Colossians 1:15-23

This great passage about Christ is in some ways similar to the prologue of John’s Gospel, John 1:1-18. A lot of scholarly work has been done about whether 15-20 is a hymn that Paul either used, borrowed, modified, etc. There are many divergent ideas in the scholarly world that differ widely about this that we can’t say with any certainty. There is certainly beautiful symmetry about the verses, with profound theological depth. My thought is that it may well be that the passage is Paul’s own theological poetry; a hymn or creed of his own crafting. He is not writing from an ‘ivory tower’, but is addressing a specific threat to the life of one church. The message of the passage speaks directly to what has been pestering the church.

15 **He is the image** (eikwn) **of the invisible** (aoratos) **God,**

Consider John 1:18 – no one has ever seen God; however “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known.”

Jesus is the visible point of contact for humanity to the reality of God. The idea of “image” positions him uniquely between the two realms – the spiritual realm and the created realm. As the emperors had their eikwn (image) stamped on coins, Jesus reveals for us God’s face.

**first-born** (prwtotokos) **of all creation;** (ktisis)

first-born – In OT theology “frequently ‘first born’ was employed to denote one who had a special place in the father’s love. So Israel is called ‘my beloved son’ (Ex 4:22), a phrase that expresses the particularly close relation between God and Israel.” (O’Brien)

Also an echo is Psalm 89:27 – this would apply to Christ as the Davidic Messiah king.

“As first-born, Christ is unique, being distinguished from all creation. He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since he is its Lord.” O’Brien

16 **for in him all things were created** (ktizw – aorist passive – aorist has the sense of ‘unhorizoned,’ there is no limit to the boundary of Christ’s creative activity),

This further explains Christ’s relation to the creation. Consider John 1:3 “All things were made through him, and without his was not anything made that was made.”

**in heaven and on earth, visible** (horatos) **and invisible** (aoratos),

Parallel poetry

**whether thrones** (thronos) **or dominions** (kuriotas) **or principalities** (archa) **or authorities** (echousia) –

“Probably with special reference to the Colossian heresy Paul now emphasizes that even the cosmic powers and principalities, which apparently received some prominence in that heresy, were created in Christ. ... all are subject to him.” O’Brien

These were four classes of angelic powers. “They probably represent the highest orders of the angelic realm.”

**all things were created** (perfect passive has the force of ‘stand created,’ or ‘remain created’ – “The permanence of the universe rests, then, on Christ far more than on gravity” (Robertson). The perfect tense points to past action with continuing results in the present)

**through him and for** (eis has the sense of motion towards, ‘unto him’) **him.** Christ can’t be created since all things were created through him and for him. The whole universe is Christo-centric. The use of eis has the sense that Christ is the goal to which all creation is moving. It all is moving in Christ’s direction.

Notice the three different prepositions; in (en) him, through (dia) him, for (eis) him

17 **He** (emphatic), **he is** (pro pantwn) **before all things,**

**and in him all things hold together** (sunistami – perfect active indicative – ‘to place together, to cohere’ The use of the perfect points to past action with present continuing effect – Christ held it together in the past, he holds it together now.) If the Gnostics thought that matter was evil, then this description of Christ’s relation to matter blows that thought away.

I like this image. We used to sing as children that Christ “holds the whole world in his hands.” When Christ is not the center, then things begin to fly apart.

“Apart from his continuous sustaining activity all would disintegrate” O’Brien
18. and He (‘he’ is emphatic – ‘he and no one else’), **he is the head (kephala) of the body (swma), the church (ekklesia);** Jesus’ authority is not just in the heavenly or universal realm, he is first in the life of the Spirit. **he is the beginning (archa), first born (prwtotokos) of the dead, in order that (hina) in everything he might be (ginomai – aorist middle subjunctive) preeminent (prwteuw – present active participle – ‘continually be preeminent’),**

There are echoes of the Logos passage in John’s prologue – “In the beginning was the Word …”
Since he is “firstborn of the dead” we understand that there will those who will be second born, third born and so on, from the dead. “Because I live, you shall live also.” (John 14:19).

19 For in him all the fullness (plarwma) (of God is understood) was pleased (eudokew – aorist active) to dwell (katoikew – aorist active infinitive)

There was a hardware store called Slater’s in Lancaster, an old fashioned kind of hardware store, filled with all manner of things. The saying was that if you couldn’t find it at Lowe’s then you could find it at Slater’s. If you want to find something of God, then Jesus has the whole store of God in himself. He is the authorized dealer and the sole outlet and distributer.

20 and through him to reconcile (katallassw – aorist active infinitive) all things unto (eis) himself, whether on the earth or in the heavens, making peace (eiranopoiew aorist active participle) through (dia) the blood of his cross.

He came to make peace, to reconcile all things unto himself. We understand that there is an unspoken condition of brokenness and hostility that he had to take care of by himself. The gnostic sense that there is a distance between God and humanity was in some ways correct. But not because God was distant, God had been rejected. The Gnostics by positioning themselves as the keepers of some special kind of knowledge were speaking to the fears and superstitions of the people. They looked into the heavens and could only see a fearful idea.

But Christ cuts completely through whatever fear one might have about the heavens. He has brought all things into rightness, and he holds all things and holds all things together.

