

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
Because of Christ
September 26, 2018
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Welcome to Women's Bible Study at Autumn Ridge. We are delighted that you have joined us. We are in week three of our study on Colossians and we will continue our study of chapter one.

I hope you are enjoying your new binders and are finding them helpful as you prepare each week. But, even if it was a crazy week and you didn't work through as much of the lesson as you wanted, I hope you are able to read through the scripture we are studying each week.

If you are new to Bible Study and don't have a Bible please let us know and we will get one for you. We can also recommend apps for your phone if you prefer an electronic format.

However, most of us do have Bibles, probably several. In fact, when I sat down to work on this lesson, I counted nine Bibles in our Master Bedroom (all mine) and thirteen in my husband's home office. That is 22 Bibles in two rooms, owned by two people.

I was reminded this summer by my daughter Ashley of the privilege of having a copy of the Bible in our own language, literally within arm's reach all the time. But I will let her tell the story. (Video) It is very convicting isn't it?

Historical Context

Please open your Bibles to Colossians Chapter 1, we will be reading beginning in verse 15.

You will recall from the past two lessons that Paul is the author of the Book. Paul did his work of church planting a few decades after Jesus lived on the earth. Paul didn't know him in his lifetime, but only met him through a supernatural encounter after Jesus rose from the dead. Paul is founding churches in the area around the Mediterranean Sea (Map from Binder, Map of Modern Day).

He did not found the Colossian church, nor did he actually visit it, but he is writing to the Christians there to help them understand what it means to be a Christian in a place called Colossae. From this passage we are going to learn what it means to live as a Christian in our world.

A clear grasp of the person and work of Jesus will help us stand firm as we navigate challenges to our faith.

Cultural Context

This book was written around 60 A.D. which was the time of the Roman Empire. The Empire was huge, at its largest it stretched from Spain to Arabia and from North Africa to Britain. (Map) It was the world super power. Leaders like Caesar and Claudius believed the Romans had the right to conquer neighboring countries and with Rome's Army few could resist.

Centuries before Colossians was written (312 B.C.) Rome began the construction of over 50,000 miles of roads. Some are still in use today. Before those roads, travel was restricted to those who were wealthy or very courageous. These roads shrunk the world and allowed the rapid exchange of many new ideas.

In the same way we have access to advances in transportation and technology that also make our world smaller. With the advent of airline travel, the internet, e-mail, smart phones, television, and even solar audio Bibles, the exchange of ideas and information is incredibly fast and accessible.

The Colossians had begun well, being established in the foundations of Christianity, yet the influence of the culture, Jewish Law, Roman ideas, and philosophers had introduced confusion among them. The same can happen to us, we begin well in our faith and then we encounter the influences of culture and we wonder, where is God and where does he fit into our lives and the issues of the day. Paul is going to address that for the Colossians and for us because a clear grasp of the person and work of Jesus will help us stand firm as we navigate challenges to our faith.

Scripture Passage: Colossians 1:15-23¹
Jesus is the Image of the Invisible God

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God,

Let's look at that word image. It is from the Greek word (Eikon) which means image or likeness. An English equivalent would be like a statute. I wonder how many of you have a background in Art or Art History?

I have zero background in either. I don't think I ever had a class in High School or College in Art History. That is very apparent when I am with my children in a museum. When our family went to England a few years ago we visited a variety of museums. The Roman Army Museum was fascinating to me, the Hall of Statues in the Ashmolean, not so much. (Hall of Statues)

¹ Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

We entered the museum doors as a family, but quickly separated as we were moving at very different paces. I gazed at the statute hall to my left as I moved through the first floor and quickly assessed that bodies with missing heads and arms were of no interest to me, so I didn't even step foot into the area.

When we met up with the children later, they wanted to know if I had seen the amazing statutes. No, I responded and the look on Sarah and Scotty's faces was one of horror. I concluded perhaps I had missed something and sheepishly asked for an overview of this aspect of art history. It is hard when your children give you a reprimanding look.

They walked me to hall and explained that heads and arms are missing because of the age of the statues, those body parts apparently are the heaviest and weaken with time. They also began to show me the advanced skill of some of the sculptors as they carved intricate detail into the marble, right down to clothing that had pleats and folds in them. So much so it looked like actual fabric that you would want to reach out and touch. Yet they were carved out of stone. I learned a lot.

In the same way this passage is telling us that Jesus is the closest representation that our human minds can conceive of an invisible God. This was the ancient version of a modern day photograph or smart phone video.

