

Truth, Tragedy, and Triumph | *Colossians 1:15-23*

Series: Everything In Christ

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15 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.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Colossians 1 (NIV)

When I was little, maybe around 5 or 6 years old, my family loaded up the van set off for the magical land...of Colorado.

Our plan was to visit our cousins, hang out in Estes Park, drive the winding road up Pikes Peak, waste money at gift shops...all the classic family-vacation sort of stuff. But for me, more important than roadside picnics or overpriced nick-nacks was that I was finally, FINALLY going to see *the mountains*.

As a kid growing up in Kansas, I had been told that in some places on planet earth the rolling green hills that I thought of as pretty big only got bigger and bigger, becoming so huge that eventually the grass and trees stopped growing, replaced instead by snow capped peaks, some of which rose even above the clouds.

I had of course seen pictures and videos of mountains, but now I was going to get to see the real thing. So as we cruised down I-70 I kept my eyes glued to the windows, not wanting to miss the moment the plains of Kansas turned into the mountain ranges of Colorado.

Two things left me disappointed that day: the first, as many of you are aware, Western KS becomes Eastern Colorado with no discernable difference in the landscape. The "Welcome to Colorado!" sign at the state border is surrounded as far as the eye can see by more...flat...prairie. Not what I had been hoping for.

The second problem was that by the time we got far enough into Colorado for the mountains to appear...it was nighttime. All I could see was the vague suggestion of something tremendous and massive out there on the dark horizon.

So that night, after we got the van unloaded at my cousin's house, I went to bed a little bit bummed that I'd missed my chance to see the mountains that day.

But the next morning...the sun came up...and I looked outside...and the moment of seeing those mountains for the first time is one of the most vivid, powerful memories I have. I was absolutely in awe, wonder-struck, and instantly understood what singer/songwriter John Denver called the "Rocky Mountain high" – a true love of the beauty and grandeur of those incredible mountains.

This morning, our study of Colossians brings us to 1:15-23. This is perhaps the most well-known passage in the entire letter because it describes the absolute supremacy and cosmic-significance of Jesus Christ. Throughout vv1-14, the Apostle Paul praised the believers of Colossae for their faith in Christ and hope in His Gospel. He gave some specifics about Jesus and his Good News, but compared to what he says in our passage this morning they were just shadows and suggestions on the dusky horizon. Beginning in v15 the sun rises and we are treated to a full, majestic vision of our God, our Savior, and their plan for our salvation.

In these verses we find ***the truth, the tragedy, and the triumph*** of our God and His Gospel.

- ***The truth***: that Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends.
- ***The tragedy***: that Because of our sin we lose everything.
- ***The triumph***: that now God, through Christ, has done everything necessary for us to be redeemed.

I have to confess a feeling of inadequacy in preaching this passage. What is written in these verses is a powerful and magisterial description of the all encompassing greatness of God. Paul writes about the cosmic mystery of the very roots and foundations of the universe. About the meeting of our deepest needs, and the mending of our most painful brokenness, by a powerful and loving God.

The nature of preaching is to break things down into explainable pieces, but today it feels a little bit like telling you about how the slow crashing together of tectonic plates made the mountains instead of just sitting in awe before the majestic formations themselves.

So while we seek to better understand this passage this morning, don't get so distracted by the details that you miss out on the brilliance and beauty of what we read today.

We'll begin by considering ***The Truth: Jesus Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends.***

In vv15-20, Paul goes back and forth between telling us who Jesus is, and why it matters so much that we know who Jesus is.

We are told that Jesus is the "*image of the invisible God*".

Some of you may be familiar with the phrase "the image of God" because of its use in Genesis 1, where we are told that

"God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created

them” (v27).

Being a bearer of God’s image means far more than looking like Him, or sharing some of the same traits as God. To be “in the image of God” means to be a representative of his authority – “to rule” as it says in Genesis 1:26. In the same way that kings would build statues of the themselves in order to remind their subjects who was in charge, or how they would grant some of their power and authority to the governors or leaders spread throughout their kingdom, so too does the Bible describe God giving some authority to humanity by virtue of being image-bearers. You and I are image-bearers. We have a responsibility to represent God and exercise authority on this earth...which we don’t always do so well (but more on that later).

This idea of image-bearing is also assigned to Jesus in Colossians 1:15...but in a stunningly greater way than it was ever given to us. Jesus is not “*made in the image of God*” (as you and I and every other human being are)...he ***IS the image of God***.