“The heartbeat of the created universe is that which we have seen in Jesus Christ. His love, His self-giving, the way he liberates people, His sense of the presence of God everywhere, His way of reading life so that there is time and eternity intimately mixed up – all of this is the heartbeat of the created universe.” (English)

21 and you, ‘you’ is in the emphatic position. He goes from painting the picture of Christ, to painting their picture.
**who once were (eimi - present active participle) estranged (apallotriow – perfect passive participle) and hostile (echthros) in mind (dianoia) in the works (ergon) the evil (ponaros)**

Their wrong thinking produced wrong actions. A mind that is not submitting to God’s direction gets into trouble. Consider James 4:1-10; “friendship with the world is enmity with God.”

Estranged, hostile in mind, doing evil works – a threefold description of their past that is countered by the three positive adjectives in verse 23.

22. but now (nuni de – a sharp contrast is drawn between their former standing with emphatic form of “now”) he reconciled (v 20 aorist active indicative)

**in his body (swma) of flesh (sarkos) “The expression ‘his body of flesh’ appears to be rather heavy. It was evidently a Hebraism meaning ‘physical body’ and has an exact verbal equivalent in the Qumran literature.” (O’Brien).**

If the people pestering the Colossians were Gnostics who thought that the flesh was evil, and that one needed an esoteric knowledge to gain access to the heavens, then this teaching about reconciliation through Christ’s flesh and death would stand in stark relief to that heresy.

**by (dia) his death,**
On the basis of the beautiful theological statements about Christ, Paul applies their meaning to the lives of the Colossians. “But now …” Christ is the turning point of life to present (paristami aorist active infinitive – literally “to place beside”) you holy (agios – separated from common use for God’s use) and blameless (amwmos – this word in the Septuagint was commonly used for ceremonial purifications) and irreproachable (anegklatos – “old verbal adjective from a privative and egkalew, to call to account, to pick flaws in” Robertson)

“These three adjectives give a marvelous picture of complete purity (positive and negative, internal and external).” Robertson

We go from having a really bad past to having a wonderful present, and an even more wonderful future. before him.

Consider Romans 8 – “There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus … nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
Consider Hebrews 4:16 – “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need.”

With the temple cultic flavor that stands behind the words ‘holy, blameless, and irreproachable,’ “Lightfoot therefore concluded that these expressions, together with the prepositional phrase, ‘before him’, pointed to the bringing of the Colossians in the here and now as sacrifices into God’s presence for approval. God is thus regarded not as a judge but as the ‘examiner’ who inspects the sacrifices to make sure they are unblemished.” (O’Brien)

And we are presented to God’s inspection, not on the basis of what we have done, but by what Christ has already done on our behalf through his death. However, other scholars do not see such a line to a cultic imagery. They note that “irreproachable” was used in the legal sphere.

But Paul was not one who was afraid to mix metaphors at times, and my thought is that he may have borrowed from both spheres to make the larger point – Christ will present us to the Father, and we will be ok.

Indeed, Christ will present us (paristami – stand alongside, to place beside). – Who will be “alongside” us when we are presented to God by Christ? Christ himself will be standing at our side when he presents us to God – a wonderful image.

23 if ye (ei ge – condition of the first class assumes the fact, does not express doubt – ‘since, as is the case, as I’m sure you are’ – ge is an emphatic particle. This conditional phrase expresses confidence, not doubt).

ye continue (epimenw present active infinitive) in (or on – epi) the faith,

The preposition epi “adds to the force of the linear action in the present tense (continue and then some.)” Robertson.

We are helped when we are reminded of the ‘perseverance of the saints.’ To be reminded of this truth keeps us from falling into laxity in the faith.

stable (themelioi perfect passive participle nominative plural masculine – stabled ones) and steadfast (edraios). - these verbs were used to speak of the stability of a structure or house. Consider Jesus in Matthew 7:24-27 – we are called to “build our house on the rock.”

not shifting (metakinew present passive participle – not being shifted) Another building metaphor – as in shifting from a foundation. The Colossian area was subject to earthquakes.

from the hope of the gospel which ye heard (akouw), the one being preached (karussw aorist passive participle) in all creation (ktisis) under heaven,

of which I Paul, became (aorist middle) a servant (diakonos)

Paul began his writing to them using the plural, “We always thank God …” He now brings himself individually and personally before them.

Paul starts with a sweeping, universal description of Christ’s preeminence, power, position – the creator of all, sustainer of all, goal of all creation. And here in verse 23 he brings it all down to us – to the Colossian church, and to him – to “ye and me.”
We could read the story this way. Christ created all things and brought about reconciliation and peace just to connect to ‘ye and me.’

“The universe is verified as it becomes local.” (Dunnam)

We are the official representatives of Christ on earth. As Paul is a ‘servant’ of this gospel, then so are we. He began his letter using his official title, “Apostle of Christ Jesus.” But in terms of his relationship to them he is a fellow servant, a fellow worker, one of them and with them in the day to day work of proclaiming and living the gospel.

Some further reflections:
Paul paints for us a beautiful, sweeping, powerful picture of Christ.

On the basis of who Christ is, we discover who we are – we are also made beautiful in him.

We enter into the picture by serving Christ’s gospel and paint a new picture for others

The turning point in our lives is when we turn to Christ.

We are caught up in the poetry of the universe
And the one who is the first born from the dead
Leads us all into the new life, the new creation
And he leads us into the presence of the Father
And stands by our side as the introductions are made

As Christ is the fullness of God, then no other “vendor” can supply what we need
Anyone who would place something between us and Christ
Is seeking to rob us of what we already have gained