

How Great Thou Art

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The First Christmas Carols (Advent 2007)

Colossians 1:15-20

Throughout the history of the Christian church whenever there's been a fresh wave of God's Spirit blowing into a church, or into a movement, or into a country – whenever there has been a fresh move of God's Spirit, it has always resulted in new worship songs being produced. So, for example, in the 1700's during the great evangelical awakening in England and in the U.S. under John Wesley and George Whitefield, that was followed by an incredible surge of great hymn writing by people like Charles Wesley and John Newton.

In the 20th century as God's Spirit drew millions of young people to Christ in the Jesus Movement, there was an amazing outburst of worship music that followed in Maranatha Music, in Hosanna Integrity, our own movement, the Vineyard during the 1980's and 1990's. One church historian said this,

It would have been strange indeed if the [early] Church had remained songless in that first glorious dawn when the light from Christ came breaking across the horizons, making all things new. ~A.B. Macdonald

The fact is the Christian church was birthed in song. When Jesus Christ came to earth, what we find in the early chapters of Luke is song after song. Mary the mother of Jesus sings; John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, sings; there was a huge choir of angels who appeared to shepherds attending their flock at night that burst out in songs of praise to the Lord singing:

Luke 2:14

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When Jesus was presented in the Temple by his parents to be circumcised as an 8-day old Jewish boy, the elderly Simeon sees him and bursts out in song:

Luke 2:29-32

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

And when the apostle John was taken up in a vision to heaven, he writes in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, that what he heard and saw in heaven was singing. We read this in Revelation 5:8-10,

Rev. 5:8-10

And when he [Jesus] had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. 9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

And we read in vv. 11-12 these words:

Rev. 5:11-12

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they were singing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Finally, we read in Revelation 5:13-14,

Rev. 5:13-14

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" 14 The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

If you are a Christian, you better learn to love to sing because you will be doing a lot of that when you see Jesus face to face in heaven. In fact, you could say that a Christian who has no desire to sing praise to Jesus is a contradiction in terms. If you have ever experienced the Holy Spirit in your life, one of the results is that you are going to want to sing praises to Jesus.

So let me ask you a question: Do you like singing songs of praise to Jesus? Does your heart leap sometimes when you worship Jesus in song? Do you look forward to worshipping Jesus week by week in the fellowship of his people? Have you ever found yourself so filled with God's Spirit that the only reasonable thing for you to do was worship Jesus Christ?

Again, because the earliest church was a Spirit-filled church, the earliest Christians composed worship songs and hymns to Jesus. Now, Bible scholars see traces of these earliest church hymns in a number of New Testament texts. They find traces of early Christian worship songs in Colossians 1:15-20, which we are going to look at today.

And we find traces of early Christian worship songs in Phil. 2:5-11, which we will look at next weekend; and in John 1:1-18, which we'll look at in future weeks. But each of these early Christian hymns focus on the amazing and glorious person of Jesus Christ.

For my Advent series – advent by the way, is the season in the church calendar that prepares us for the coming of Jesus into the world at Christmas – but for my Advent Series, what I'm going to do is look at each of these early Christian hymns. I've titled this Advent Series: The Earliest Christmas Carols and today's talk from Colossians 1.15-20, I've titled "How Great Thou Art."

Colossians 1:15-20

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For 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. 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. 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.

Again, many scholars believe that in these words Paul was quoting an early Christian hymn. What we don't know is whether Paul authored the hymn, or whether he added his own touches to an existing hymn. But it seems clear that this passage embodies an early Christian worship song.

Let me share with you a story. A little over a hundred years ago, back in the 1890's, there was a huge world fair that was held in Chicago. The World's Fair was designed to show off America and its achievements, but particularly Chicago as a world-class city to the rest of the world. Chicago had recovered from its terrible fire and it was showing the rest of the world, "Look at us! We've arrived." And the show was amazing. It drew record crowds. 21 million people went to that World Fair. These were the days before the automobile.