Colossians 2:9 further explains, *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,* So the very essence of God the Father and his nature dwells in the earthly body of Jesus. The details, the depth, the form, the function is all there. Hebrews 1:3 reinforces this idea by noting, *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, . . ."*

If you want to know what God is like, then look at Jesus. If you want to know how God responds to a woman with five husbands living with one to whom she is not married then listen to Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:1-30). If you want to know how God reacts to the grief of a widow at the funeral procession of her only son then study the time Jesus interrupted a coffin being carrying through the streets (Luke 7:11-17). If you want to know how God grieves with a sister whose brother has just died then read how Jesus wept with her (John 11:1-44). References are in your notes.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. If you want to know what God is like, how he responds to people, how he interacts with his closest friends, what he thinks of taxes, how he responds to the poor, how he interacts with those who are sick, start reading the first century historical accounts of eyewitnesses Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The Colossians had been taught this truth and presumably they had accepted it and had begun living their lives in light of this fact. But as they had gotten back to the dailyness of life and the influence of culture they were becoming confused.

The same happens to us. We have been taught that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, but we skim the news headlines, sit down to watch our favorite tv shows, and listen to the radio station. We don't want to be perceived as intolerant of the very people we

want to reach for Christ and gradually we become confused. Was Jesus a great moral teacher? Was he a good person? Pretty soon we lose our clear understanding of a foundational truth.

Jesus is the image, the exact representation of a God that we cannot see. He is God in Human Flesh.

Jesus and Creation

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For 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 him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Jesus is the Firstborn over Creation

In order to understand this, we need to examine the role of the firstborn in the ancient world. In Jewish and Greek families the firstborn son received the largest share of the inheritance as well as positional authority in the family. If they were a royal family the kingdom would generally be passed to the oldest son.

The rights of the firstborn didn't always go to the one who was chronologically born first. For example, in the Old Testament Jacob received this role over his brother Esau, and Joseph's younger son Ephraim, was given the role of firstborn over his older brother Manasseh. So we shouldn't get hung up on Jesus coming in the form of a baby years after other people on the earth were born and yet being identified as the firstborn.

He has the highest rank, greatest authority, and the rights of the inheritance. He is the firstborn of all creation.

Jesus is the Creator of All Things

He is the creator of the sun, moon, and the stars. He created oceans, animals, mountains, and trees. He is the creator of people, human beings. He is the creator of things we cannot see in the spiritual dimension like angels. All these things were created through him and for him. He existed before all of them because as God he has always existed.

Gnosticism

Why is Paul making such a big deal out of all of this, isn't it obvious from Genesis 1:1 that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth? In the first century the early concepts of a belief system called Gnosticism were being introduced. It wasn't really a developed thought system until centuries later, but we see its roots here.

Gnosticism had several key components. The tenet being addressed here was that God or the spiritual world was considered good, but the material world including creation and everything in it was bad or evil. It was unthinkable that God would create something as lowly as created matter or humans. He couldn't touch or interact with matter because it was evil.

The Gnostics' solution to this problem was that God would make a series of beings or emanations (think of them like a chain of paper dolls). Each one a little further from himself and a little less holy until finally you got down to a being that was far enough away from God so that he could touch the evil matter and thus create the world and human beings.

We may laugh and say wow that is really odd thinking. But in our culture we have similar explanations. We try to explain God out of his role in creation. I am not going to delve into the various points of view on creation held by very committed Christians, except to simply draw the line that if we are consistent with our beliefs and accept the scriptures we cannot remove God from the process of Creation.

Another idea we have as a culture is the deism concept of the Grand Watchmaker who sets up creation, but then lets it run as an uninvolved spectator, perhaps because the material world is not worthy of the effort. While Gnostic beliefs sound odd to us, we might have more in common with them than we initially think. The enemy doesn't really change his tactics, he just freshens up the marketing strategy for each generation.

Paul reminds the Colossians and us that Jesus is the creator of all things. He existed before all created things. He is not one of angels or little gods who are far removed from God, rather he is God. He is the creator of all things.

Jesus Holds All Things Together

17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Many of you are mothers and grandmothers. We take on many roles in our families. We tidy up the kitchen after everyone leaves for school. We purchase supplies for the family so there actually is toilet paper in the bathrooms and food in the refrigerator. Sometimes if I am having a rough day, I wonder if anyone else is aware of these seemingly endless tasks. What would happen if we just stopped doing them?

It is tempting to think we are responsible for holding everything together in our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, or even our churches. That is part of the reason we feel exhausted and overwhelmed. But we are not the ones holding it all together. It is Jesus that holds all things together.

