowl on His face. He's "unwithered in any way, far more vital and vigorous, far more full and complete, far more human than any other." He is the Lord of eternity Who stooped so tenderly in His incarnation that He can now lift our humanity up to the heights of God's throne. Praise Him! Is He great? Yes, He's great. He's the image of the invisible God.

Christ is the Firstborn over all creation (verses 15b-16).

Look at the second part of Colossians 1:15. It's absolutely vital to understand what this phrase means. Someone might come knocking on your door, using this phrase to diminish the glory of Jesus Christ. They're going to tell you, "See, He was born. That means He's not eternal." How are you going to answer that? Are you going to be thrown off by that?

Well, the best thing to do when someone like this shows you a verse from Scripture is what? Keep on reading. Here's a great principle: "A text without a context is a con." Just keep reading. In the very next verse you'll see that "firstborn" cannot possibly mean that Christ was a created being. It's impossible, because—as Blake proclaimed last week—the Son is Himself the Creator of all things.

Look at verse 16. Everything was created by Him, through Him and for Him. Just pay attention to those prepositions: by Him, through Him and for Him. The emphasis is on "all things." All the things Blake showed us last week and whatever there is in all the universe exists—why? Because of Jesus Christ. Everything that has a beginning began in Him, so He Himself must be the One Who is without beginning. If everything that exists was created through Him, then He cannot Himself be created. Christ is the uncreated Creator of all things.

You might be saying to yourself, "I thought God the Father created all things." Well, yes, He did. But God the Father created all things by His Son, through His Son and for His Son. If you're going to build a house, you need a lot of people involved, right? You need an architect who will draw up the plans. You need a builder who can put it all together. Then you go live in the house and you need to maintain it.

But Christ is all of that in God's creation. He's the Architect, He's the Artisan, He's the Builder, He's the Owner and He's the Occupier of it all. And as we're soon going to see, the Manager and Sustainer and Conserver of it all. It was all made by Him, through Him and—praise God for this—for Him. Think about what that means. All things were made for Christ. That means creation itself is the overflow of the Father's love for His Son. What does God the Father call His Son in Colossians 1:13? He's "the beloved." Christ is the Son the Father loves.

So when you look at the Grand Tetons, stand on the shore of Lake Michigan, see a forest covered in fresh white snow or look at a brand-new baby, what are looking at? You are looking at the overflow of the Father's love for His Son. It's all for God's Son. All creation is reflecting the love the Father has for His Son. Christ the Son is the reason, the goal and the end of all things.

So "firstborn" cannot mean that He's a created one. The firstborn instead is the heir. In the ancient world, the law of primogenitor meant that the firstborn son got all the wealth of the father,

all the status, all the standing and all the power, which meant the firstborn was equal with the father. What this verse is saying is that to Jesus Christ belongs all the Kingdom, all the power, all the glory forever, just as it does to the Father, with the Spirit. Christ is the rightful Heir of all things.

Look at verse 16 again, where it says, *“By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities...”* This is saying is that there is no higher throne, no greater power, no ruler on earth and no ruler in the spiritual realm above or below that can threaten or thwart the reign of King Jesus. All the powers that be only have their power on loan from Him. They cannot manipulate Christ. They cannot add anything to Christ. They’re all subject to Christ, accountable to Christ and will all be judged by Christ.

Remember what He said to Pontius Pilate when Pilate said, “I have authority to put You to death.” Jesus said, “You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). This means that for those of us who belong to Christ, there’s no earthly ruler; there’s no spiritual authority in heaven or on earth or under the earth that can separate us from His love (Romans 8:37-39). There’s no ruler or authority that has any treasure they can give us that we haven’t already received in Christ. And there’s no ruler or authority who has any terror to torment us if we’re in Christ, Who is the One by Whom all dominions, all rulers and all authorities get their power.

The Firstborn is the Heir of all things; the Firstborn is the King of all kings. The word Paul uses is the same word the Greek version of the Old Testament uses in Psalm 89:27, when it says this about King David, the anointed one: *“I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”* Friends, Firstborn is talking about rank and inheritance rights, not in any way diminishing Christ’s supremacy. In fact, it’s exalting His supremacy. It’s saying He’s the King of all kings. He’s the One Who towers over everyone and everything. He is peerless. He has no competition. He has no rivals. John Piper marvels at this and says:

Everything exists to display the greatness of Christ. Nothing—nothing!—in the universe exists for its own sake. Everything from the bottom of the ocean to the top of the mountains, from the smallest particle to the biggest star, from the most tedious school subject to the most fascinating science, from the ugliest cockroaches to the most beautiful human, from the greatest saint to the most wicked genocidal dictator—everything that exists, exists to make the greatness of Christ more fully known—including you, and the person you have the hardest time liking.

I wonder—does that make you glad? Does it make you happy to know “I exist to make the greatness of Christ known. That’s why I was made. I was made for Him”?