One of the features at this World's Fair was something called "The World Parliament of Religions" in which representatives of the world's religions met to share their mutual philosophies and to try to together come up with a new religion. Some Christians in the city of Chicago tried to organize a protest against this World Parliament of Religions. They sought out D.L. Moody, who was the Billy Graham of his day. They wanted Moody to go on the attack against this World Parliament of Religions.

But Moody refused to attack. Instead, he rented theatres all over the city of Chicago and set up preaching posts with preachers and evangelists. He said, "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to him."

Today, in the U.S. we are living in the age of pluralism. America has become the marketplace of different faiths. Here in our city we have tens of thousands of Muslims from various Muslim traditions. We have Hindus and Buddhists, and practitioners of Wicca. There are many Jews like myself living in this city along with growing numbers of agnostics and atheists, to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of church attenders who have never actually come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. So, what should we who are followers of Jesus do regarding other faiths, other religious traditions? Should we go on the attack? Rail against these other religions; point out their flaws on the radio?

The Apostle Paul's basic method for dealing with the extraordinary spiritual pluralism existing in the city of Colossae was to present Jesus in such an attractive way; Jesus is so amazing, so wonderful and winsome that men and women from all different faith backgrounds would turn to Christ for salvation.

Now, this doesn't mean that we can never offer a generous critique of another faith or engage in honest, healthy dialogue about the differences that we have. We aren't interested in trying to merge faiths together as if there are no hard edge differences. But the basic pattern that we Christians follow in dealing with pluralism is the pattern laid out by the apostle Paul and the strategy adopted by the great evangelist, D.L. Moody. It is not to put other faiths down; rather, it is to lift Jesus up. In reference to the cross, Jesus said:

When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men and women to myself.

Again, if our desire is to reach people for Christ, then our basic approach is not to put other faiths down. It is to lift Jesus up. This was Paul's recommendation, by the way, to the Christian Gentiles who lived in the early church in Rome. The question was: How could these Christian Gentiles ever hope to reach their Jewish neighbors who had not yet placed their faith in Jesus? Paul's recommendation was to live such exemplary lives that you make Jewish people jealous of your relationship with their Messiah, Jesus. Here is what Paul says in Romans 11:13-14,

Romans 11:13-14

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.

This was, by the way, how I as a Jewish person was reached and came to faith in Jesus. It was not by having my Jewish faith attacked, or having all the errors of modern Judaism critiqued. It was because I met a young woman who lived such an exemplary life that I wanted to know what her secret was. She made Jesus so attractive that I wanted to know him too.

Let me ask those of you who have made a decision in your life to be followers of Jesus – I know not all of you have done that – not all of you sitting here consider yourselves to be followers of Jesus – but for those of you who do, is this your method of trying to reach other people? Do you really attempt in your own life to make Jesus so attractive that your mother, father, your sister or brother, your children, your dearest friends who you care about might come into a relationship with him? Is the approach you take to lift Jesus up so that Jesus would draw that person to himself? Is that your approach in reaching people you care about for Christ?

You say, “Well how do I do that? How do I make Jesus attractive?” I think it is by attempting to live our lives in such a way that in every area of our lives, we seek to please Jesus – the decisions we make at work, the way we speak, whether we choose to forgive someone or not, whether we choose to bite our tongue or go on the attack, whether we choose to let someone advance ahead of you, whether you take a servant role – but in the practical choices of our lives, we seek to please Jesus. That’s what makes him attractive. It is the attitude displayed in my life’s verse in Luke 5.5, where Peter we read:

Luke 5:5

Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

I wouldn’t put myself at risk for anyone else. I wouldn’t be as generous as I’m being in my giving for anyone else. I wouldn’t hang in there in a difficult marriage for anyone else. But because you say so, Jesus, I will...

So, in lifting Jesus up and making him attractive to the Colossians who were living in the midst of great religious pluralism and lots of competing faiths, the Apostle Paul speaks about the greatness of Jesus Christ. If you were to break down this passage, it falls neatly into two sections:

1. In verses 15-17, The Apostle Paul is celebrating Jesus as being supreme over creation.
 2. And in vv. 18-20, the Apostle Paul holds up Jesus as supreme over the new creation.
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1. In verses 15-17 Jesus is lifted up as supreme over the universe.
 2. And, in vv. 18-20, Jesus is lifted up as supreme over the church.

