

Unwrapping God's Greatest Gift
THE SUPREMACY OF JESUS CHRIST
(The Greatest Gift I Ever Got)
Colossians 1:15-18

Main Theme: When we unwrap God's Christmas gift, we find out God has given us the greatest gift of all, the gift of Christ:

- *the image of God (1:15a),*
- *the creator of everything (1:15b-17); and*
- *the Head of the church (1:18).*

Colossians 1:15-18

¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ 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 and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

For many of us, as kids, the most exciting morning of the whole year was Christmas. After setting out chocolate milk and cookies for Santa Claus, my brother and I reluctantly went off to our bedroom. It was agony to realize a whole night barrier stood between us and unwrapping our gifts. Somehow, without aid of any alarm clock, my brother and I would wake up at first light, maybe 6 AM—much to the chagrin of my parents—and tiptoe into the living room. Mounds of wrapped boxes had magically appeared during the nighttime, obscuring the lowest branches of the Christmas tree.

Do you remember those days as a child? Or maybe such a scene describes the happy memories you created for your own kids now or in the past.

Do you remember what your best Christmas gift ever was? I do mine. It happened on one of those early mornings when as a nine year old, I tiptoed into the living room and saw something poking out from behind the floor-length curtain. I had wished so hard, but had not dared to hope, that I would see what I saw. Sticking out beneath the bottom of the curtain was the unmistakable form of two black tires with silver spokes. And above the tires, at just the right distance pushing out the curtain was the unmistakable projection of a handlebar. A bicycle. My bicycle. That to me was the “Greatest Gift I Ever Got.” Or, at least, I thought so at the time.

What was the greatest Christmas gift you ever got? [Sixty seconds of sharing among the congregation with those sitting next to one another.]

When we think of the “greatest Christmas gift I ever got” our minds go first to those items we unwrapped from under the tree. But these things break, rust, and become obsolete. Once I left my bike outside by mistake, it rained, and the fenders got rusty. Another time the chain broke. And eventually, it either shrank or my legs grew because by the time I was 13 I was lobbying for a newer, better bike—one with 10 speeds. The gifts you just now discussed with one another probably did the same, and few of those items are still in your possession.

Maybe for that reason you have grown to understand what I also have concluded: the greatest Christmas gift is not under the tree, but in the manger. God has given us the greatest gift of all, Christ.

Today we turn in our series, “Unwrapping God’s Greatest Gift,” to one of the pinnacle passages on the person of Christ, Colossians 1:15-18. Here we find out **God has given us the greatest gift of all, Christ: the Image of God (1:15a), the Creator of everything (1:15b-17), and the Head of the church (1:18)**. Let’s look at the brilliance of each of these claims about Christ’s Supremacy.

Colossians 1:15 begins by the bold assertion Christ *is* **the image of the invisible God**. What does this mean?

The Greek language has two words that could have been used to express here Christ’s relationship to God. One word that could have been used is the word, *homoion*. It means likeness. It could have said Christ is God-like, similar to God. Kind of how these two branches are “like” each other. But their similarity is only casual. Although they look similar, they are from different trees and might even be different species. The Holy Spirit, writing through the Apostle Paul, did not want to convey that Jesus Christ was just God-like, or similar to God. He did not write that Christ is the *homoion* of God.

The word Paul actually used is the Greek work, *eikon*. It is a word that expresses an image that is not casual, but causal. Not similar, but exact. The word *eikon* would be used in their cultural life to describe a coin that bore the image of Caesar. The coin looked like Caesar because it was struck from a die or stamp of the original image. The likeness was causal, not casual.

Listen carefully. Jesus is not just a similar to God; He is God Himself. Last week Pastor David preached from John 1 that has the same truth, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Later in that chapter in John 1:18 the Deity of Christ is re-emphasized, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” In John 14:9, Jesus said this about Himself: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” And Hebrews 1:3 states the same truth, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being.”

2 Corinthians 4:4 also uses the same word we find in Colossians 1:15, *eikon*, to repeat the

truth, Christ is the “image of God.”

