

Monday - Colossians 1:15

Seeing is believing, or so we are told. But if that's true, how can we ever be expected to believe in God? Several biblical texts make it clear that God is, by nature, invisible. It isn't just that he has not been seen: he CANNOT be seen (cf. John 1:18; Romans 1:20; 1 Timothy 6:16; Hebrews 11:27). Even here in Colossians 1:15 he is described as "the invisible God."

In Romans 1:20, Paul says that God's existence and eternal attributes can be seen in the things that are made. In other words, the visible creation reveals an invisible creator. All well and good, but looking at a tree or a sunset or the majesty of the Grand Canyon isn't the same as looking at God himself.

So what hope is there for knowing and believing in God? The answer is Jesus! Philip certainly felt the urgency to "see" God. "Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us" (John 14:8). To which Jesus replied: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

This is very much Paul's point here in Colossians 1:15 where he declares concerning Jesus: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4).

The word translated "image" refers to a likeness or visible representation. How exact or precise the resemblance is between the original and the copy must be determined by the context. To say someone is "like" another person often conveys the idea of moderate similarity, but not necessarily exact representation. On the other hand, you've undoubtedly heard someone described as "the spitting image" of another. If one may be reverent in saying so, God the Son (Jesus) is the spitting image of God the Father! Of course, Paul's point isn't that Jesus "looks like" the Father, as if to suggest the Father has a physical frame and visage which the Son reflects. The Son "images" the Father in terms of moral character, will, and the attributes of deity. They, together with the Holy Spirit, share a common divine nature, glory, and purpose.

I've spoken with people who almost choke when they hear that God is their "Father." The latter term reminds them only of abuse or abandonment, often evoking a bitter taste in their mouths. How, then, does one rebuild in the hearts of Christian people the image of God as Father? It can only come by pointing to the Son. He is everything the Father is, except for being the Father. Every virtue, every power, all glory, and the fullness of deity reside in the Son as they do in the Father. He is the perfect and exact image of the Father (cf. Hebrews 1:3).

But if being the "image" of the Father seems to confirm the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, the second phrase in v. 15 appears to destroy it, for there we are told that he is also "the firstborn of all creation" (v. 15).

This phrase seems to say that Jesus was the first created being in a series of other created beings. Does this mean the Jehovah's Witnesses were right all along? No. Part of the problem is related to translation. We have to determine the best way to render this phrase. Is it, "the first born of all creation," or "the first born over all creation"? Either is grammatically possible but there is a world of difference between them. Is Jesus "of" creation in the sense that he belongs to it as its initial or original member? Or is Jesus "over" creation in the sense that he is its source and sovereign Lord and maker? I believe it is the latter, and for several reasons.

First, observe how v. 16 begins: "For by him all things were created . . ." The word "for" indicates that what follows in v. 16 supports or explains what has preceded in v. 15. In other words, Paul is saying, "Here is 'how' or 'the sense in which' Jesus is the firstborn of/over all creation: it is by virtue of his having created all things . . ." If Jesus were merely one of the many and varied parts of creation, belonging to them as if he were himself a creature, Paul would not have said that Jesus created all things. Second, to say that Jesus is himself a creature is inconsistent with Col. 1:17. There Paul declares that the Son of God is "before" all things, similar to our Lord's claim in John 8:58 that "before Abraham was, I am."

Third, to say that Jesus is a creature would be inconsistent with what Paul clearly said about him elsewhere, primarily in Philippians 2:6-11 (esp. v. 6).

Fourth, to say that Jesus is a creature would be inconsistent with what John clearly said of him in John 1:3 – "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made."

Fifth, the word "firstborn" itself does not necessarily mean first in a sequence or first in time. It can also mean first in "rank" or "supreme in dignity." The point is that the Son, by virtue of being the image of God, has a pre-eminence and exercises a sovereignty over everything else that exists. The word is used this way of King David in the Old Testament. In Psalm 89:27, God says of David: "And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."