Let’s look at this then. Why is Jesus supreme over creation?

Well, first of all, he is supreme as God.

Supreme as God

We read in v. 15,

Col. 1:15

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

He is the image of the invisible God. In v. 19 we read this:

Col. 1:19

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

This is a remarkable statement regarding Jesus. All that is God dwelt in Jesus. Now, it says in v. 15 that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. That word "Image" comes from the Greek word "Eikon"

Image = Eikon

Sometimes the Greek word "eikon" meant "picture." So you could say that Jesus is the visible portrait of the invisible God. We can't see God, but Jesus is the visible portrait of the invisible God. But the way Paul uses this word "eikon" here, he is going beyond just saying that Jesus is the portrait of the invisible God. He is saying that Jesus is the revealer of what God is really like. Let me apply this in a couple of different directions.

Have you ever talked with someone who said to you, "I don't believe in God. You talk so much about God, well, I don't believe in God." Maybe you have a teenager who has said that to you: I just don't believe in God, Mom and Dad. I just don't believe. Or you have a friend who can't figure out why you spend so much time in church: I just don't believe in God.

How do you respond to someone who claims to be an atheist? Well, it is certainly possible to marshal the arguments in favor of God's existence. There are a number of great books detailing some of the arguments for God's existence. For example, there is an excellent book by JP Moreland titled:

"Does God Exist? The Debate Between Theists and Atheists" ~ J.P. Moreland

There is another wonderful book titled "God, The Evidence" by Patrick Glynn that offers evidences for God's existence; scientific, ethical.

"God The Evidence" ~ Patrick Glynn

There is a great book by one of my favorite authors, Alister McGrath titled "Intellectuals Don't Need God". Alister McGrath has his doctorate in microbiology and he has a doctorate in theology. He is very, very smart and he teaches at Oxford University.

"Intellectuals Don't Need God" ~Alister McGrath

Certainly, you could read and digest them and then communicate some of the arguments in these books, or pass them along to a friend who says they are an atheist. But let me suggest an easier approach to someone who says, "I just don't believe in God. I'm an atheist." Here is an easier approach. You might say, "Well, you say you don't believe in God. Let me ask you a question: what kind of God don't you believe in?" And then listen to the answer:

"I just can't believe in a God who would let little children be abused without working any kind of justice in this world."

"I can't believe in a God who just sits up in heaven and watches a world suffer so much violence without lifting a finger to help."

"I just can't believe in a God who gets pleasure out of giving people cancer."

"I can't believe in a God who has a long white beard."

When someone says, "I don't believe in God; I can't believe in God," ask them what kind of God don't you believe in. And then with all sincerity, after listening, you can say, "Well, I couldn't believe in that kind of God either. I don't believe in that God who sits up in heaven and won't lift a finger to help people out. I don't believe in a God who watches children getting abused and won't work justice on their behalf. I don't believe in a God with a long white beard. If by God, you are talking about some being who remains detached from the world that he created and is just defined by dry-as-shredded-wheat doctrines, but offers no relationship with us as human beings, I don't believe in that God either. Why would we want to believe in a God who is like that?"

Here is my starting point for understanding who God is. I ask myself the question: who is the God that Jesus believed in? Who is the God that Jesus knew about and spoke to the people about? Jesus believed in, and knew the passionate, compassionate God. The God who is big enough to create the entire world and tender enough to care about every little sparrow that fell to the earth and died. The God who heard the cry of his people Israel when they were enslaved in slavery and reached out his arm to save them. I believe in the God that Jesus believed in and if this God that Jesus knew came to earth, took on human flesh, what would that God look like?

The apostle Paul said that that God would look like Jesus.

Let me drill this down even more. Does it matter if you call Jesus God Almighty, the Eternal One, the Uncreated One, the only true Revealer of God? Does it matter?