Now, before we move on to the last two phrases, I usually stay away from sports illustrations for a number of good reasons. But since Blake seemed to make a not-so-subtle jab at Wisconsin’s favorite football team last week, let me remind you who Brian Urlacher said was the best football player who ever lived. Brett Favre. Urlacher said, “He’s number one. I consider Brett Favre the best.” When Favre announced he was going to retire from the Green Bay Packers back in March 2008, he wept openly at the thought of leaving the NFL, which he later rejoined in teams much less illustrious. What he said was revealing.

If I felt like coming back—and Deanna and I talked about this—the only way for me to be successful would be to win a Super Bowl. To go to a Super Bowl and lose would be worse than anything else. Anything less than a Super Bowl win would be unsuccessful—and honestly, the odds of winning there are tough. Those are big shoes for me to fill and I guess it was a challenge I wasn’t up for.

Here’s the point. There will never be a time when Jesus Christ worries about winning. There will never be a challenge He isn’t up for, because there will never be anyone in all the universe who can even begin to compete with Jesus, the Christ. He is the Heir of all things. He is the King of all kings, because He is the Firstborn over all creation.

Christ is before all things (verse 17a).

Then Colossians 1:17 summarizes everything that verses 15 and 16 have been asserting about Christ. Look at the first phrase: “*And [Christ] is before all things...*” Before all things means there was never a time at which the eternal God the Son, the eternal Christ, did not exist. He is the eternally pre-existent Word of the Father spoken of in John 1 and 2, where it says, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” He was with God in the beginning, so there’s nothing before Him—and there’s nothing above Him. He’s above all earthly powers, as we just talked about.

Furthermore, there’s nothing beyond Him. So you can never find a time before which Christ existed; you can never find a throne or a power above Christ and you will never reach a place in this universe or a perspective in your intellect that will take you beyond Christ, His presence or His wisdom. If He is before all, over all and beyond all there is to know and experience in this universe, then can you see how vital it is that you place Jesus Christ at the beginning, at the end and at the center of all your thinking and living?

I mean, if you don't know Christ and have Christ as the pre-eminent One over you—supreme over how you think and how you feel and what you do—if you don't give Him first place in your thoughts and actions, you are ignoring the One Who holds the whole universe together. You are ignoring the One Who is before all things, the One Who is above all things and the One Who is beyond all things.

Christ is the One in Whom all things hold together (verse 17b).

This is the last phrase I want us to consider today at the end of verse 17: Christ is the One in Whom “...*all things hold together.*” He existed before anything else came into being, He created it all and this last phrase is telling us He sustains it all. He didn't create it and then skip town. He is the power that conserves and sustains all that He has created and in His kind providence, He is administrating the universe in such a way that nothing in all creation will be able to separate His people from His love. Everything in all creation is working together for our God and for His glory. He is the One in Whom all things hold together.

Look at what Sam Storms says. “Jesus Christ is the cohesive power that keeps all things intact... He's the ‘divine glue’ that holds it all in place. This world is a cosmos rather than a chaos because of the continuous exertion of divine power from the risen Christ!”

R.C. Sproul illustrated this by taking his glasses off, letting go of them, then when those glasses dropped to the floor, he would look at the class and ask, “What made my glasses fall?” If anyone said gravity, he'd say, “You're a pagan! Jesus Christ is the One Who sustains gravity. He's the One in Whom all things hold together.”

So we talk about the laws of nature, but that can be misleading. Nature doesn't have some internal system of self-government, as if nature rules itself. In Christ all things hold together. That means He holds together gravity, magnetism, our body's metabolism, every breath we take. “It's Your breath in our lungs,” we sing. He holds every step we take. He sustains the light and heat around us.

Christ is the One Who holds together the 400 million tons of hydrogen that are being converted into helium every second in the heart of the sun, so that you and I don't freeze to death. He's holding it together. We're not governed by abstract laws of nature. What do we sing? “Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature, O, Thou of God and man the son; Thee will I honor, Thee will I cherish, Thou my soul's glory, joy and crown.” He's the Ruler of it all.

So what does this mean for how we should think and how we should live? First, how we think. Athanasius described it like this: “The only system of thought into which Jesus will fit is the one in which He is the starting point.” In other words, you can't just squeeze Jesus into your

worldview. You can't make Him just one little part of something bigger. Jesus Christ is not just an important person for you to consider. He's not just one part of truth among lots of other truths. No, there is no bigger truth that can validate Jesus. Jesus is the Validator of all that is true and He is the Repudiator of all that is false. Paul Blackham says it brilliantly:

Jesus makes sense of everything else. It's not that other things make sense of Him. He makes sense of everything else. He is the answer and everything else is the question. He made the stage. And with His Father, He is the star of the show. And everything that exists finds its destiny and meaning only when it is part of the supporting cast.

Friends, that means you're only going to find your destiny and meaning when you realize, "I'm part of the supporting cast. I'm here to magnify the greatness of the One Who created it all, the One Who redeemed me by His blood. It's all for Him." That then affects how we live. We are entirely dependent on Him. He's the One Who's holding us together.