The point, then, is that Jesus Christ is utterly unique, distinguished from all of creation because he is both eternally prior to it and supreme over it in the sense, as v. 16 makes clear, that he is its creator.

Who, then, is this man? He is the Lord Jesus Christ, who "images" the Father, displaying in himself as the second person of the Godhead every perfection and attribute of the first person of the Godhead (see Col. 1:19 and 2:9). He is also creator and sovereign Lord over all. Praise be to the Son!

Tuesday - Colossians 1:16

I admit it sounds pretty weird at first, but there's something stunning about prepositions. That's right, prepositions. I'm really not nuts. Trust me. Yes, I'm talking about those words like "in" and "over" and "through" and "by" and "for", just to mention a few.

There is immeasurable spiritual wealth in those little words. I'm fascinated to think that God would entrust the revelation of his glory to something as mundane as prepositions, words that few of us ever pause in the course of a day to notice. But the more I meditate on prepositions the more I see the beauty and majesty of Jesus. Let me prove it to you.

When Christians gathered for worship in the early church they sang hymns of praise like we do. Many scholars contend that the words to one such hymn are found in the passage we are studying in Colossians. Read it closely and take special note of the capitalized prepositions it contains:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For BY [literally, 'in'] 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. And he is BEFORE all things, and IN him all things hold together" (vv. 15-17).

Perhaps an analogy will help make my point. Consider the stages involved in building a home. The first thing you do is hire an architect who draws up the blueprints. He formulates the plan and lists the many specifications on how everything is to be constructed. You then contract a builder, the person who actually puts brick to mortar and nail to wood. The house is then put to the use for which it was built: you move in. You occupy it and enjoy the many special features it contains, whether a special den or a hot-tub on the deck. Finally, as its inhabitant and owner, you maintain it. You are careful to make timely repairs and perhaps a bit of remodeling here and there.

Here's my point. Jesus Christ is all of these in relation to the whole of the universe! He is the architect. This is what Paul means in Colossians 1:16a when he says that all things were created "in" him. He is the artisan. He is the one in whose eternal mind the blueprints for every nook and cranny of the cosmos were conceived.

And Paul is pretty specific about the extent of Christ's creative input. It encompasses literally everything: "all things" (v. 16a), by which he means everything "in heaven and on earth," be they massive galaxies billions of light years away or the dust mites beneath your feet. The "all things" includes what you can see and can't see, whether visible but intangible, like a mirage or beam of light; whether invisible but tangible, like a summer breeze or the heat of the sun; whether visible and tangible, like an oak tree or a book or a baseball; even things invisible and intangible like a proton or gravity or a feeling or a dream. He conceived them all!

But it doesn't stop there. He is the architect of every spiritual being, here described as "thrones" and "dominions" and "rulers" and "authorities," typical Pauline language for every conceivable variety of angel, both good and evil, both hellish and holy. They were all Christ's idea!

He is not only the architect who conceived their existence and their manifold properties and powers, he is the artisan who actually constructed their being. They were made THROUGH him, says Paul (v. 16b). John echoed this thought by saying that "all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3).

Yes, he is both architect and artisan, as well as the aim for which they were created. As Paul put it, "all things were created . . . FOR him" (v. 16c; oh blessed preposition!). Whatever is, is, that he might be glorified and praised and enjoyed forever. He's the reason, the goal, the aim, the intent, the point, the purpose, the end, the terminus, the consummation and culmination of every molecule that moves.

