**Colossians 1:15-23**

**Theme:** The glorious depths of Christ’s supremacy in creation, redemption, and in blood-bought believers

**Purpose then:** Laying out, and calling to hold to, right belief about Christ in the face of false teaching

**Call now:** To see Christ’s nature as supreme, resulting in worship and holy living in believers

**Introduction**

Good morning! My name’s Nathanael, I’m a member of the church here. It’s a privilege to be preaching here this morning – a privilege made even greater by this incredible passage of scripture which was just read for us, and which we’ll be looking at this morning. That’s Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 to 23.

As a church we began a series through the letter to the Colossians just 2 weeks ago. Paul, the author, while under house arrest in Rome for preaching the good news about Jesus, was visited by a friend and fellow believer called Epaphras. And Epaphras brought news from the church of Colossae – a town in modern-day Turkey. Some of the news was encouraging, as Epaphras told Paul about the Colossian church’s “faith in Christ Jesus, and love for all the believers”.

But he also brought some disturbing news. Because questions had begun to come up within the church. Doubts about the fact that they themselves had never seen Jesus, or even heard the news about him from someone who had seen Jesus. No, they’d heard it from someone, possibly Epaphras himself, who themselves had heard it from Paul or one of the other apostles.

Because of the second-hand nature of the way they had heard the good news about Jesus, some of the believers were questioning whether it hadn’t been distorted somewhere along the line. Whether or not certain parts had been left out, or even if things had been changed. Some had begun to say that maybe Jesus Christ was not enough; that maybe it was necessary to go through additional processes, to receive extra, mystical knowledge. It was this news of a church at risk of losing the hope there is in Christ alone which prompted Paul, out of his deep concern for the spiritual welfare and personal joy of the church, to write this letter.

In future weeks as we press on in this letter we’ll have the chance to see how many of the same challenges which the earliest Christians faced are still active and dangerous today. But in opening the letter, in the verses we are looking at now, Paul’s focus is not yet on speaking against the false ideas which had begun to find their way in. Instead, the letter begins on front foot – laying out the truth and affirming what the believers heard from the beginning. He lays out the truth about Jesus Christ and his sole position as author and perfector of our faith.

In this passage our focus is drawn to the *real* Jesus. We are presented with what forms right belief is. And more than just presenting the truths to our minds (although that is a valuable endeabour) we are presented with overflowing poetry pushing these truths into our stony hearts. This is not truth for truth’s sake. This is given so that we might live lives which enjoy God and glorify him forever. Alongside the functional role of establishing the truth, these words are here to direct us to right worship – because that is the ultimate purpose of all of creation and that is where we find our deepest joy. This passage we’re looking at may in fact have been a song of worship in the early church. The high and expansive words and extended exploration of the depths of our God have led to much debate and some misunderstanding and misapplication of these verses. Yet even if the words themselves do not derive from worship, the truths when rightly understood, speaking to our hearts through poetry, must surely lead to worship.

It is so exciting to be unpacking them together this morning.

**Incarnated Image**

*Christ is the image of God*

Colossians chapter 1, verse 15 – “the Son is the image of the invisible God”. The Son, Jesus Christ, the second person of the trinity, who became the man, is the visible image of the invisible God.

That God is invisible is not a controversial statement. It’s the clear teaching throughout the bible, and evident from our own experience. But God’s invisibility goes beyond just being able to see him in front of us. In the 10 commandments, the second commandment instructs God’s people “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them”. Whether it be a powerful and beautiful golden calf, a towering statue of a king in his raiment, or any other image formed by human hands – God’s people were not to bow down to it. This is because God alone is worthy of praise, and no object made by human hands – even if it tries to represent God – can come close to fully or faithfully representing God. God’s invisibility goes beyond Him not having a physical form, it means He cannot be accurately represented by anything which is made by human hands.

Well in looking for images, we can do better. Genesis 1 verse 27 says that all of humanity, and each individual person, is made “in the image of God”. There, that is to say that we are made with personhood, with mind and soul, with a role to play in the created order. But humanity does not perfectly, fully, represent the image of the invisible God. There are certain attributes of God which are beyond representation in a created thing and beyond even human comprehension. There are certain attributes of God which cannot be communicated by and to created beings, they are “incommunicable” attributes. Attributes like eternality, omniscience (all knowing), and immutability (unchanging). These attributes are not imaged by people. And perhaps most importantly we do not represent God’s image morally. And nothing in this world, affected by sin as it is, can represent his moral righteousness. God is holy and we are not.