He's the One Who's giving you your next breath. He's the One Who's sustaining you when you go out on Randall Road. He's the One Who's providing your daily bread and giving you the ability to chew, swallow, digest and find nourishment from it. He's the One Who's keeping your body from being invaded by all kinds of parasites and plagues and things that could destroy you in just a few days—or even a few hours. We're entirely dependent on Him. He's the One Who's holding it all together. He's got the whole world in His hands—and He's got you and me, Baby, in His hands. You can trust Him to hold you together.

How comforting this must have been for the people of Colossae who first read this letter. They lived in the Lycus Valley, which was the center of many earthquakes in what is now modern Turkey. We know that around the year 60 or 61, much of the city of Colossae was destroyed and numerous lives were lost in a major, devastating earthquake. How comforting it must have been to the believers in Colossae to know that if the earth was shaking, it was not because somehow Jesus had lost His grip on their world or their lives.

And how comforting it should be for us to know that our bodies, minds, homes, families, past and our future are being held together by the One Who created us, Who redeemed us, Who came down from heaven to save us. If He can hold the sun and stars together and keep them in their orbit, He can hold you together. "It's His breath in your lungs." Do you ever wonder, "How am I going to get from here to where He is?" Well, when He determines that He's just given you your final breath, He knows exactly how to bring the essence of who you are into the presence of His majestic glory. He will do that for all who trust in Him. You can trust Him to prepare a place for you in His Father's house (John 14:1-4). I don't know the way there. I can't find it on my own.

I sometimes boast in thinking that I can drive anywhere in the United States without a map. But, I can't drive to heaven. I can't get to where Christ is. I can't find my way—but He is the way (John 14:6).

I trust that after He's given me my final breath and my body is laid in the ground to rest, that He will know how to hold the cells and atoms of my buried body—even if it decomposes in the grave for 2,000 years—in His care until He transforms my mortal body into the likeness of His resurrection body. I know He can do that, because all things are from Him, through Him and for Him.

So do you see how great Jesus is? Can you see it? Can you rejoice in it? Do you realize how indebted you are to Him? Do you know how foolish it would be to try to live your life independently from Jesus? If you live and move and have your being in Jesus Christ, if everything you are and everything you have and everything you enjoy in this world was created by Him and through Him and for Him, and if He is the One Who is holding it all together right now to sustain you, to refresh you constantly, to gladden your heart—if He is the One Who does all that, how can you resist Him?

You cannot live without Him. You cannot know that which is truly life apart from Him Who is life itself. And if you are living right now as if you can, God's calling you through His Word to stop pretending and get in sync with reality. Jesus is reality. A life lived out of sync with Jesus is a life that is denying the reality that's at the center of all things. It's the ultimate insanity to live your life ignoring the One Who gave it to you. You know, deep within, that you're not in control of your life. That's what makes you anxious. That's why you get angry. That's why there's this primal fear that rises up within you that something could happen that exposes you and your inability to hold it all together.

But if you know and trust Jesus, if you love Jesus, you can be sure that you're in sync with the One Who's keeping it all together. And you can sing, "No guilt in life, no fear in death—this is the power of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny." He's the One I want commanding my destiny. He can do that for you.

You might be wondering right now, "How?" God's inviting you into the life of Christ through His Word today. God's summoning you. He's summoning you into reality, into life, into joy. He's inviting you to all that. All you need to say is, "Yes, Lord. Yes. I believe. I receive the Son You sent from heaven to be my Savior." His life will give you new life. You'll be born again and you'll live forever in the presence of His glory.

Patrick, would you come and pray for us?

Patrick Havens: Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for revealing the Father to us. He is invisible, but that doesn't mean He does not exist. It means we can't see Him or know Him. But Jesus, You revealed to us the Father and through You, we understand now far better than ever what the trees or stars could ever reveal. We know God's name. We know what He's like. Thank You, Jesus.

You didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped, but You gave Yourself, You emptied Yourself, and You became a Servant, even to the point of death on a cross. Jesus, thank You. You've come to us. You've descended before us, and You took on flesh so we might know You and understand Who God is. Thank You.

Lord, we're born in Adam. We all have a rebellious nature, turning away to seek other gods. We confess before You our idolatry, our temptation to worship other things in this life. But Jesus, You have come to remind us Who You are and the reality of this world. By faith in You, we are born again. We are made new and are now in Christ. Every one of us who believes in the Lord Jesus is a new creature.

Yet, Lord, we struggle. We can leave today thinking more about where we live, missing out on worshiping and delighting in You, not seeing that it's all about You, for You and by You. Thank You that You hold us together so we don't fall apart. I pray that You would continue to remind us that You are holding us together. And if anyone doesn't know You, Lord Jesus, if they're still a man or woman of dust, may they seek You. You have a smiling face toward us, welcoming all who come.

Shape us today and give us delight in You. Draw us near. Thank You that Your blessing has come as far as the curse is found. We celebrate Advent because we know You're coming again. Lord Jesus, may we be found faithful to You, delighting in You, believing in You, until You come again. Help us today. We all needed this message to remind us of these great and glorious truths. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

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