It matters for a hundred reasons. But one of the most important is how we human beings finally solve life's ultimate questions, which are: Is there a God and can we come to know this God? There are no more important questions that you could ever ask or answer than is there a God and can you and I as ordinary human beings come to know this God?

See, if Jesus is the image of the invisible God, as Paul says, then there is a God and we can know him by looking at Jesus, if Jesus perfectly reveals the Father, if he is the exact representation of the Eternal God, then to see Jesus is to see God. To hear Jesus is to hear God. As Christ himself said in John 14:9,

John 14:9

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

John 12:44-45

Then Jesus cried out, "Those who believe in me do not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. 45 When they look at me, they see the one who sent me.

To see Jesus is to see God; to look at Jesus is to look at God; to know Jesus is to know God. That's why Jesus said in John 8:19 these words:

John 8:19

Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

So when the rubber meets the road in our lives, when we are pressed to the limit and we wonder how would God, who is invisible, feel about this? What would God think? What would God say? What is God like? We can with confidence say, "I know what God thinks about something. I know what God feels. I know what God is like because Jesus made this invisible God visible." If Jesus is God, then I have a freeze-frame image of the Eternal God in the face, the eyes, and the hands of Jesus Christ.

Does God care about the death of a child? Well, read the gospels. Did Jesus care about the death of a child? He did; and, therefore, we know God cares.

What is God's view of crowds at Ohio Stadium or the crowds that fill the streets of the world's largest cities – New York, Bombay, Karachi, Tokyo? What was Jesus' view of crowds? The gospels say, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them." That's how God look at crowds of people.

What is God's view of women? What does God think about weddings? What does God feel about sick people? What was Jesus' view of women, or weddings, or sick people?

How about this one: How does God respond to someone who has lived a double life, who has denied big time what they said they believed about Christ, someone who has gone ahead and blown up their life; someone who has sinned against God, but turns to God for forgiveness? How does God relate to someone who has failed hugely and asks for God's mercy? Well, how did Jesus respond to people who failed hugely and lived inconsistently with what they professed? How did Jesus relate to Peter who denied him and the woman caught in adultery, and the woman who was married five times? He forgave them. He welcomed them back into fellowship and relationship with himself. That is God's view of someone who has denied what they said they believed and blown up their lives!

Jesus is supreme. Jesus is great because Jesus is God.

Jesus is also supreme as the first born over all creation.

Supreme as first born

Col. 1:15

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Now, this little phrase, first born, is a favorite of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses deny that Jesus is fully God and they say that Jesus had a beginning; that he is the highest of the created beings. And so they go to this phrase and say, "look here, he is the first born – clearly that means that he is the first among all created beings."

That is superficially convincing if you wrench the phrase, first born over all creation, entirely out of context. The context of this phrase, the first born, is Paul's celebration of Christ as supreme. If the Jehovah Witness interpretation of first born is right – he is the first born of God's creatures – then Paul would be contradicting himself in the very next verse when he says,

Col. 1:16

For 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.

In v.17 he is before all things:

Col. 1:17

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

Paul is saying to us far from being creature, this Jesus Christ about whom this worship song is written is the Creator. What does firstborn mean if it doesn't mean the first of God's creatures?

Well, we have to look back at the way the Bible uses this term "first born." The way the Bible uses the term "first born" is to communicate that the first born is not necessarily the one who is first in the birth order, but he is the one in the family that we would say today is the #1 Son. So, for example, in Genesis the one who is first in the birth order, Esau, sold his right as first born to his brother, Jacob. A generation later, Jacob makes it clear that it is not the son who was born first, Rueben, who has the rights of first born, but it was Joseph. Joseph is the #1 son. And then a generation after that when Joseph brings his own sons to Jacob, Jacob takes the one who is born second and he designates the second in the birth order as the "first born" the #1 son. The #1 son is the heir of the father.

And that is what the apostle Paul is getting at here. He is not saying anything about birth order. He is saying that Jesus is the #1 son and the heir of God the Father. He is the one for whom the whole universe was made. He is supreme as God. He is supreme as first born. He is the #1 Son. And he is supreme as Creator.