When I was growing up and had shorter hair, people would regularly tell me that I was the spitting image of my Dad. That many of the attributes of my physical father were seen in me. And as I got older if I picked up the phone people would momentarily think they were speaking to my Dad. But very soon they would realise that I had no idea what they were talking about. That I could not answer their questions, that I could not represent him in more than surface attributes. That though some of his attributes could be seen in me, there was no question that I was not him.

The bold claim here in this passage of Colossians though, is that Jesus Christ *is* the full image, the full representation, the full manifestation of the invisible God. That there was one who has communicated God to us, to people, in the most perfect and full way, one who was not just made in the image of God – but was himself the visible image of the invisible God. In John chapter 1, which parallels what we’re looking at here, talking about the Son as the “word”, its “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning”. Verse 18 of that same chapter then says “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

From eternity past, Jesus Christ was himself God, and in becoming man made the Father known to us. Perhaps sometimes we can think “if only I could see God – if only I could experience his presence, his power. If only I could know him”. If you want to know what God is like, just look to Jesus. If you want to know God’s character, God’s attributes, God’s very essence, look to Jesus as He is revealed to us throughout the pages of scripture as the old testament looks forward to Him and the New testament experiences him. If you want to know the Father, you must come to the Son.

The verses in the passage we’re looking at now, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are all there to help us to delve into the person Jesus as He makes known to us God. And they make sure we know a Jesus who is ruler, in control; who is supremely powerful and supreme good in all things.

**Christ’s creation**

*Firstborn*

A Jesus who is, verse 15 continues, “the *firstborn* over all creation”. Now we’ve already seen from John chapter 1 that the Son was with God in the beginning, that the Son is himself God, so the fact is that “firstborn” here cannot mean that he was the first thing, the first person to be born. First in order would be, what, Adam and Eve’s oldest son Cain? No, firstborn here is not in time, but in rank. It is a title reflecting the authority of the oldest child within the kingdom. The Son is the firstborn, the heir, the primary inheritor. The way in the ancient world and throughout most of history the firstborn child is the heir-apparent to everything the parent owns – the estate, even the kingdom – and so speaks with the authority of the head of the family. In some times and places the title of firstborn would not be given to a child, but to a nephew, niece, or even another individual seen as worth to rule in the future.

This word is used in a similar way in Exodus 4:22 as God says “Israel is my firstborn”. Israel was not the first nation in order, but was the set apart people of God, due to inherit the land and blessings, and to bless the land and the people around. The title of firstborn for Jesus in our passage indicates that Jesus Christ is the heir who will inherit all of creation and who rules over it by the authority of his name and blesses it in that.

Jesus is not simply a man who managed to gain a following. Nor is Jesus one in a series of prophets, teachers, mystics, and philosophers. Nor is he even one spiritual being amongst many, one god competing with all the others. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, God only God; and He is the lord and heir over all creation.

*Is your God big enough?*

We’ve reached the end of verse 1, and the question already is: is your picture of Jesus big enough? Does your mental conception of Him even approach an accurate idea of Jesus? Because from now on it only gets bigger, deeper, wider, richer.

As we run through verses 16 and 17 we begin to see this. We’ve already seen that Jesus Christ is *over* all things. Verse 16 opens by saying “for ***in*** him all things were created”. Jesus is ***over*** all things, and all things were created ***in*** him. Whether “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rules or authorities”. Jesus Christ is over all, all things have been created in him, and also (as we continue in verse 16) “all things have been created ***through*** him and ***for*** him”. “He is ***before*** all things, and in him all things ***hold together***”.

Let me ask again: do you have a big enough idea of Jesus Christ? Does your idea of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, include all things being under Him, created in Him, created through Him, created for Him; all things following him, and all things held together by Him? Because that is what these verses are telling us! Everything in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, is under Christ, created in Christ, created though Christ, created for Christ, following Christ, and held together by Christ Jesus, the Son. Wow.

We can explore some of the relations between Christ and creation more specifically.

*All things in Him and through Him*

All things were created *in* Him and *through* Him. In case we didn’t get it, Paul then lists what that covers: “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rules or authorities; all things are created through Him”. If you can think of something other than God himself, he created it.

