

The Preeminent Gift of Christmas #3

Series: A Heavenly Christmas

Colossians 1:15-20, 25-27

Scripture Reading: "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. 18And 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 supremacy. 19For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20and 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.

25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— 26the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 27To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." [NIV]

Let's PRAY

Do you like secrets? Are you good at keeping secrets? There are a lot of secrets especially this time of year. Sometimes people have secrets they don't reveal until Christmas. Maybe it is a secret engagement. You get the family together at Christmas time and she holds out her hand with the engagement ring for all to see. Or maybe a new baby is on the way and when you get the family together at Christmas, you tell them the good news. Or it may be that you have a special gift that you are trying to keep secret until Christmas. One time our kids found all the Christmas presents we were hiding and had to take a peak.

I want to share with you God's Christmas secret which is NOT really a secret because God wants the whole world to know, but most people never find out.

In these four Sunday mornings in the month of December I have been sharing with you the four major passages in the New Testament which explain the meaning of the birth of Jesus...A Series called "**A Heavenly Christmas.**"

We know that Matthew and Luke give us the historical record of the birth of Christ. They give us history. But other books in the New Testament give us the meaning of the birth of Jesus. Why Jesus was born! What is the birth of Jesus Christ all about! The meaning of Christmas!

These verses in Colossians 1 give us real spiritual meaning of the birth of Jesus. The title of today's message is called: **The Preeminent Gift of Christmas.**

Before I try to unpack these amazing verses, let me give you the **Back Story for this letter:**

While on his third missionary journey, Paul had an opportunity to preach to the citizens of Ephesus. One of his proteges named Epaphras made an excursion to his hometown of Colossae, preached the Gospel there and the Holy Spirit birthed a church.

Before Paul would ever set foot in Colossae, he finds himself in prison in Rome. In prison, he hears about an onslaught of heresies that this new church faced.

Gnostics had gained some influence in the young church. Gnosticism was a movement that viewed anything material as evil and anything spiritual as good. They also had a real problem with the incarnation. If Jesus had come in the flesh, he couldn't really be Truly Divine in their perspective.

Listen to the average Mormon or Jehovah's Witness - they sound like they are all about Jesus - but if you listen closely, it's just repackaged Gnosticism.

Another group that the Colossians dealt with was called the Judaizers. They had begun to influence the church with a brand of Christianity that taught for one to become a Christian they must first embrace Jewish Like circumcision and keep the law of Moses. Paul writes this letter to clear up the confusion.

The fruit of heresy always leads to legalism and hypocrisy. The influence of Gnostics and Judaizers had produced so much ungodly legalism in Colossae that true believers didn't seem to know what to believe.

Colossians is a blueprint for freedom. Ironically, God's chosen instrument to deliver Paul's letter to the Colossians was a runaway slave... who had landed in prison. His name was Onesimus.

Onesimus was a slave from the city of Colossae who would return to his hometown with a letter from Paul to his Master - Philemon. (NT book)

Paul had faith in the life changing power of the Gospel to not only have an expectation that Philemon would receive back and restore Onesimus but also that Onesimus would also carry 5 of Paul's letters that would ultimately be part of God's word!

Why would Paul begin his attack against the heresies of the Judaizers who had plagued the church at Colossae by a dissertation on the nature of Christ? The answer to that question reveals the genius of Paul. **The answer to every heresy is Jesus.**

In the book of Colossians, he presents them and us with the most complete picture of the person and work of Christ anywhere in the New Testament.

Now three times in these verses we find the words "**He is.**" Verse 15, "**He is...**" Verse 17, "**And He is...**" Verse 18, "**And He is...**" So, here in Colossians 1 we discover who Jesus is: "**He is ...He is...He is.**"

You also find the phrase "**By Him**" three times: Verse 16, "...**by Him...**" Verse 20, "**and by Him**"... Verse 20, "...**and by Him.**"

"He is" tells us WHO HE IS and "by Him" tells us WHAT HE'S DONE. And when you come to understand WHO HE IS and WHAT HE'S DONE...you'll understand why JESUS is "The Preeminent Gift of Christmas that God wants the whole world to know about."

