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## A Hymn Of Christ Colossians 1:15-17

**Intro:** By way of introduction today, instead of a brief summary of last week's message, I wanted to take a few minutes to go back and analyze Paul's style of writing. Most people today have a habit of writing similarly to the way they speak (unless they use AI to spruce it up); their emails, texts (and letters) reflect the same speaking patterns, vocabulary and typical phrases they might use in a normal conversation. I like to think the Apostle Paul had a similar style of writing and, if he did, then he would also have had a superior thought process that would appear in every conversation, whether it be personal among friends or in a public setting of a sermon or defense of the gospel.

In v9 Paul begins to share with the Colossians Christians that he's been praying for them ever since the day that he had heard of their existence as a body of believers. Of course, he doesn't just tell them he's praying for them – he tells them exactly what he's been praying for on their behalf: that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will in order that they might walk worthy of the Lord – fully pleasing Him. Knowing that this last prayer may have seemed like an unreachable goal for them, Paul goes on to describe what fully pleasing the Lord would look like: being fruitful in good works; increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened by divine power for all patience and longsuffering with joy; and giving thanks to the Father.

Now here, Paul doesn't merely commend them to a general attitude of thankfulness; he provide them specific things, wonderful things that they should constantly be thankful for: the fact that the Father has qualified them for heaven; that He has not only delivered them out of the power (authority) of darkness, which would have been more than enough to be eternally grateful for but, He has also conveyed (wholly transferred) them into the kingdom of the Son of His love. It is in and through this very Beloved Son of the Father that they have received both redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

As Paul writes, the theology in his prayer builds and expands with every new thought. Whatever questions may arise from a specific comment are

immediately answered in the following statements. Although he is speaking to a group of people he has never met about a general subject that applies to every believer, Paul is as specific and direct as he can be so as to leave no doubt in their minds that he loves them as brothers and sisters and wants God's best for them in every area of their lives.

Paul's thought process must have been amazing and to hold a conversation with him in any setting must have been the equivalent of a full semester in seminary. You can almost see his mind working as he moves through this prayer because as Paul mentions thanking the Father for His plan of redemption, he couldn't do it without thinking of Jesus, who is the great Redeemer! With his mind squarely set on Jesus, Paul delivers what constitutes not just the most famous passage of the letter, but one of the high points of the theology of Jesus Christ in the entire NT. If this prayer were a symphony, we would hear the music building as Paul explains and expands on the different topics but the music would all reach its crescendo in v15-20. It's not a symphony but it is a hymn about Jesus Christ.

**15-** As you can see, this passage is crammed full of the theology of Jesus Christ. It would take months of seminars and a multitude of commentaries to get the full extent of what is being revealed here. But, Paul's not writing this letter as a document to be studied in a seminar or picked apart in a commentary but as something he knew would be read aloud as part of the church's worship and he could express his faith with a majestic poetry. All his other epistle reveal that he can write as a prophet and a psalmist as he employs a writing style that rises high above common prose.

The appearance of this glorious theology of Christ serves the overall general purpose of the letter by setting forth Christ as the exclusive instrument through whom God created the universe (15-17) and through whom He is in the process of pacifying the universe (18-20). This hymn places particular emphasis on the supremacy of Christ over the unnamed, invisible power in both creation and redemption. But this passage also serves Paul's immediate argument. It backs up what Paul has said about the Colossians' redemption in v14. Our deliverance from the power of darkness is certain and lasting because God accomplished it through none other than the One who is Lord of the universe.

So, who is this Christ who brings redemption and the forgiveness of sins?

Paul offers us 2 parallel descriptions of the Son: He is the image of...God and the firstborn over all creation. The first description may sound strange, how can something invisible have an image? But, that's exactly what Paul is saying, that God, who is beyond human sight or even comprehension, has provided a picture of Himself! For centuries the Jews had faithfully kept the command of **Ex 20:4**, that there was to be no attempt to make an image of God. He's too great to be encompassed by human imagination; too free to be imprisoned in a rigid form and certainly too powerful to be controlled by human beings. Yet now, in Jesus Christ, the invisible God has provided His own image!

The point is that God can't take up residence in a statue or painting: it's too limited to be a meaningful representation of Him. Besides, what counts about God is not that He exists (the heavens declare that truth) but what He does, what is He like in His character and nature. These important truths can never be meaningfully expressed in terms of art. However, they can be expressed in terms of a human life. Jesus embodies in a living person the reality and nature of God. If God has shown Himself to be the savior of Israel by bringing them out of slavery, that same saving nature is made visible in Christ the Savior. If God has shown Himself to be compassionate, that compassion takes on flesh in Jesus Christ and is shown in daily acts of forgiveness and healing.