Some groups, like Jehovah Witnesses, have used the “firstborn” language of verse 15 to say that Jesus Christ is not himself God, but was the first thing that God created. That Christ is prominent, but not preeminent. We’ve already seen how this is not the intended meaning of ‘firstborn’ here. But to say the Jesus is created also makes no sense with the rest of this passage. It says that *all things* were made in Jesus and through Jesus. All things on Earth, and even all things in heaven above. So then if Jesus is himself created, how can all things be created through him? Can a pot mould itself? Did you form yourself in your mother’s womb? No, Jesus is the creator of *all* things, and so cannot himself be created. This same logic is in John chapter 1, which we referenced earlier. JWs might suggest that John 1:1 is not “the word was God” but should be “the word was *a* God”, but they must still deal with John 1 verse 3 which says “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” No, it is a clear misuse of the text and an insult to God to say that Jesus Christ is a created being. Jesus Chris was eternally begotten not made, for in Him and through Him *all* things were made.

All “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, *whether thrones or powers or rules or authorities”.* We today, perhaps feel like we live in times of political turbulence for many thrones and governments and powers in our country and around the world. But isn’t it amazing that Paul – 2000 years ago – picks out earthly powers as well. Amongst all things he zooms in on all thrones, powers, rulers and authorities – that is all earthly powers – as having been created in Christ. Remember Paul was in a roman prison at the height of the roman empire, and he declares that in Christ these authorities were established, and in Christ they serve their purpose. And as soon as they no longer server their purpose, in Christ they will be disestablished. What confidence there is for us in the hope of a perfect king so much more powerful than anything we can imagine.

*All things created for Him*

If you have time to think and reflect on these amazing truths, one question which might come to mind is…why? Why did the glorious Son, image of the invisible God, over all creation, in whom and through whom all things were made; why *did* he create all things? If Christ is as great as He must be for this to be true, what moved Him to call this world into existence?

Well, our passage briefly mentions it. “…in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through and *for* Him”. All things have been created ***for*** Him. God instigated creation – called stars into existence, filled the seas, the lands, and the air with creatures, breathed life into the lungs of human kind: ***for the Son***. For His own sake. For Himself. All things have been created through Him and for Him.

Once we have that in mind as the future goal of creation, we can begin to see the theme of creation being for God throughout the bible. Psalm 19 verse 1 “the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands”. Isaiah 43 verse 7 “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” In Exodus 14 verse 17 God says “I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after [the Israelites]. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army”. In John 9 verse 3 Jesus says of a man born blind “’Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” The creation and the unravelling of history are for the Son – for His glory.

Christ bestows all the benefits of grace for His own name’s sake: redemption, forgiveness, sanctification. God gives His glory to no other. The final goal is that all kingdoms will be subjected to Him and every creature will yield to Him. Even today He is given glory by all His people – Psalm 115 opens with God’s people crying “not to us, Lord not to us, but to your name be the glory”. Someday this will be brought to it fullness, and all creation will join the song in Revelation 4 “you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power”. He is the first and the last, the alpha and the omega. Of Him, through Him, and to Him are all things.

The glory of God is the final goal of God’s works. Just as a good father in his family and a ruler in his kingdom to do his role well must seek and demand the honour due to him in that capacity, so it is with the Lord our God. All of creation is for the Son, because God is for God.

*All things hold together*

And because of this, we are also told, in v17, that Christ is “before all things, and in Him all things hold together”. Why do you think it is, that the world is a cosmos, and not a chaos? Why do you think it is that the Earth is perfectly positioned in the solar system, so that we do not freeze and do not boil? Why do you think it is that each morning the sun rises in the east and each evening it sets in the west? Why do you think it is that we have seasons and a harvest each year in their place? Why do you think it is that the flowers keep budding and blooming? That water continues to act like water? That grass continues to act like grass – with all its distinctive characteristics. That the air around us is allowing my voice to travel to your ears? Why do you think it is that you continue to breath each moment? One answer: Jesus is holding all things together. And he is doing it for His name’s sake.

And, as an aside, we can know what is true for the universe, is true of your life, and true of your family, and true of your ministry, and true of all your security. The only reason we are here today looking at one another is because Jesus is holding all things together. In your work and at home tomorrow, with friends and alone, Jesus Christ is holding all things together; for His name’s sake.