What Paul says about Jesus in Colossians 1:15-20 can be divided up into three big ideas: Jesus is Preeminent over Creation...Jesus is Preeminent over the Church...Jesus is Preeminent in His death on the Cross.

I. **Jesus is Preeminent over Creation**

There are two words I want to pull out of verse 15 and talk about them as they relate to Jesus. The first word I want to use is the word '**image**', and the second word is the word '**first born**'.

A. The word "**image**" points us to the person of Christ. It is the Greek word *eikon*. You may have picked it up in the English language as icon. If you have a phone or computer, and most of you do, you have several icons on it.

The Bible says that the Lord Jesus Christ is the icon of God. Jesus is the exact representation, the exact likeness, the manifestation of God being fully God and fully man. That's why you cannot turn your face toward God and your back on Jesus. God and Jesus stand as one! It's not God "yes" and Jesus "no." Nor is it Jesus "yes" and God "no." It is Jesus "yes" and God "yes."

It says in verse 19, '**For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him...**' In the second chapter, verse 9 says, '**For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.**'

He is the icon. He is the exact representation of God. Jesus Christ is the one who makes the invisible God visible. When you see Jesus, you see God. The image, icon, of God points us to **His person**.

B. The second word is the word, '**first born**.' The 'first born' points us to **His power**.

In the first century the heretic Arius suggested that this term indicated that Christ was a created being, greater than the rest of creation but less than God himself. This is a position held by many groups today-Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, both hold a similar view of Christ.

The Greek word "firstborn" here refers to Preeminence.

In Psalm 89:27 (ESV) speaking of David where it says 27 ***And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.*** This use does not indicate numerical order, but rather RANK. David was not the first in order, but he was the highest in rank.

It is a word which does not indicate that Jesus Christ is a part of the creation, but rather, it means He was prior to all creation. He is the first born. Verse 17 puts it this way, "***He is before all things.***"

It is also a word which indicates that he is superior in position. You will notice in verse 16 that it says, "***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.***"

Note three phrases in verse 16 - ***by him, through him, and for him.***

Three different ideas are communicated in these phrases:

BY HIM -This means that Jesus conceived of creation and its complexities. Creation was his idea.

THROUGH HIM- This phrase means that creation came to be through his power and ability.

FOR HIM - This means that Jesus is the goal of all creation. Everything exists to display his glory. That means that the universe has direction and meaning.

Literally the text says not just by Him, but in Him were all things created. It doesn't say that He was in All things. That's Pantheism. That's why there are some religions of the world that won't kill a cow or other animal because they think they would be smashing God. God is not IN everything. But the Bible says that all the creative laws and processes, which bring the universe into existence, are in Jesus Christ.

Think about what that means. We are celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Son of God who was the Creator of this universe.

It is mind-boggling when you think about how immense our universe is. Think about the stars in our universes. One prominent scientist has said that there are more stars in our universe than there are grains of sand on all the seashores in all the earth. Yet the Bible says that God knows their number and God knows every one of those stars by name.

Illustration: I read a few years ago that a group in Washington was spending a hundred million dollars to try to discover if there was intelligent life on other planets. Someone thought the money would be wisely spent if they spent it to see if there is intelligent life in Washington. But that's another subject.

When I think about the fact that the Bible says, "in Him all things were created," I think about the complexity of the universe. Take one human cell. They tell us that in the human body there are 300 trillion individual cells. You isolate one of those cells in the human body and study that cell and you discover amazing complexity. Each cell is a very complex organization. It has a wall and it has cytoplasm and it has a nucleus. In that cell you find strands of DNA which give detailed instructions for every part of the human body. [Ex.?]