Does that please you? Do you find unparalleled joy in knowing that it's about him and not you? Do you find delight in knowing that God didn't create the world so he could have you, but so that you could have him? John Piper put it this way, and with his words, I'll close:

"Do you love the thought that you exist to make God look glorious? Do you love the thought that all creation exists to display the glory of God. Do you love the truth that all of history is designed by God to one day be a completed canvas that displays in the best way possible the greatness and beauty of God? Do you love the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world to vindicate the righteousness of God and repair the injury that we had done to the reputation of the glory of God? Do you love the truth you personally exist to make God look like what he really is – glorious? I ask again: Do you love the fact that your salvation is meant to put the glory of God's grace on display? Do you love seeing and showing the glory of God? This is why God created the universe. This is why he ordained history. This is why he sent his Son. This is why you exist. Forever to see and savor and show the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . Do you embrace this calling as your treasure and your joy?"

Wednesday - Colossians 1:18

If it weren't for biblical texts like Colossians 1:18, it would be easy to get discouraged about the local church. There Paul continues his description of Jesus Christ with the statement, "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."

There are many local churches out there. Many are struggling to stay open. Others are on the verge of schism. Political ambition and behind-the-scenes shenanigans prevail. In some, the proverbial "worship wars" are raging intensely, while others are laboring to overcome the devastation of moral failure in its leadership.

I don't want to sound unduly pessimistic. I'm thankful that some churches are flourishing and vibrant and maintain a faithful testimony to Jesus and a commitment to his Word. But far too many have compromised with the surrounding culture or have embraced worldly values that have largely muted their proclamation of the gospel.

As I said, it would be easy to get discouraged if it weren't for the fact that Jesus is the Head of the Church. The "church" here is probably a reference to the universal body of Christ, that spiritual organism comprised of all believers in all of history. But if Jesus is the head of the universal church in general, he is also the head of every local church in particular. These many and varied local expressions of his body belong to him. If a local church dissolves or strays off course, the Church, the universal body perseveres. When Jesus first promised to "build" his Church (Mt. 16:18) he assured us that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. I have to keep reminding myself of this, as I suspect you do as well.

When Paul says that Jesus Christ is the "head of the body, the church," he means to tell us that Christ is the sovereign, ruling authority over his people, as well as the source from which we, his body, derive all spiritual sustenance and power. As such, we can rest assured that our Lord will neither permit his body to drift into

utter moral and theological chaos nor to die of spiritual starvation and thirst.

Some professing Christians behave and "minister" as if Jesus is the head of the Church only in name or title, much in the way Elizabeth is the Queen of England. When it comes down to the daily operations and administration of that country, she has very little if any role. The title "Queen" is merely honorary and traditional.

But such is not the case with our Lord Jesus Christ. He exerts a functional authority over his body. He can be trusted to govern and direct and provide instruction and power for the life of his church if we will but look to him and draw from the resources he so generously supplies. The relationship between Jesus as Head and the church as Body is organic and living and vital. He exercises sovereign control over us and we are ever and always dependent on his abiding influence and presence. As J. B. Lightfoot once wrote, Jesus "is the inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power (of the church), the mainspring of its activity, the centre of its unity and the seat of its life" (157).

Paul continues by describing him as "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." That is to say, he was the beginning and founder of a new humanity, a new people, by virtue of his having been the first to rise, never to die again. When God the Father raised him from the dead and glorified and exalted him to the right hand of the majesty on high, he became the first-fruits of that resurrection guaranteed for all who are united to him (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-23; Revelation 1:12-18).

There is a reason for this. There was a goal in view. It was so that Jesus might be seen and known and glorified as preeminent in everything! God raised Jesus from the dead and placed him in authority over the church so that he, and only he, might be seen and savored, recognized and relished, exalted and enjoyed as the sovereign Lord, the one for whom all things were made and to whom all praise should be given.

To what extent does your life reflect the preeminence of Christ? Are the affairs of your daily existence so ordered that Jesus is seen to be preeminent? Is there any doubt in the way you use your time, your money, and your talents that Jesus is the source and center of it all? Is he your treasure, or is it found in the documents and deeds lying in a bank vault? Does he govern your life in such a way that all may know he is Lord? How visible is the supremacy of Christ in the way you talk and relate to others and fulfill your responsibilities at work and in the home?