Before time even began, the Triune God wrapped his greatest gift to the world within the package of his Decree. And then God waited to give his gift to the world. “*When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law that he might redeem those who were under the Law*” (Galatians 4:4-5).

God has given us the greatest gift of all, Christ: the Image of God (1:15a) and the Creator of everything (1:15b-17).

We see his role as Creator described in the last half of verse 15 through verse 17.

Christ...is the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The last phrase of verse 15 has troubled some of us who believe in Christ’s full deity. If he is God, then in what sense could he be the “firstborn of all creation?” Does this mean he was the first thing created? The heretic Arias in the 4th Century believed so and wrote, “There was a time, when he was not.” Arias argued that Jesus was not deity from this verse. Picking up the same heresy, Jehovah’s Witnesses at your doorstep will argue the same thing, that ‘firstborn’ means Jesus was a created being.

But if Jesus was created, how can verse 16 be true, in which Christ is said to be the creator of everything? “*For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*”

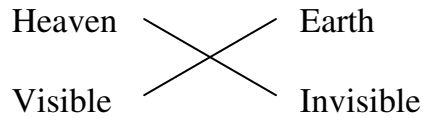
Yes, both Arias and his heretical progeny are refuted by an early church father, Athanasius who called attention to this verse 16. “*If all the creatures were created in him, he is other than the creatures, and he is not a creature but the creator of the creatures.*”

The solution of this perplexity between being “firstborn” of all creation and also the creator of everything, is that “firstborn” often did not mean first in time, but rather first in honor and authority and position. David, anointed King, was not the firstborn of his family (he was actually the youngest of eight), but Psalm 89 says of him, “*I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.*” (Ps. 89:27) Firstborn is a title of honor or position, not always of chronological order.

Jacob and Esau are another case in point. Jacob was not born first, but he bartered with Esau for the position of “firstborn” in Isaac’s family. And so he, the second born, became the “firstborn” in honor. His name was changed from Jacob to Israel. And he, the one born second, became the firstborn, the one through whom the 12 tribes of Israel were born,

through whom the Messiah came.

When we read verse 16, did you notice how Paul went out of his way to express that Christ was the creator of every thing? *For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*



This chiastic arrangement was a literary device employed to emphasize the all-inclusiveness of everything within the creative activity of Christ.

The reason for this emphasis was because of a heretical threat swirling around the people of Colossi, the heresy of Gnosticism. Gnosticism believed God was Spirit and was pure goodness. Matter, such as earth and our bodies, is material and is polluted by being material. God, who is pure could not have produced material that is evil. So Gnostics came up with fantastic suppositions that God—who could not have sullied his hands by creating matter—created semi-spiritual beings which in turn created the material universe. Paul attacks this false supposition straight on. He says that Christ—who is the very image of God himself—created all things. All things: “Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” and even the various classifications of angelic beings. “All things were created by him and for him.” Even the premise of Gnosticism is in error. Spiritual beings are not pure because they are spiritual, and material beings are not sinful because they are material. Some spiritual beings—such as Satan and demons—are spirits but are evil to the core. And even material beings, such as humanity, is not evil because we are material but because we have sinned. Some day, when we are in heaven, we will be sinless but still be material.

Not only did Christ create the universe, verse 17 says that it is by his rule and power that “*all things hold together.*” Christ is the cosmic glue that keeps galaxies from whirling off into some black hole. On the sub-atomic level, it is Christ that keeps the negatively charged electrons from colliding into the positively charged protons in the nucleus of every atom. It is Christ that tilts our earth on its axis to give us coolness in winter and warmness in summer. The helm of the universe is held by the hands which were pierced for us. As Hebrews 1 reiterates, “He upholds all things by the word of his power.”

*We come, O Christ, to You, True Son of God and man,
By Whom all things consist, In Whom all life began.
In You alone we live and move and have our being, in your love.*

God has given us the greatest gift of all, Christ: the Image of God (1:15a), the Creator of everything (1:15b-17), and the Head of the church (1:18).

