

Paul Magnifies Christ in Prison

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Through His work on the cross, Christ is restoring the world and reconciling us to God and to one another.

On September 11, 2001, the world watched in horror as two hijacked Boeing 767s crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and two Boeing 757s were flown into the Pentagon and a field in southwest Pennsylvania. It was the deadliest attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor, some sixty years prior. In time, both towers collapsed along with the hearts of people around the world.

On 9/16, the Sunday following the attack, church attendance spiked. Pews that were usually empty were packed with visitors rushing to religion for answers. Why did God allow this evil to happen? Where was Jesus Christ when the towers fell? What would happen *to me* if I died?



What other hard questions about God have you or others you know asked?



How would you answer some of these questions?

During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul had to address difficult questions in his letter to the church at Colossae as it faced implosion from heretical teachings.

In this session we explore the letter Paul wrote to the church at Colossae when he learned through Epaphras that heretical teachings were running through the church. We will see Paul's letter pointed the church to the person and work of Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ is not merely a theory for theologians to ponder; it's a real-life, real-time reality that heals, restores, and reconciles. As we read Paul's words in this session, we will aim in three directions—upward, downward, and outward. For through the cross, Christ reconciled us to the Father, reconciles all things in Himself, and reconciles us to one another.



Voices from Church History

"I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away."¹

—C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

1. Christ is preeminent in His reconciling all things (Col. 1:15-20).

We don't know exactly what kind of heresy the Colossian church had imported, but it consisted of at least three threads woven together: Greek philosophy (Col. 2:8), pagan practices (2:23; 3:5), and the roots of Gnosticism (2:9)—a heresy that would seduce the church in subsequent centuries and pull at the very fabric of the Christian faith. Paul recognized the danger of this kind of heresy, which prompted him to call on the church to look *upward* to the one true Christ.

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.

To correct the Colossians' misunderstanding of Christ, Paul used what many believe was an early church hymn that expressed Christ's supremacy as Creator. The Son of God was not created; He is the agent of creation itself, having existed "before all things" (v. 17). "By *him* all things were created," "through *him*," and "for *him*" (v. 16). Moreover, "in *him* all things hold together" (v. 17)—Christ did not create everything and walk away leaving creation to fend for itself. He continues to be actively involved in His creation. The Son of God is Creator *and* Sustainer of all.

Remembering that Christ created everything and that He sustains everything—He continues to care for His creation even after the fall—not only informs your understanding of who He is but how you are to live as part of creation. Christ is preeminent over creation, and every single atom of it exists for His glory. Christ is concerned with the world around us. So should we be.



Voices from Church History

"A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end."²

—Handley Moule
(1841-1920)



How should knowing Christ created and sustains the world impact how we live?

Christ, in whom the fullness of divinity dwells (v. 19), is preeminent, or firstborn, over all creation. "Firstborn" is a curious term to use when speaking of eternal God. How can Christ be firstborn if He is Creator? The answer is that this term doesn't mean what it sounds like.

When we read Christ is firstborn, it is hard not to think He was born first. But that is not what it means here. Instead, Christ being firstborn means He is first in rank. He is supreme over all creation. And that makes sense because the Creator is always greater than His creation.

Because Christ is preeminent over all He created, He is also preeminent in the Father's mission of reconciling creation back to Himself. This is why Jesus is not just "firstborn of all creation" (v. 15), but He is also "firstborn from the dead" (v. 18). Jesus is preeminent over creation *and* He is preeminent over the new creation, which was inaugurated with His crucifixion and resurrection.³ Creation came through Christ, and re-creation does too.



In what ways have you wrestled with enjoying God's good gifts in fallen creation?



Why do you think it matters that Christ will reconcile all things?

2. Christ is preeminent in His reconciling us to God (Col. 1:21-23).

Paul began by guiding the Colossians to look *upward* at Christ's work to reconcile all of creation. Now it is time to turn their focus to Christ's work to reconcile people to God, which would lead them to look *downward* to remain grounded in faith.

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Just as Christ is preeminent in His reconciling creation, He is preeminent in His reconciling us to God, which He accomplished through taking on flesh and then laying His life down on our behalf. Because of the blood He shed on the cross, we are no longer alienated, hostile, and evil. That is the old person who has been put to death with Christ on the cross.

In that person's place, we have received new life, new identity, in Christ. And it is this new person who has been declared holy, faultless, and blameless whom Christ presents to the Father. This is the fundamental change of Christ's reconciliation. He has undone sin's curse. He has restored that which was broken. He has made right that which was wrong. He, not us, has accomplished this work of reconciliation. And this is why He receives all the glory of our salvation.