Supreme as Creator

Look at v. 16,

Col 1:16

For 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.

How does it affect us to call Jesus the Creator?

Well, if we look at Colossians 1:15-20 as a whole, there is one word that jumps out because of its repetition in this text. The word is "all."

Col. 1:15-20

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For 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. 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. 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.

All...all...all...all – The Colossians taught that God was separated from his creation by a series of emanations that went down a ladder from God to Jesus to angels, down, down, down the rungs of the ladder to an evil, material world. And they taught that the material world was bad and only the spiritual world was good. We call that philosophy, that separates spiritual things from material things, dualism.

Dualism

Paul says in v. 16

Col. 1:16

For 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.

In other words, Christ, who is the Creator, made the visible world and the invisible world. Christ, the Creator, made the physical world and the spiritual world. And you know what the Bible says about the physical world. Way back in Genesis 1 when God created the world, he looked at it and he said, "It is good." And when he created human beings, God said, "What I've done is very good."

Don't you ever wonder what God thinks when we human beings enjoy the material world? When I sat down at Thanksgiving last week along with a dozen friends and family, I got to eat turkey, stuffing, salad, vegetables, homemade pie, and ice cream on top of the pie, and a little piece of cake to go with that ice cream and pie. What did God think as he watched me eat? What does God think when you enjoy the material world – when you enjoy a great meal? Or you exercise? Or you put up shelves in your house? Or you walk on the beach holding the hand of your spouse, or your girlfriend or boyfriend? What does God think? Is God happy with our enjoyment of the material world? Or does he like it only when we sit alone in a room and quietly pray and read our Bibles?

Over the course of about 10 years while my kids were growing up, our family used to go down to a condo that my dad owned in South Florida. And at night my wife, Marlene, and I would walk along the beach. We would roll up our pant legs and walk in the warm waters of the South Atlantic. One evening there was a full moon was out and there was a nice ocean breeze blowing. Marlene and I held hands and every once in a while we would stop and kiss. How does God feel when a married couple kisses on a beach or enjoys the ocean or soaks up

the sounds and smells of a beautiful sandy beach? Does he only like it when you go to Christian meetings, or when you are involved in narrowly defined religious activities?

If Jesus is the Creator not just of the invisible spiritual realm, but of the visible material realm, and God calls the material realm “good” then our enjoyment of what God has made, when we use things according to God’s guidelines, makes God very happy.

C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian author, who taught for years at Oxford University, said,

There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant us to be purely spiritual creatures. That’s why he uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us. We may think that’s crude and unspiritual. God does not. He invented eating. He likes matter. He created it.

I know, friends, that some muddle-headed Christians have taught as if Christianity thought that sex, the body, or pleasure was bad. I know that there have been muddled headed Christians who climbed flag poles and tore at their flesh and tried to escape this material world thinking that our material bodies were bad. But they were wrong. Christianity properly understood from the Bible affirms this world and our bodies more than any other religion. See, we Christians alone believe that God himself took on a human body. And we also believe that we are going to live forever in bodies. We are not going to just float around as some wispy ghosts in heaven. We are going to forever be embodied in our new resurrection bodies.

So when you enjoy the material world, invite Jesus into your joy. Welcome his presence as you eat, as you exercise, as you work, or run, as you married couples make love, as you enjoy art, or a walk in the woods, or fixing up your house. Return thanks to Jesus. Worship him as Creator. Every square inch of the universe belongs to him and was made by him.

He is supreme as the creator. He is supreme as the pre-existent one, v. 17.

Supreme as the pre-existent one

Col. 1:17

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

We are going to spend a lot more time talking about the pre-existence of God the Son when we look at John 1. But suffice it to say in touching on this today that when the apostle John wrote his book of Revelation, he quotes God in Revelation 1:8 saying this:

Rev 1:8

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

This is not Christ talking; this is Almighty God. He calls himself "Alpha and Omega" which is the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In other words, in the alphabet, you can't speak of anything that comes before Alpha. There is no before Alpha in the Greek alphabet. And there is nothing after Omega. There is no after omega in the alphabet. There is nothing before God and there is nothing after God. He is reality. No matter how far back you go, you are going to encounter God. And no matter how far forward you go, you are going to encounter God. You can't escape God.