*Summary of bigness*

Jesus Christ is the revelation of God to humanity, the one who is supreme in all things. All things are under Him, were created in Him, through Him, for Him, follow Him, and are held together in Him. We can look to all of creation to find metaphors for the glory of the Son, yet all they can do is point to something even bigger. “How great is our God”.

**Evil Enemies**

And that is the God from whom all of us at one time were alienated. This is the God from whom billions of people around the world, and some possibly in this room are still alienated. Even some who would call themselves Christians.

Verse 21: “once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour”. All of us, without exception, were at one time alienated from God. Alienated – isolated, cut off from God – because we were enemies in our minds and our evil behaviour.

Perhaps you object to the accusation that you are an ‘enemy to Jesus Christ in your mind’? Perhaps when you think about your attitude to God now, or before you were a believer, not as an enemy, but as a neighbour who you rarely speak to. Or perhaps the receptionist at work who you say good morning but don’t see for the rest of the day.

Of course there are some who actively oppose God. Either spreading false religions and other gods, or by militantly arguing that there is no God – that the God of the bible is in fact the evil one of the narrative of the bible. If that is you, then please consider again what kind of God you set yourself up against. The God we have been talking about so far.

But most of us are not or never were like that, would never go close to being “enemies to Jesus Christ in our minds”. But consider for a moment two things about all people: first, that it is essentially universally accepted that there is a right and wrong, a way people ought to behave, should behave; there is some kind of morality. It’s why we have a courts to uphold laws in the country, it’s demonstrated in rules established by parents at home raising their children and in the by-laws of the local tennis club. Everywhere and in all times; from the earliest tribes to today, it is accepted that there is a right and wrong way to act.

And consider second, that people don’t. That in all times and in all places people do not obey the laws of right and wrong accepted everywhere. Why should that be? Why should it be that humans everywhere can agree that there is a way people ought to behave, and yet never do?! Because stones always obey the law of gravity, and trees behave exactly as trees should under their condition – but human beings never, universally, behave in the way they ought to. This is evident as we look at others, and even if you say one person’s right and wrong is different to another’s, we do not even live up to our own standards. It is simply a fact that we know there is a way people ought to live, in the same way as there is a law of gravity. It cannot be explained away.

The question then comes, where does this rule come from then? If there were no humans, there would be no law of right and wrong. Yet there is, and it is not made up by us or we would follow it. What lies behind this law of how people ought to act?

The question answer comes loud and clear. There is a right and wrong, written our hearts, by a holy, perfect, set apart creator – the Son we have been talking about so far. We can observe it because this God has broken in to our world, in the man Jesus Christ, and in His revealed word. This law of right and wrong is evidence in our very hearts of a pure God. A righteous God. A good God. A Holy God.

But each of us must acknowledge that we often act against the law which is written on our hearts. Our conscience tells us this. And the fact is that a God who is wholly and purely good cannot stand the presence of Sin. Our God, the creator and sustainer of all things; His most magnificent characteristic is that he is holy. It is the one characteristic that the bible emphasises three times whenever it comes up: “holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty”. He is holy, and we are not. And that is why we are alienated from Him. Because holiness has nothing to do with un-holiness. Holiness cannot stand the presence of the profane, in the face of holiness all wrongdoing is revealed to be evil. Holiness is directly and completely at war with un-holiness. It is true that even in our denial of our state before God we are enemies to Him in our minds and because of our behaviour. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

**Humanity’s Hope**

But there is good news. Good, good news for all people. Though “once you were alienated from God … now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”

Oh good, good news! The gospel of Jesus Christ’s reconciling work on the cross. That there should be a way for God’s enemies, those isolated and cut off in their minds and deeds, to be reconciled to the God of the universe.

This is worked through “Christ’s physical body” we’re told. The body of the Son. The physical body of the one who from the beginning of the time was over and in and through all things. Having wondered at the Son already, in His incomprehensible otherness to us in size and magnitude and glory and holiness we are then faced with the mystery that it was the father’s will that the Son should, by the spirit, take on the very nature of a man. Not appearing as an apparition or phantom, not passing by as people cower behind a rock only glimpsing his back; no he should become fully man: fully God and fully man.

This was how the God who is so utterly different to us was made known to us. He is the image of the invisible God. But his mission was to do more than just reveal God to humanity, it was to reconcile man to God. And so even though we did not recognise him when he walked the Earth, even though the Son was rejected, beaten and mocked, even though we were still enemies to him, alienated and cut off, Christ died for us. The living God took on the very nature of a human, so that he who knew no evil, might take the punishment of sin for us.