How have you been changed from who you were before Christ?



How is Christ continuing to change you?

Did you catch the little word that begins verse 23: “if”? We are reconciled and will be presented holy, faultless, and blameless *if* we remain grounded in the faith. Is Paul saying reconciliation comes through *our* ability to remain grounded? On the contrary, he is saying our groundedness, our rootedness, is how we know we have been saved. It is evidence in our lives of the reconciliation Christ accomplished on the cross.

In light of the false teaching influencing them, Paul encouraged the Colossians to remain grounded in the “gospel that you *heard*” (v. 23). Remember, the Colossians didn't have the four Gospels of the New Testament that you and I possess. The Gospels most likely were not written until after Paul was executed. The Colossians believed in a Christ they *heard*, not read, about.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

62. Christ as Reconciliation

Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ's death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Paul's letter would have challenged the Colossians to entrench themselves in the gospel they heard. But it also would have encouraged the one who spoke it to them, Epaphras. Paul was basically saying this: Listen to this fellow servant because his message about Christ, his message about reconciliation, is true. At one time, you were alienated from the gospel, but because the "body of flesh" of Christ (His full humanity) died and rose again, God has grafted you into the family. And what is more, even though you "were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (v. 21), Christ makes you as "holy and blameless and above reproach" as He is (v. 22).



What can we do to be better rooted in our faith?

3. Christ is preeminent in His reconciling us to one another (Col. 1:24–2:3).

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

¹ For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Here's Paul's point in this passage: The same Christ who reconciled us to the Father also reconciles us *outwardly* to one another. The cross goes vertically, but it also extends horizontally. Our reconciliation with God is firmly attached to our reconciliation with others. In fact, Jesus even told his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4).

Essentially, Paul was tapping into the same impulse that motivated Jesus to tell His disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).



Voices from Church History

"Paul desires that there should be first of all a spiritual unity 'in love.' If this prime condition was fulfilled, there would be little danger of serious divisions caused by erroneous teachings. The unity of love is the best safeguard against the party spirit and unseemly wrangles over matters of doctrine."⁴

—E. Y. Mullins (1860-1928)



Based on your own observable love toward other Christians, how would the world judge your church?



How does reconciliation, either by seeking forgiveness or extending forgiveness, demonstrate Christ's love to the world?

Paul encouraged the church to be "joined" or "knit" together in love because he knew how hostile churches could be—especially in the restoration of a fallen brother or sister. Paul's not postulating here. He's speaking from personal, pastoral experience. Look at his churches—petri dishes of relational problems! In the Corinthian church, Paul noticed, "There is quarreling among you" (1 Cor. 1:11). To the Galatians, he wrote, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you" (Gal. 1:6). "Mind your own affairs," Paul reprimanded the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:11-12).

Even though Christ has reconciled us to one another, there is still work for us to do. And that work is not easy. It is hard to love others. And it is hard for others to love us. But it is worth the effort. The more Christ's church is joined together as one in love, the more we will know Christ—our greatest treasure—and be able to live for Him giving Him the glory He is due.



What do you think Paul would write about the love within your church?

Conclusion

There are no quick and easy answers when it comes to the problems of evil, suffering, murder, and death. Why does God allow violence, terrorism, and tragic loss of human life? One day, our questions will be answered fully when He “will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces” (Isa. 25:8). But for now, we cling to the cross, the difference between Christianity and all other religious movements.

By the cross, Christians enter into a personal *relationship* with the Man of Nazareth who, being fully God and fully man, suffered *with* us, suffered *for* us, and suffers *through* us as we “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). The beams of the cross point us upward (Christ), downward (grounded in the faith), and outward (loving others). Be careful to keep those three beams together, for if we become deficient in one, the others will fall apart. May we proclaim a *whole* redemption through a *whole* Christ to a world that is not yet *whole*.

CHRIST CONNECTION: In prison, Paul encouraged God's people by proclaiming the magnificence of Christ—His identity as God's Son and His work on the cross to reconcile us to God. Christian growth and maturity does not take place through moving beyond the gospel to other Bible teaching but through continually refocusing our attention on Christ—who is the focus of the Scriptures and the head of the church.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us, as those who have been reconciled to God, to be heralds of reconciliation to the world.

1. What steps can your group take to honor Christ in its use of the world's resources for the sake of the gospel?

2. What regrets and guilt over past sins and mistakes do you need to leave at the cross?

3. How can love for one another and being reconciled to one another in Christ bolster our witness to others of the salvation in Christ?

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