Now God underlines this revelation about himself in Isaiah 44.6 when he says:

Isaiah 44:6

"This is what the Lord says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.

God always has been before anything else was there was God. And God won't be outlasted by anything. This is what it means to be God.

So what does this have to do with Jesus? It has everything to do with Jesus. Near the end of John's revelation, John quotes Jesus Christ as saying,

Revelation 22:12-13

"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Revelation 22:16

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

Now, this is Christ talking here. This is not God the Father. There can't be two Alphas and Omegas unless these two are one. Two can't be the first; and, two can't be the last unless they're one. So Christ is claiming for himself in Revelation a shared being, a shared existence with God. That gives him a glory; that gives him a greatness; that gives him a supremacy that calls forth our worship.

And finally, in this section on creation, Christ is not only supreme as God, as first born, as the pre-existent one, as creator, but Christ is supreme as the Sustainer of Creation.

Supreme as sustainer of creation

In v. 17 we read this:

Col. 1:17

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

Christ didn't just wind up the universe and release it to run on its own. He is not an absentee landlord, a distant, aloof landlord. Christ is actively involved sustaining the universe, holding it up, holding it together.

These days it is so hard to find service people who will work on all the gadgets that are sold to us. What do you do when your cell phone breaks, or your iPod breaks, or your Palm Pilot breaks. What do you do?

Well, you probably do what I do – you throw it away and get a new one because if you've ever tried to fix a cell phone, you find out that it is going to cost you \$175 to have the cell phone fixed because you dropped it in the bath tub. And maybe they can get it back to you after nine weeks.

Paul is saying that Jesus is not like this. Paul is saying that Jesus services what he sells. He just doesn't make things, he sustains what he makes. He holds all things together, it says.

These days I can't imagine getting married if the two people getting married don't have Christ in the very center of their lives. There are so many centrifugal forces pulling couples apart. When a young couple stands up in front of a church and they exchange their vows with each other, I think to myself: What is it that is going to keep this couple together for the next 50 years through all of the hard times that we human beings inevitably go through – our illnesses, miscarriages, deaths, financial problems, wayward kids, layoffs? Over a lifetime we get fat, we get old, we get bald, we get sick, we change. What energy source can a young couple tap into to keep their love for each other alive for the long-term?

Only Jesus. He holds all things together, including marriages.

Look at our church we have such extraordinary diversity here at Vineyard Columbus. But on any given weekend, when I stand up to preach, I'm speaking to lifelong Christians, people who have been following Jesus for 30, 40, 50 years; and I'm speaking to newcomers who have never been to church before, people who have never read the Bible, don't know the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament; people who have their Master's Degree or their doctorates in theology; I'm speaking to retirees and single moms who are on state assistance; people with terminal cancer and the physicians who treat them. I'm talking to folks who come from Baptist backgrounds, Pentecostal backgrounds, Roman Catholics, and people from Muslim backgrounds, and

Hindu backgrounds, and Buddhist backgrounds, and addicts of every kind, and international students; corporate executives and homeless people; I'm speaking to far right Republicans and far left Democrats and everyone in between; Hispanics, African Americans, Africans, Asians, Caucasians; I'm speaking to big city people, rural community folks – what is it that keeps our folks from flying apart? How can we all possibly, with our diverse backgrounds, and diverse perspectives on so many different issues, keep walking together? Who is big enough? Who is great enough to keep this church united?

Only Jesus. Only if you commit yourself to follow the leadership of Jesus and only if I and the other leaders in the church commit ourselves to follow the leadership of Jesus can this thing called Vineyard Columbus hold together.

Christ is supreme not only over creation, but over the new creation. V. 18,

Col. 1:18

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.

Here Paul asserts that Jesus is over life and death.