The very complexity of the universe tells us that there is a Creator. The Bible says that when Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem that it was God made flesh and dwelt among us. He is the Creator.

Jesus Christ is preeminent. He is above all things. He is the one who has the power to be above the creation. All things were created by Him.

Not only that, but **He is the sustainer of all things.** It says in verse 17, '***He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.***'

That simply means that the principles of cohesion and gravity reside in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus not only created it all...He controls it all, and "holds it all together."

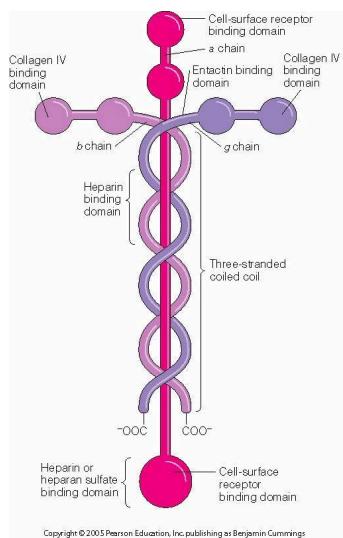
Illustration: Louie Giglio, a pastor, once spoke about how inconceivably big our God is...how He spoke the universe into being...how He breathes stars out of His mouth that are huge raging balls of fire...etc. etc. Then He went on to speak of

how this star-breathing, universe creating God also knitted our human bodies together with amazing detail and wonder.

Louie went on to talk about how we can trust that the God who created all this, also has the power to hold it all together.

And then he started talking about laminin. Wikipedia describes laminins as a family of proteins that are an integral part of the structural scaffolding of basement membranes in almost every animal tissue.¹ Laminins are what hold us together, literally. They are cell adhesion molecules. They are what holds one cell of our bodies to the next cell. Without them, we would literally fall apart.

This picture is what the structure of laminin looks like – and this is NOT a 'Christian portrayal' of it.



Now tell me that our God is not Amazing! The 'glue' that holds us together, everyone one of us, is in the shape of the cross.

Thousands of years before the world knew anything about laminin, Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, penned these words in Colossians 1:15-17: ***"The 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."*** (NIV)

From a literal standpoint, we are held together...one cell to another...by the cross.

It is JESUS who keeps everything from falling apart! He is the glue of the galaxy!

We are literally held together...one cell to another by a cross! And what is true for us physically...is true for us spiritually!

It's the cross that holds us together! It's Jesus that keeps everything from falling apart. He is the glue that keeps our marriages together. He is the glue that keeps our families together. He is the glue that keeps our lives together.

That's why when life begins to fall apart, run to the cross where you will find: hope...peace...love...forgiveness. It's Jesus that keeps everything from falling apart.

So, the work of Christ in creation wasn't that of a divine watch maker who made a gorgeous instrument and sent it away...He remains actively involved in creation - sustaining all that he has made.

When you see a wound heal, you witness the work of Christ.

When you see a baby born, you witness the ongoing work of Christ.

When you see a sunset, you witness the ongoing work of Christ the Sustainer.

Hebrews 1:3 "... and upholds all things by the word of His power. "

Scientists say man has the capability of destroying the earth today with nuclear power. Let me just say that in Jesus Christ all things hold together. Terrible destruction is coming, as we read in the Book of Revelation, but only by God's permissive will!

First, we see that Jesus is Preeminent over Creation...secondly

II. Jesus is Preeminent over the Church...

Verse 18 says, **'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 (or preeminence).'**

I want to focus on two things in that verse as well.

A. The Bible says that Jesus is the **head**, that is, He is the leader. That means that Jesus is the one who **governs** the church.

We know that every cell of our human body has direct access to the brain. We know that everything about our body finds its direction and is governed by the brain. I say it reverently, that Jesus Christ is the brains of the church.

The church is not a monarchy ruled by the pastor. The church is not an oligarchy ruled by the deacons. The church, properly understood, is not a democracy governed by the people. **The church is led by the headship of Christ, by the leadership of the pastor with the stewardship and fellowship of the members.**

Jesus is the head of the church. When churches forget that is when churches get in trouble.

Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." It's His church. It's not your church. It's not my church. It's His church. He **governs** the church.

B. But it says that He is the **first born** from the dead. That's referring, of course, to His resurrection. He also **guides** the church.

We believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and that three days later He rose again, and the same Jesus who was alive that day when He rose from the tomb, is just as much alive today as He was that day. We serve a living Savior.

Illustration: I heard about an old pastor, and somebody said to him, "How is your church doing? He said, "Man, we are doing wonderful. My church is dying slower than any church I ever had.'

A dead church is a contradiction in terms. Properly understood, when you recognize that the church is the body of the living Lord Jesus Christ that means that the singing should be alive. That means that the praying ought to be alive. That means that the preaching ought to be alive. Evangelism and witnessing ought to be alive. Our relationships and fellowship are to be alive.

How can the Church fail when God is its head? Jesus is its Director, Nourisher, Creator. The Church is called the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is in the superior position over the Church. No pope, no bishop, no pastor is the head of

the Church. CHRIST is the Head of the Church, which is composed of every born-again believer.

He is superior, in absolute authority over every Christian. Now the Church is called His BODY, of which He is THE HEAD. This is developed in Paul's epistles elsewhere, Christ is the Head, and we are members of that BODY.

The Church is unique. It had its beginning in His death, burial and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit into this world.

Jesus is preeminent in Creation, over the Church, and thirdly,

III. Jesus is Preeminent in His death on the Cross.

Last week, as we talked about the meaning of Christmas, we talked about the cross. Today, as we talk about the meaning of Christmas, we once again come to the cross. We are constantly coming to the cross. You don't understand Christmas if you stop at the cradle. You must go on to the cross.

Did you notice that with one sweep of the pen, Paul takes us all the way from eternity to Calvary? With one stroke of the pen, he takes us all the way from creation to the cross.

Jesus is the one and only above the creation. Jesus is the one and only over the church. Jesus is the one and only on the cross.

Verses 19-20, ***"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20and 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."***

Jesus is not just a Savior. He is THE Savior. Jesus is not just a truth. He is THE truth. Jesus is not just a way. He is THE way. Jesus is not just a life. He is THE life. Jesus is not just a preeminent one. He is THE preeminent one.

The cross was in the heart of the Father from all eternity. The Lord Jesus was the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the earth.

We read in the Bible how Jesus came. He was born of a virgin. He lived a sinless life. Then we are told that this Jesus was crucified on a cross.

It is sometimes amazing to read in the Bible about the crucifixion of Jesus and be surprised that there is so little description given there.

Think about how Jesus suffered physically on that cross. As He hung on that cross, His bones were disjointed and His tendons shredded. His nerves were pulled apart and every movement of Jesus on that cross sent pain with shoots of fire running up and down the nervous system of Jesus.

It says, "His cross." It was not Buddha's cross, or Mohammad's cross, but His cross. The same one who is above the creation, who created the heavens and the earth, it is His cross. The same one who governs and guides the church, it is His cross. The same one who created a seed and the leaves and the branches of a tree is now crucified on a tree. The same one who brought into existence all the streams and rivers and oceans and creeks, now cries out 'I thirst.'

Whose cross? The same one who created the sun is now blinded and blistered by its presence and is now chilled by its absence. I'm talking about Jesus.

Let me make two statements.

- A. The first thing I want to say about His cross is, **the price He paid**. It says in verse 20, ***'And, having made peace through the blood of his cross. He gave His blood.***

The Bible says in Revelation 1, verse 5, ***"Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood."***

"There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunge beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." "What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again, nothing but the blood of Jesus."

The price He paid.