Resist the temptation to restrict the preeminence of Christ to one day a week, as if he were Lord and worthy of praise for only one hour on a Sunday morning. He is to be honored as preeminent not only over all things but at all times, in every context, in every circumstance.

Resist the temptation to isolate the preeminence of Christ or to confine it to "religious" matters. He has been given preeminence "in all things"! Everything in all of life, both inside and outside the church, exists to make him look good. Not to make him good, for he is eternally and self-sufficiently good, but to reveal and disclose and enable all to see that he is, in fact, good and glorious and worthy of our whole-hearted and exclusive devotion.

Thursday - Colossians 1:23

Thank God that there is something "after" the "before"! Before Jesus there was only alienation, hostility, and evil deeds (v. 21). Not a very flattering picture! But now . . . (v. 22a). Oh, my. But now! Were ever more glorious words spoken to otherwise hopeless and helpless sinners? But now!

Were it not for the divine and gracious "But now" we would be forever mired and entrenched in the "Always" of sin and death and darkness. There would be no purpose in speaking of a "Before," because there would be no hope of an "After."

The contrast evoked by the transitional words "but now" with which v. 22 begins is lost in most English translations. There are several places in the NT where we encounter these or similar words. Often following the dire description of humanity in sin are the words, "But God" (cf. Eph. 2:4). In Ephesians 2:11-12 Paul paints a rather ugly and disheartening portrait of the plight of Gentiles before the coming of Jesus. "But now" (v. 13a), "in Christ Jesus," he happily shouts, we have been drawn near and our former alienation has given way to friendship and intimacy and forgiveness.

The apostle uses the same terminology in Colossians 1:22 to tell us yet again that "now", because of God's gracious activity in removing the hostility that alienated us from his presence, we can stand confident in his presence.

Well did John Newton say it in that famous hymn:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost BUT NOW I'm found,
was blind, BUT NOW I see!*

These are words that embody and express an indescribably encouraging and hopeful truth.

When your conscience is pricked by the memory of failure and sin, a simple cry of "BUT NOW" will bring healing and hope.

When the enemy assaults your soul with reminders of how unworthy you were, a simple cry of "Yes, BUT NOW I've been made worthy in Christ" will suffice.

When he insinuates that no one with a history so filled with failure, ingratitude, and selfishness could possibly be a Christian, rebuff him with a hearty and defiant, "BUT NOW I have a clean slate and new life and joy and the promise of God's abiding presence"!

Fight the paralyzing power of past transgressions and the crippling fear of what may lie ahead by strengthening your soul with the inspired promise that "NOW", because of Christ and in Christ, you are reconciled and redeemed.

Friday - Colossians 1:23

If you're among Christians, talking about politics will rarely lead to an angry debate. Disagreement, yes, but usually a civil and constructive one. Sports? Even Christians have their favorite players and teams and will defend them vigorously, but not at the expense of unity. There is a way of creating a furor, if you're so inclined. Just bring up the question of whether or not a believer can lose his/her salvation. State your position, and then duck! I've been in a few of those theological donnybrooks myself. They are rarely resolved peacefully. On more than one occasion the dispute focused on Colossians 1:23. Paul has just made the glorious declaration that by virtue of the death of Christ we have been reconciled to God, all with a view to his presenting us holy and blameless and without reproach before him. Then he drops this bombshell: "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."

Paul seems rather clearly to say that if you don't persevere by continuing in "the faith" you will not be presented before God holy and blameless and without reproach. Whether "the faith" is a reference to one's personal trust in Jesus or the objective body of truths we call "the Christian faith", the fact remains: if you don't continue in it you will not experience the inestimable joy of standing forever in the presence of God.

So, yes, there is truly a conditional element involved ("if indeed"). The condition for final presentation is faithful perseverance. The notion espoused by some that one "act of faith" in Jesus Christ eternally secures final salvation irrespective of how one lives is unbiblical. But that's for another day.