Supreme over life and death

Jesus is the beginning of the new creation. He is not just the beginning of the old creation – in making the visible and invisible worlds - but he is the beginning of the new creation, the creation that took place through his life, death, and resurrection. He is the first fruits of the resurrection, Paul says in 1 Cor. 15, the harbinger of more resurrections to come. When it says here that Christ is the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy, what is Paul saying? How is he singing of Christ's greatness there?

What the apostle Paul is saying is that Christ is sufficient for any problem you currently face, and any problem or difficulty you or this world will ever face. There is nothing that you are facing; there is nothing that you will ever face that Christ, as the Great One, is inadequate to handle. Think about your greatest fear. What if...and then for you, you just fill in the blanks...

What if your spouse dies?

What if you got cancer?

What if your kid goes off the rails?

What if you never get married?

What if you can't get pregnant?

If you are going to have peace in this broken, fallen world, you need to be related to someone who loves you and who is bigger than any problem you ever faced.

It doesn't matter what you go through, Christ is bigger than that; Christ is greater than that; Christ is sufficient to handle anything. That's why the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:12-13 was able to say this:

Phil. 4:12-13

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

How many of you today could say this? I can do anything; I could handle anything – not in myself – in myself I collapse under the least weight; in myself I have no capacity to bear up; but, because he is so great and he loves me, I can do anything and handle anything through Christ who gives me strength.

He is supreme in life and death; and, he is supreme over our salvation.

Supreme over our salvation

The Bible is not the story of human beings' search for God. The Bible is the story of God's search for human beings. It is the story not of our initiative and our religious seeking; it is the story of God's initiative, how God set about making peace with us. For all the ways that we've turned our backs on God, for all the ways our relationship with God is broken; all the times that we've said "no" to God, pushed him to the margins of our lives, God has made provision for you and me to be at peace with him through the sacrificial death of his Son Jesus Christ. Peace with God is not based on some human achievement, what we must do. Peace with God is based on human acceptance of what God has done through Jesus Christ.

And what God has done is incredible. He has reconciled all things to himself. We need to read that phrase, all things, in the context of the whole of the Bible. We don't want to pull it out and develop some sort of distorted universalism. God has not reconciled to himself fallen angels, demons, and Satan. They will be judged, the Bible tells us, and cast into the Lake of Fire. God does not reconcile to himself those who actively reject God.

But this passage does tell us that there is a wideness to the mercy of God. There is a reason why when you see what God has done in Christ, your only proper response is to worship him because there is a wideness in the mercy of God. I know that the Bible says that it is difficult to get in and that we need to enter through the narrow gate. Some understand this as God reserving just a few places for people in heaven. But the vast majority of those who have ever lived are going to end up in a Christ-less eternity.

But the bible gives us every reason to believe that there are going to be, in fact, vast uncountable numbers of people who have found their way somehow through the gate. It says in Revelation 7:9-10,

Rev. 7:9-10

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

I don't play the numbers game with people: what percentage of all who have lived are going to enter? Who is not going to enter? I know as a pastor when I do a funeral and some loved one says to me, "You know, I don't know about my mom. There were signs in her life that she did reach out for Christ in salvation, but there were other inconsistencies, great inconsistencies, in her life. I don't know about mom." I often will say to someone, "I don't know either. But I'm holding out for God's generosity. There is a wideness to the mercy of God."

And this fills me with a desire to worship Jesus Christ. He is great. Let's pray.

How Great Thou Art

Rich Nathan

December 1-2, 2007

The First Christmas Carols (Advent 2007)

Colossians 1:15-20

I. Singing and Signs of Spiritual Life

II. The Way to Approach Other Faiths

III. The Greatness of Jesus Christ

A. Supreme Over Creation

1. Supreme as God (Col. 1.15, 19)
2. Supreme as First Born (Col. 1.15)
3. Supreme as Creator (Col. 1.16)
4. Supreme as the Pre-Existent One (Col. 1.17)
5. Supreme as the Sustainer of Creation (Col. 1.17)

B. Supreme Over the New Creation

1. Supreme Over Life and Death (Col. 1.18)
2. Supreme Over Our Salvation (Col. 1.20)