Colossians speaks of yet another realm in which Christ is Supreme. He is the Supreme Head of his Church, verse 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.*

Having served as a pastor in five churches over the last 36 years, I have seen a lot of things within the church. Christ, who is the head of the Church Universal and the head of each local expression of the church, has also seen a lot of things in those churches I have served. Some events have brought a chuckle to him. Christ, the head of the church, must have laughed at me when... (Recount the time I spilled grape juice on my butter-colored shirt, washed out the stain and spent the afternoon with a shirt, half of which was soaked. Recount the time I forgot to bring a change of clothes for the baptism and had to perform the baptism wearing pants snatched out of the clothes barrel—women's nylon pants that zipped up the back.)

But the Head of the Church has seen other situations that have brought grief or even anger to him. Have I ever told you about how I received my first pastorate? (Recount the way the pastor of Belton Baptist Church invited me to go out for pie after the evening service, and there in the café told me he was having an affair. He was leaving his wife and the church that week and “next week the church is yours to lead.” The next Sunday the church—the betrayed and hurting church—was my responsibility. At such a time, it is a tremendous relief to know I am not the head of the church; Christ is. It is his responsibility to help me lead. Even though I was only 21 with two years of Multnomah Bible College, God used me.

Not only was Christ grieved toward the sin of the pastor of that church, he was also grieved and angry with the cultural sins that infected the church too. Recount how I did visitation on Saturdays and, one week went to a trailer house where I met a family and invited them to attend. The next day the six kids came, filling up the front pew. The 14-year-old kept the 12-year-old in line, and the 12-year-old kept the 10-year-old in line, etc. I found out months later that that afternoon there was an emergency Deacon meeting to discuss what that church was going to do now with their problem. The problem was that these children, you see, were black. And no black person had ever darkened the doorway of that white church. And what were they going to do with their 21-year-old Yankee pastor that had invited them! The Deacons decided not to do anything. And the children eventually received the Lord. Eventually, their parents came. And eventually they also professed faith in Christ and became part of that church. As a 21-year-old Yankee pastor, God used me to integrate that church deep in the Heart of Texas).

At such times, we remind ourselves the church is not our burden. The head of the church is Christ. Or, to use another biblical image, the Church is his Bride, and he is working

within her through distresses and in victories *“to present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and blameless (Eph. 5:27).”*

Christ is the Head of this church. We who serve here as leaders—pastors, elders, and other ministry partners—do so under allegiance to the One who is the true Head of every true church. Since He is the Head, we submit to him and his leadership:

*My Savior and my Lord, my Conqu’ror and my King,
Thy scepter and Thy sword, Thy reigning grace I sing.
Thine is the pow’r; behold I sit in willing bonds beneath Thy feet.*

What a gift God gave to us that first Christmas! God has given us the greatest gift of all, Christ: the Image of God (1:15a), the Creator of everything (1:15b-17), and the Head of the church (1:18). What a great gift, wrapped up in the package of God’s sovereign Decree, delivered as “good news of great joy for all the people.”

I spoke earlier about the best gift I ever got. A bicycle when I was nine. Actually, that was not the best Christmas gift I ever got. The best gift came later that year, when I was ten. I actually received an even greater gift. For when I was 10 years old, as best as a little boy can do, I opened my heart to Jesus. I realized Jesus—God’s Son—came to be my Savior and Leader. I unwrapped God’s greatest gift. In the intervening years my childlike faith has deepened. It hasn’t got any better, just deeper. Today I realize so much more what a treasure God’s unspeakable gift was to me—and to you if you have unwrapped it for yourself.

The Supreme Christ—Image of God, Creator of Everything, and Head of the Church—wants to be your Savior and Leader. Colossians 1:20 goes on to say he came to reconcile you to God *“by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

Are you at peace with God or still at war with him? If it is time for you to surrender, to lift up the white flag of independence and come to depend upon his mercy, I’m going to ask you take a public step, just as I took when I was only ten years old. As we sing together the truths of the lyrics of the song, “In Christ Alone,” will you indicate your acceptance of God’s Greatest Gift into your life by coming forward. Pastor David and I will meet you here at the front and pray with you.