Perhaps an example from science might help us grasp the concept even more. In the book, The Atom Speaks author D. Lee Chesnut talks about the mystery of the atom. He notes:

“Consider the dilemma of the nuclear physicist when he finally looks in utter amazement at the pattern he had now drawn of the oxygen nucleus . . . For here are eight positively charged protons closely associated together within the confines of this tiny nucleus. With them are eight neutrons—a total of sixteen particles— eight positively charged, eight with no charge.

Earlier physicists had discovered that like charges of electricity and like magnetic poles repel each other, and unlike charges or magnetic poles attract each other.

And the entire history of electrical phenomena and electrical equipment had been built up on these principles known as Coulomb's law of electrostatic force and the law of magnetism. What was wrong? What holds the nucleus together? Why doesn't it fly apart? And therefore why do not all atoms fly apart?"²

Karl K. Darrow, a physicist at the Bell (AT & T) Laboratories, agrees:

"You grasp what this implies. It implies that all the massive nuclei have no right to be alive at all. Indeed, they should never have been created, and if created, they should have blown up instantly. Yet here they all are . . . some inflexible inhibition is holding them relentlessly together."³

The Anthropic Principle which notes that the universe appears to be carefully designed for the well-being of mankind, further illustrates that something or someone is holding our universe together.

"A change in the rate of Earth's rotation around the sun or on its axis would be catastrophic. The Earth would become either too hot or too cold to support life. If the moon were much nearer to the Earth, huge tides would inundate the continents. A change in the composition of the gases that make up our atmosphere would be fatal to life. A slight change in the mass of the proton would result in the dissolution of hydrogen atoms. That would result in the destruction of the universe, because hydrogen is its dominant element."⁴

All of these facts seem to be illustrations that in Jesus all things hold together.
Jesus is the Head of the Church

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

The body is a metaphor for the church. And Christ is the head of the church. As the head he is the vision, the source, and the origin. His death and resurrection was the beginning of the church. He is the equipper of the saints who work together using their spiritual gifts.

As the head of the church, he is the leader, he is the one of highest rank, he is the one in authority. While others may serve in positions of authority in the church, the pope, the pastor, the deacons and the elders, their positions are underneath Jesus who is the head of the church. Earthly leaders have term limits. Because they are human they will not serve forever in their capacities. Because they are human they have weaknesses and flaws.

²MacArthur, John, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*. Chicago: Moody Publishers: 1992, page 49. Print

³MacArthur page 49-50.

⁴MacArthur page 48.

In contrast Christ is the constant. His leadership continues generation after generation and he is perfect in his leadership. As a church in the first century or the 21st we can get off track if we forget that it is Jesus who is the head of the church, no one else.

Related to his role as Head of the Church, He is the firstborn among the dead. Again this is not a chronological statement, but one of authority and rank. Others had been raised from the dead during Jesus' earthly ministry, but no one will ever outrank him as the firstborn among those who have risen from the dead.

Jesus is the Reconciler

19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 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.

Once again we are reminded that all of the fullness of God dwells in Jesus. Through Jesus people are reconciled to God. The means of this reconciliation is the death of Jesus, who was both fully God and Man, on the Cross. His death was the perfect sacrifice required to pay for our sins.

Jesus Offers Reconciliation to You

Jesus is the reconciler. Just so we don't become too academic or theoretical in our understanding of Jesus as reconciler, Paul reminds us of our past and our personal need for a reconciler.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But 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— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

We were all once separated from God and were His enemies. We were engaged in outright rebellion against him, rejecting his authority, disregarding his commands, and mistreating the people around us. Paul lists some of these thoughts and actions in chapter 3: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, which is idolatry, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lies. That is who we were.

But for those who desire to set aside those hostilities. For those who want to come into relationship with God. For those who will accept Jesus' sacrifice as payment for all the wrong things we have done, we do not just experience an absence of conflict, but we are transformed. We are holy, blameless, and above reproach, a status we could never attain by ourselves. He has secured that transformation for us and has presented it as a gift. A gift we cannot pay for or earn, but a gift freely offered. We can accept it or continue as God's enemies and reject it.

That gift which was available to the people of the first century is still available to us. If you have never accepted it, I encourage you to journey with us through Colossians, give the book a serious read, understand who Jesus is and what he is offering you. Accept the gift. Exchange your sinful state and be transformed.

For those who have accepted the gift, Paul implores us to continue in our faith. Paul will provide some very practical instruction in subsequent chapters, but we need to get the foundation sturdy because it impacts how we relate to Jesus, our world, and the people in it.

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