Jesus is the embodied, incarnate, manifest presence of God among us. He makes the “*invisible God*” – who is too wondrous, too holy, too completely “other” for us to fully comprehend, and too glorious for us to see or experience without coming undone – Jesus makes *that God* visible by humbling himself to be bound to flesh and blood, just like us. In the Gospel of John the importance of Jesus being fully God yet fully human is made clear:

18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John 1

Thanks to Jesus we can finally, blessedly get to know our God. It is through God’s Son that we may draw close to the Father.

Jesus is also “*the firstborn over all creation*”. We must understand this metaphorically. In the same way that the firstborn son had certain privileges and prominence in the ancient world, so too does Christ – the coeternal Son of God – have preeminence before all creation. “Firstborn” is a title of sovereignty, not an indicator of himself having been created. To say otherwise is to argue against a landslide of biblical evidence declaring Jesus as eternal and uncreated, not to mention that the very next verse makes it clear that anything that has ever been created was created because of Jesus:

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.

Colossians 1

Christ is not created. He is The Creator. If it is in heaven or on earth, if it’s visible or invisible, if it exists outside of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, then Jesus had a hand in creating it. And just to be clear how superior Christ’s power and position really is, Paul lists off four categories that were commonly associated with supernatural, spiritual forces: thrones, power, rulers, and authorities. All of these owe their existence and their allegiance to Christ.

This is such a massive vision for who Christ is and why that matters...but Paul is not done yet.

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

Christ is before all things, again affirming that nothing came before Christ. We've got down, we're good there.

However, we've got something new and very cool in the second half of this sentence. All things are held together by Christ. ***The universe owes its continuing existence to Jesus.***

Reality is not held together by laws or virtues or ideas or mistakes. It is completely dependent on and continuously sustained by One Person. And that person is none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This should make your jaw drop. This should blow your mind. This should create 10,000x the awe and wonder that the mountains created in the eyes and heart of little six year old Sam.

Take a breath. The only reason you can is because of Christ.

Feel something solid around you – the ground beneath your feet or the cushion of your chair. The only reason that object is tangible is because Christ makes it so.

Think about someone you care about. The only reason you can think, the only reason you can love, the only reason there is a person you can fondly recall is because Christ says “yes” to your mind and your heart and to the people around you.

All things in creation are because of Christ. All things continue to exist in creation only because of Christ.

The magnitude of His majesty, of His sovereignty, and of our absolute dependence on him...is immeasurable.

In Jesus all things hold together. ***The truth is that Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends.***

This is a lot to comprehend...and yet, there is more.

On the surface, it might seem odd that Paul shifts from this incredible cosmic vision of the almighty God and his image-bearing Son, to suddenly talk about “the church” in v18:

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.

Why did Paul think this distinction of Christ's being the head of the church so important that it needed to be mentioned in the same place as Jesus' unparalleled position over all creation?

So far we've learned that Christ is eternally and sovereignly before all creation, that he is preeminently above all creation, and that he is responsible for the continued existence of all creation.

Yet we still need some room on our "just how amazing is Jesus?!" list. Because he is also the ultimate authority and the firstborn *of the New Creation*. The death and resurrection of Jesus gave him the right to establish a new and glorious future for everything that is found in him.

With the fullness of God, and the mission of reconciliation, Jesus died on the bloody cross – only to then defeat death through his resurrection and forge an unconquerable peace for all things.

The church is the New Creation community that heralds this incredible truth. To be a part of the church – the local church, the global church, and the cosmic eternal church of all believers – is to be a part of something where death is defeated and life flourishes, in full reconciliation with our God, forever.

Jesus very literally has **all supremacy**. Over life. Over death. Over heaven. Over earth. Over the past, present, and the fully redeemed future to come. Christ rules over all. You cannot find a better source for hope or salvation or glory...than Jesus.

The truth is that Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends.

The question you must ask yourself, then, is this: Christ is first in everything...***but is he first in your heart?***

Really and truly, is this awesome, astounding, mind blowing, heart transforming vision of who Jesus and why He matters...is this truth what rules over your heart and soul and mind and strength? Is Jesus the one who defines your hope and gives your existence its meaning? Is he first in your heart?