Having said this, there appear to be three options worthy of our consideration. There are probably others, but I want to focus on three.

First, the Arminian view says it is possible for the truly regenerated (born again) soul to fail to meet the condition and thereby fail to be presented holy and blameless and without reproach before God. The salvation once gained by faith alone may be forfeited and lost by the disappearance and death of said faith. My aim here is not to challenge this view (again, see my website for an extensive discussion of this position and what I believe is a biblical response to it).

Second, some Calvinists read Colossians 1:23 as saying that perseverance is the proof that one's "act of faith" in Jesus Christ was genuine. Perseverance, or continuing stable and steadfast in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the gospel, is evidence of the authenticity of one's initial conversion and commitment to Christ. Likewise, the failure to persevere, or the decision to shift from the hope of the gospel and abandon one's "commitment" to it, is proof that one's profession of faith in Jesus was spurious and false, an act of self-delusion.

This concept is undoubtedly true, in my opinion, and other biblical texts affirm it. The passage in 1 John 2:19 clearly speaks to this scenario. There John writes, "They [i.e., the false teachers] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

The phrase "they went out from us" most likely points to their willful and voluntary separation. In spite of their external membership or alliance with us, says John, they did not share the inner life or spiritual bond of the body of Christ. "For if they had been of us they would have continued with us." If they had truly and authentically shared our unity and life in Christ, it would have displayed itself in fruitful perseverance. "But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." This is to say that there was a divine purpose in their secession, namely, exposure of those who are merely professors, not genuine possessors, of spiritual life. Their departure was their unmasking (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18-19)

So again, abiding or continuance or endurance is the sign of the saved, just as apostasy reveals the counterfeit character of one's initial profession of faith. Note the emphasis of the phrase: "for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (cf. Heb. 3:6,14). The presence of saving faith ("of us") implies (necessitates) perseverance.

Third, the other Calvinist option interprets Paul's purpose in Colossians 1:23 somewhat differently. All Calvinists believe that the elect will fully and finally persevere and thus be eternally saved (in fact, some "Arminians" believe this too). They will not fail to fulfill the condition of Colossians 1:23.

According to this third option, God preserves us in faith and holiness of life by stirring our hearts to avail ourselves of his sustaining grace. One way he does this is **BY MEANS OF THE WARNING IMPLICIT IN THE CONDITION**. What is the warning? Simply this: no continuation, no presentation. In other words, God preserves and keeps us safe, and thus we persevere, by heeding the warning that, if we don't, we will not be presented blameless and without reproach before God.

On both Calvinist options, the elect will persevere. According to the first, Colossians 1:23 is backwards looking. As we consider whether or not a person continues in the faith we are directed to draw one of two conclusions concerning the authenticity of their initial profession of trust in Jesus.

According to the second, Colossians 1:23 is forward looking. "Christian, **TAKE HEED** to this undeniable fact: **IF YOU DON'T** persevere by continuing in the faith you won't be presented before God. Christian, **TAKE HEART** in knowing that **GOD WILL WORK** in you 'that which is pleasing in his sight' (Heb. 13:21). Be encouraged with the assurance that 'he who began a good work in you **WILL** bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:6), so that you will persevere and not shift from the hope of the gospel which you believed."

Some people insist that the idea that God will preserve us undermines and vitiates the urgency to make certain that we continue in our faith. I would argue precisely the opposite. The reason I commit myself fervently to the pursuit of holiness of life is because God has assured me that he will be ever present to energize my heart "to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). Praise God for his preserving presence and power!

If you are inclined to indulge in unrepentant sin and then justify your licentiousness on the grounds that God has promised to preserve you, there is a strong likelihood that your alleged "faith" in Christ is not saving. Given what Paul says in Colossians 1:23, it would be irresponsible of me to assure you that following such a life you will, nevertheless, be presented before him holy and blameless and without reproach. Remember: no continuation, no presentation.