The word image here is the Greek word *eikon* and it expresses 2 ideas: 1) likeness, as in a coin or the reflection in a mirror; 2) manifestation, with the sense that God is fully revealed in Jesus. It's not just that Jesus and the Father are similar. In Greek philosophy, the *eikon* has **a** share in (is part of) the reality it reveals and can be said to actually be the reality. If Paul had intended to convey the idea that Jesus was simply similar to the Father he'd have used the ancient Greek word *homoion*, which speaks merely of similar appearance. The stronger *eikon* used here proves that Paul knew that Jesus is God just as the Father is God. It means that Jesus is the very stamp of God the Father. God is invisible, not because He is transparent but because He is transcendent. This doesn't just mean He can't be seen with the physical eye; it means He's unknowable! It's in the exalted Christ that the unknowable God becomes known.

According to 1 scholar (Barclay), the ancient Jewish philosopher Philo equated the *eikon* of God with *Logos*: Word/ Reason – a Greek term that

represented the creative principle of reason and order that was the foundation of the world according to some Greek philosophy. Jewish thinkers believed it as referred to the word by which God created (**Gen 1**). Neither of these ideas are wrong, they just fail to arrive at the logical conclusion. But the Apostle John did arrive at that that glorious conclusion when he wrote in his gospel, by Holy Spirit inspiration, that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Just as the written Word of God reveals the reality and nature of God, so the living Word of God embodies and expresses the very character and nature of God.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> description Paul gives of Jesus Christ is that He is the firstborn over all creation. This phrase has been used by some to suggest that Jesus was a created being; even today, some cults refer to this to back up their false claims about Jesus but the argument is made in ignorance. First, Paul’s use of *eikon* would automatically preclude such a ridiculous assertion. 2<sup>nd</sup>, Paul’s use of the Greek word *prototokos* prohibits the claim altogether. In common speech, we usually associate the term firstborn with birth, the first to arrive on the scene and its appearance here would imply that Jesus was the first to be created. But, while *prototokos* does imply a priority in time (chronology), it isn’t limited to that definition and it doesn’t mean Jesus was the first being created or born. In fact, it doesn’t necessarily refer to physical birth at all; at least not in this context.

In the OT, firstborn was a title that expressed status; it’s a title of sovereignty in **Ps 89:27**. It’s a term that describes one who stands in the favored position of power and inheritance normally occupied by the eldest son. Here, it *denotes* as well as *distinguishes* Christ from all created things as being before them in time and supreme over them in status. Jesus Christ outranks all things in creation! Paul is asserting Christ’s primacy over creation, not just within creation. The picture is of Christ’s existence before creation and His authority over it. Actually, time is also a part of creation, so this indicates that Jesus is eternal, which is good theology but goes beyond what Paul had in mind here.

**16-** This verse explains why Christ is preeminent over all creation. If Christ is the firstborn of creation, existing before anything else (**17**), then it follows that He is superior to any other power that may exist within creation. The verse has a series of prepositional phrases that identify Christ’s work in

creation: it was by Him, through Him and for Him. The word translated as by can also correctly be translated as in. The word by refers to Christ's agency in creation, that He was the instrument used to create everything. The word in refers to the sphere of location of creation – in Him. Paul frequently uses the term in Christ or in Him in this sense. And, since the 2<sup>nd</sup> prepositional phrase states that all things were created through Him, it's unlikely Paul intended to repeat the idea of Christ's agency in creation. The term in Him maintains the idea that Christ was the location from whom all came into being and in whom all creation is contained.

The prepositions in, through and for weren't just chosen at random. The Jewish philosophers who spoke of God's Logos saw the Word as the rational, logical principle which gave order to the universe and filled it with a meaning and purpose that could be detected by the human mind. Paul's clearly saying that Jesus Christ is that very principle in human form. Without Him, creation would cease to be, returning to the chaos from which it was created.

Paul says that all things were created through Him and there's no doubt that Jesus is the author of all creation. In his notes, David Guzik lists a number of mind-boggling statistics about creation. Comets have vapor trails up to 10K miles long. But, if you were to capture all that vapor and put it in a bottle, the amount of vapor in the bottle would take up less than 1 cubic inch of space. Saturn's rings are 500K miles in circumference, but only about a foot thick. The earth travels around the sun about 8 times the speed of a bullet fired from a gun. A single human chromosome contains 20 billion bits of information. If this information was written in ordinary book, using ordinary language, it would take up about 4K volumes. When we behold the wonder and glory of the universe Jesus created with eyes of faith and hearts of love, we can't help but worship and honor Him all the more.