He took the punishment, but further – see what it says “…he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you ***holy*** in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation”. Christ, the creator, sustainer, supreme ruler and architect of the universe has made a way for those who believe in Him to be holy. One day He, who has all of creation in His power, will present all those who trust in him before the father and they will be holy, without blemish, and free from accusation.

This is the gospel which the Colossian believers heard and believed. This is the gospel which Paul travelled the roman empire proclaiming. This is the gospel which Epaphras and others took further in the first century. This is the gospel which has been passed down from generation to generation, church to church, believer to believer; until it reached you. Wherever you first heard it, maybe even just this morning for the first time. Jesus Christ, the Son, the Holy one, who is himself God, who is beyond our greatest imaginings; became flesh to die for those who were his enemies. For you, who were alienated and cut off from God. That all who believe might be reconciled and one day presented as holy, blameless, free from accusation; to enjoy God and glorify Him forever.

**Awesome Assurance**

I hope this is astonishing to you. I hope that in this passage you’ve began to heighten, and widen, and deepen your conception of Jesus Christ. I hope you’ve been challenged once again by the depth of your condition without Jesus. Enemies to God. And I hope you’ve begun to consider what a wondrous, incomprehensible thing it is that The Son should die to present us one day as holy.

I hope you might even wonder how this can even be true! How can anyone claim that the supreme being in the universe – outside the universe – should want to reconcile anyone who is so actively opposed to all He is. Well, as we approach the end of our time now (or in fact have gone over our time), let’s just draw out three ways we can know this is true for ourselves if we believe.

*Head of the Church*

First, Christ Jesus rose from the dead. Jumping back a little in the passage now, verse 18 says that “he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn form among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy”.

We already discussed that Christ is the firstborn, ruler, heir, over all things. The term ‘firstborn’ comes up again here – this time pointing to Him being the firstborn from among the dead. The ruler and supreme one amongst those who were dead but rise again.

1 Corinthians 15 verse 17 says it bluntly: “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins”. If Christ has not overcome death, then there is no hope that we can ever be reconciled to God; because we are not holy, not without blemish, and certainly not free from accusation. If Christ who is the supreme being over all of creation could not overcome death, then death’s power would be over us all. But He did, and we can have confidence as we look back to that historical event when the tomb was empty, the burial clothes folded, the angel declaring He is risen; and the echo going forth throughout all of history into eternity “He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead; in *everything* he has the supremacy”. We can be assured is the one who is the head of the church that those who believe are reconciled to God because the Son rose from the dead.

*Happy in the Church*

And God was pleased in this. Our second cause for confidence, verse 19, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

This was the father’s pleasure. God’s reconciling of sinner’s to himself was his pleasure. Even while we were actively opposed to him in our very being He longed for us to be reconciled to him and it is his greatest pleasure to have his fullness dwell in the Son; so that through him all things would no longer be alienated, no longer isolated and cut off.

And of course this would be God’s good pleasure, because, as we’ve already seen, all of creation is for the Son and for His glory. And he is most glorified in us when we are glorified in him; and we are glorified in him when we who were enemies are made holy by no action of our own but entirely in him. That his glory should be shown in holy people sinners no more; and all of creation freed from the tyranny of Sin. We can be assured that those who believe are reconciled to God because it was the father’s pleasure for this to be the case.

*Hope in the Church*

And finally, we can have confidence for ourselves if we continue on and press on in the truths of the gospel. If we, verse 23 “continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel”.

For you personally, the call is to cling tightly to the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, dying and rising. But not just to cling, but to dig in. To drill down. To press on. To build foundations – “established and firm”. Maybe at times questioning, at times doubting; but those who are reconciled are those who today and everyday are investing in knowing Christ, knowing his truth, knowing Him for themselves. Press on into Christ: trust him with your heart, declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Worship Him with all you are.

**Conclusion**

Jesus Christ is the revelation of God to humanity, the one who is supreme in all things. All things are under Him, were created in Him, through Him, for Him, follow Him, and are held together in Him. He is supreme in the Church, reconciling to Himself all things: even your cut-off, unholy state. Making you able to press on into Him and enjoy Him for His please and for His name’s sake.

Let’s pray.