- B. **"The peace He made."** ***"Having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself."***

He was pre-eminent in the work that He did on the cross. No one else could have done it! A sinner cannot die for a sinner. A sick man cannot heal a sick man. We sinners could not be saved by another sinner. All in humanity have been affected by the disease of sin. And Jesus Christ alone, the sinless Son of God, could make and did make PEACE through His blood on the cross.

JESUS MADE PEACE. Jesus REMOVED everything that Adam has ever done, or that I have ever done, or that you or anyone else on earth has ever done, relative to SIN, darkness, death, judgment and hell.

The war is over between God and the person who believes in Jesus! God doesn't have to punish me. God doesn't have to judge me. God has no argument with me. God has Nothing to say against me, because Jesus made PEACE through the blood of His cross.

We don't "make peace" by anything we do, or by our attitude or feelings or anything else. This peace is something JESUS MADE when He died in our stead. HE made the peace, for us. And in this work, He was PRE-EMINENT.

For there to be reconciliation between sinful man and holy God, God had to take the initiative ... AND HE DID: He took the first step.

For there to be reconciliation between sinful man and holy God, there must be action taken by God ... AND THERE WAS! He shed His blood!

That's why Jesus came! That's why Jesus died! That's why Jesus arose from the grave! That's what we're celebrating Jesus, the Preeminent Gift of Christmas! Sin separated us from God, but the blood of Jesus...can reconcile us to God.

Conclusion

Back in 1952 an Englishman by the name of J. B. Phillips wrote a little book called, "Your God Is Too Small". He said people everywhere tend to shrink their concept of God down to the size of their own ideas and feelings.

Thinking along the same lines, Don McCollough wrote a book called "The Trivialization of God". He says people have created,

"The God of my cause,
The God of my understanding,
The God of my experience,
The God of my comfort,
The God of my success,
The God of my nation."

McCullough writes, *"Any god who fits the contours of me will never really transcend me, never really be God [with a capital G]. And any god who doesn't kick the bars out of the prison of my perceptions will be nothing but a trivial god [with a lower case G]."*

"Is your God too small?" "Have you trivialized God?" "How big is Jesus?"

There's a statue of Christ in Brazil that some of you know about. It's called "Christ the Redeemer" and looks out over the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The statue stands 120 ft tall, weighs 700 tons and sits on the peak of a mountain at 2300 feet. It's the tallest statue of its kind in the world.

It's a great reminder that most people need a larger Christ than what they've constructed out of their own ideas, emotions, biases, and desires.

There isn't anything wrong in saying Jesus is our companion and friend. This is full of Biblical truth; but if that's all of Jesus we know then Jesus is too small.

In the movie version of C. S. Lewis' story of "The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe." In this children's fantasy tale four children of the same family end up in a world called Narnia. There is a great evil doing much harm but there is also a magnificent Lion named Aslan who has come to rescue the creatures of Narnia as well as these children. Aslan is a Christ-figure in the story.

When the youngest child, Lucy, first sees Aslan the Lion she is fascinated with his beauty and asks, ***"Can I pet him?"*** "Oh no" replies a talking beaver who lives in Narnia, ***"He is not a tame lion."***

We don't receive all there is to know of Jesus when we first become a Christ-follower. Discipleship comes with a learning curve. The passage I read from Colossians has the Apostle Paul creating his own "Christ the Redeemer" statue, except that he does it in words, not in stone. He wants us to see Jesus Christ as the One who stands over each of us, over the church, over the world, over the entire universe. Listen again to how Paul speaks of Jesus:

"He is the image of the invisible God, He is the firstborn of all creation;

In him all things were created; In him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church. In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

Do YOU see Jesus as He really is? What if you don't care about this larger Christ? What if you've turned Jesus into a tame lion? If that's the case, then I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that a small Jesus isn't doing you any real good and a church with a small Jesus isn't going to do the world much good either.

The good news is, as Paul declares, all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell in Jesus. All of God's mercy, all of God's grace, all of God's love is yet offered to us in Jesus. It is never too late to know the real Jesus, the Preeminent Gift of Christmas.