For some, you may very genuinely feel your answer to this is "yes", and to you I echo Paul's praise for your faith and urge you to continue. Choose to make Christ first in your heart each and every day.

For others, you might feel as though the answer to this question is an honest "no", or perhaps "I am not sure". And to you, I offer this encouragement: let God hold your chin up and lead your way, because this passage assures us that no matter how wayward or far from God we may feel now...it once was far, far worse.

Though it is true that *Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends*, in v21 we are reminded of ***The tragedy: Because of our sin we lose everything.***

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

Remember earlier when I said we'd get back to the little problem of not being great image-bearers of God? Yeah, well, here we are.

Paul gets really, really personal in v21. Once upon a time YOU were alienated from God, YOU were enemies of God, YOU had a mind and a life full of evil behavior that YOU are responsible for.

Our sin, evidenced by the evil things we do and think and say, causes alienation – complete separation from the holy God who desperately wants to be with us, but cannot abide our wilful, terrible, rebellious disobedience.

The tragedy is most certainly our alienation, our insurmountable rejection and separation from God. But the tragedy is also the broken heart of God our Father, which lies shattered and scattered across the pages of Scripture and throughout the millennia of human history.

When God created humanity he called us “very good”. We responded by rejecting him.

When he tried to care for and guide his children, we responded by reveling in violence and murder and unspeakable immorality.

When he described himself as “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”, we responded with petulant and fickle calls of “prove it” over and over again, always hoping for more but rarely hoping for Him.

When he tried to discipline us in love, we abandoned him for false gods and cheap idols.

When he sent his Son, his Only beloved Son, to help us finally see Him, unveiled to the world for the first time...we murdered him with whips and nails and unimaginable sorrow.

This is our story. This is our tragedy. This is how we treated and often continue to treat the God who loves us and the Son who created and sustains us.

It’s ugly. It’s awful. We need to feel the horrible weight of it. We need to ask ourselves if we can admit and confess that it is true of us – humanity as a whole and each of us, personally.

We were once nothing but enemies of God. We have to be able to confess this.

But because God is so, so good...that confession does not have to be the final word on our fate.

It is indeed an unspeakable tragedy that we lose everything in our sin...but our God is a God of triumph, not tragedy. He would not stand for His love to be snuffed out by something as weak as our rebellion.

***The Triumph** is that now our God, through Christ, has done everything necessary for us to be redeemed.*

22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—

God has reconciled us – he has taken the initiative to forge a peace between us and Him – by stepping up and paying the cost of forgiveness by Christ’s redeeming death. This work is finished. It is done. And because of this incredible redemptive act of God through Christ, we are assured of one day being presented before God holy, without blemish, and free from the tragedy of our sin.

This is the truth, the tragedy, and the tremendous triumph of Christ and his Gospel.

- Christ is first in everything, and in him everything depends.

- Yet, because of our sin, we lose everything.
- But now God, through Christ, has done everything necessary for us to be redeemed.

There is just one thing left for us to do. We must respond. We must decide if we are willing to believe this truth, confess this tragedy, accept this triumph...and ***take on the task of keeping the faith.***

Paul tells us that the Triumph of the Gospel is ours...but only...

23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

The task falls to us to keep our faith in Christ and in Christ alone. There can be no other hope. There can be no idols, no competition for our devotion. God does not take lightly the sin of mixed commitment or half-hearted obedience. We don't have to be perfect. God knows that even when we want to follow Him, we will struggle to do so. What he asks is that we turn to nothing else, and no one else, for our salvation. We cling to Christ, hold only to His Gospel, and return only to God in repentance if and when we go astray.

So ask yourself...is your hope in God alone? Is it in Christ alone? Is your faith in the Gospel what you truly believe has saved you and will save you in the end?

To answer "yes" to these questions means we must be vigilant about uprooting the systems of sin and corruption and death from our lives. If we are going to claim to continue in our faith, then we must be characterized by compassion. We must desire to both be and make disciples who love God, love one another, and love their neighbors too. We must practice confession, and seek to repent from any number of terrible things. We cannot hold on the hope of the gospel if we are instead holding on to our our pride, our greed, our lust, our anger, our racism, our sexism, our elitism, our superiority complexes, our permissiveness for what is evil or our pursuits of what is wrong.

If you want to believe the truth, be free of the tragedy, and live in the glorious warmth and love of God's triumph for us...then you must take on the task of keeping your faith in Christ, and in Christ alone.