Finally, Paul says the universe was created for Jesus. If we take the view that God created the universe for Himself, to delight in it and to express His love and creativity, then Christ is being associated as closely as possible with God's creative purpose. Only in Christ can the true meaning of the world be discovered, and only in Him can it find it's fulfillment.

Putting these 3 statements together, we see a divine movement through time from its beginning to its end. The origin of the world is through Christ,

who brought it into being as part of God's creative act. It exists in Him, held together by His very being as the One who brings order to the world, and it moves towards Him as its goal, the One for whom it exists and in which it will find its destiny. The flow of time is carrying God's handiwork towards its final destination and whatever that turns out to be, whatever form His renewed creation will take, it will be intimately tied up in Christ!

All of this makes a powerful and resounding hymn of praise, but Paul has another reason for declaring it: to affirm that there is no power in creation greater than Christ. He is over all thrones, dominions, principalities (or rulers) and powers – all of which are terms used for angelic, supernatural beings. We can see the tangible powers on earth, but we can't see the invisible forces of heaven. These may be good or evil; they could be mediators of divine knowledge or malevolent enemies in league with the power of darkness. The point Paul celebrates is that Christ has majesty and power over all of them, whatever shape they take, whatever power they choose to operate under. They, just like all other things that exist, were created by Him and for Him. There's no need for Christians to fear Satan's lackeys; they all answer to and are subject to their Creator, who just happens to also be our loving and gracious Savior.

Paul has another reason for emphasizing this point. In the first century, most people believed that the events of earthly history were a reflection of the actions of heavenly powers. For some, the overriding power was fate. For most Jews, the powers were angels, each controlling the destiny, or looking after the interests, of their earthly counterparts. At times, they could even be in conflict. In other belief systems, the powers were less personal, such as the stars (astrology), but the notion that invisible heavenly beings of some sort were involved in human life was almost universal. They were the invisible reality behind the visible world.

The Colossian Christians seem to have had a strong interest in these powers, whether angels (2:18) or just the basic principles (elemental spirits) of the world (2:20). It seems likely that some in the Colossian church were pursuing mystical experiences which sought to put them in touch with the heavenly realm. Now, Paul wasn't opposed to heavenly visions, but he was certainly opposed to any teaching that claimed that such visions conferred a higher spiritual status on their recipients. All these things are unnecessary because Christians are already in Christ (1:2). They are united with the One

who is above all these spiritual forces. Why should we be bothered by them?

**17-** Paul concludes this stanza of his Christ-hymn with a reassertion of Christ's universal preeminence. Jesus Christ not only has precedence over all things in terms of time and status but He is also a type of divine glue or spiritual gravity that holds all of creation together. God didn't simply start things off and then withdraw from His creation; Christ continues to sustain the whole universe. As one scholar put it, "He keeps the cosmos from becoming a chaos."

What holds the universe together is not an idea, virtue or mystical force: it's a Person, the resurrected Christ! Without Him, electrons wouldn't continue to circle nuclei; gravity would cease to work, the planets wouldn't stay in their orbits.

But, as wonderful as this may sound, it may be saying too little. The verb translated consist can also imply that they have their existence in Him. Christ is the force that preserves the orderly arrangement of the cosmos but He is more than that; He is its rationale, the very rhyme and reason of the cosmos. Christ is the System of the systems; the basic operating principle controlling all existence. The universe is not self-sufficient, nor are individuals, no matter how much they may deceive themselves into thinking they are. Even those who refuse to acknowledge Christ's reign and those who actively oppose Him are still entirely dependent upon Him.

As I have mentioned before, we don't know specifically what the heresy was that infiltrated and threatened to destroy this Colossian congregation. It could well be that they were even tempted to find wholeness or spiritual completeness by pursuing the other religious options that were readily available to them in their diverse society. Regardless if this was their error or merely part of it, Paul wants them to understand that things make sense in this life only when Jesus is kept at the center of it.

That spiritual principle is as true and applicable in our day as it was in Paul's. Your purpose in life, your experiences – good or bad, your dreams and goals, your victories and failures, even relationships will fail to make sense unless you place Jesus Christ in His rightful position in your heart as Lord of your life, Without it, no matter how hard you work, how far you go, how high you succeed or how bad you fail. None of it is going to make any

sense or provide you with any real sense of accomplishment because, without Jesus in your life, it all amounts to nothing.

The defining reality of life is the same as the defining reality of salvation – Jesus Christ is all that is needed. 😊