

PREFACE

Like the previous paragraph in Chapter One, our understanding of the one before us—vs15-20—benefits from an outlining of the structure. The predominate reason for doing this is to reveal those things that the apostle Paul emphasizes.

[Who is this “beloved Son”?]

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

[Why is He referred to as “the firstborn of all creation”?]

For by Him **all** things were created,
both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether
thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—
all things have been created through Him and for Him.

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

He is also head of the body, the church;

and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in **everything**.

For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for **all** the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile **all** things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.
(Colossians 1:15-20)

The syntax Paul uses in vs15-20 sets this passage apart from the surrounding text. Still, this eloquent “hymn”—as most scholars refer to it—answers the implied question trailing off from the previous paragraph: *Just who is this “beloved Son”?* And Paul answers: *I’m glad you asked. Let me tell you.*

The hymn was either borrowed by Paul, or written by him for this purpose. An agreeable (and more probable) position is that he borrowed some elements, some thoughts from an extant hymn that was familiar to the first-century church, but adapted it to his purpose in addressing the situation in Colossae. He will use this as his fullest, opening argument for the preeminence of Christ.

Read Colossians 1:15-20.

v15

A proper understanding of v15 hinges on the meanings of two key words: “image” and “firstborn.” To determine what is meant by Paul, we must go beyond the dictionary meaning of each word—indeed, not just to the immediate context, but the context of God’s word as a whole. This is critical because many in the world today choose to use this verse as concrete evidence for their heretical positions. Cults have perpetrated much mischief—and much ignorance about the true nature of Christ—by their misuse of this verse.

He is the image of the invisible God...

image = *eikon* (ay-kone’) = from <G1503> (eiko); a *likeness*, i.e. (literal) *statue*, *profile*, or (figurative) *representation*, *resemblance* :- image; **we get the word “icon” from this.**

If we struggle to understand what it means that Jesus is the “image” of God, it may be because the writers of the NT—as well as the translators and commentators and scholars of Scripture—struggle so in finding the right words to explain it to us.

In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, Jesus “is the radiance of [God’s] glory, and the exact representation of His nature” (1:3). John writes in his gospel that “No one has seen God at any time” but the Son “has explained Him”—or declared Him, or made Him known (1:18). Jesus Himself put it directly in John 14.

Read John 14:8-9.

Was Jesus saying that God the Father *looks like, has the identical appearance of* the earthly Jesus of Nazareth. No, as Curtis Vaughan puts it,

Christ always has been, is, and always will be the image of God. His incarnation did not make Him the image of God, but it did bring Him, “as being that Image, within our grasp.”

The word translated “image” does mean *likeness*, in the sense of an image on a coin has the likeness of the emperor, or like a reflection in a mirror. But it also includes the idea of *manifestation*. This is what John 1:18 is saying: It isn’t so much that if Jesus of Nazareth had a mole on his right cheek this means God the Father has a mole on *His* right cheek. No, it is that the earthly Jesus perfectly revealed to man the nature and being of God. It is as if collective man asked God, “What are You like?” And God’s answer to that was, in full, the incarnated Son: Jesus.

And this is related to how the first man was originally made “in the image of God.” Douglas Moo writes that

The opening line of our hymn may identify Christ as that original image in accordance with which human beings were created.

That is, just as Christ is the image of God, man was made in the image of Christ. Christ is what we would “look like” had we not the heavy woolen cloak of sin, and the accumulated strata of depravity. But there will come a day when all that will be sloughed off, when we will stand before our Lord as if in a mirror; we will see Him as He truly is, and He will see us as we were always meant to be: like Him.

Read 1 John 3:2.

Douglas Moo cites Stettler, “who rightly distinguishes between Christ, who *is* the image of God, and human beings, who are created *according to or in* that image.”

So if you want to know what the invisible God looks like—His nature, His character, His personality—just look at the nature, the character, the personality of Jesus in Scripture.

For example, there have been times in the past when, for one reason or another, I would find myself flat on my face in my prayer closet, pleading for God’s forgiveness. In such moments of abject confession and misery, invariably it would be the presence of Christ Jesus—not the Spirit, not Father God—who came to me with His consolation and mercy. It was unmistakably *His* arms that embraced me and comforted me. Yet, did I imagine it was Christ doing this because the other two members of the Trinity didn’t feel the same way? No, I was sure that Christ Jesus was in that moment the hands and heart of very God. God was revealing Himself to me through the person of my Savior.

...the firstborn of all creation.

Even more troublesome and problematic is the second half of v15. If the church has struggled to grasp the first half—"He is the image of the invisible God"—then the world has clung tenaciously to the second half—"the firstborn of all creation"—as the basis for demoting, for stripping away Christ's deity.

This verse, along with several others in the NT that refer to Jesus as God's "only begotten" Son, have been the "proof texts" used by various sects to show that the Son was a created being. This errant belief system has its roots in "Arianism."

Wayne Grudem: The term Arianism is derived from Arius, a Bishop of Alexandria whose views were condemned at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and who died in A.D. 336. Arius taught that God the Son was at one point created by God the Father, and that before that time the Son did not exist, nor did the Holy Spirit, but the Father only. Thus, though the Son is a heavenly being who existed before the rest of creation and who is far greater than all the rest of creation, he is still not equal to the Father in all his attributes—he may even be said to be "like the Father" or "similar to the Father" in his nature, but he cannot be said to be "of the same nature" as the Father.

The Arians depended heavily on texts that called Christ God's "only begotten" Son (John 1:14; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). If Christ were "begotten" by God the Father, they reasoned, it must mean that he was brought into existence by God the Father (for the word "beget" in human experience refers to the father's role in conceiving a child). Further support for the Arian view was found in Colossians 1:15, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation." Does not "first-born" here imply that the Son was at some point brought into existence by the Father?

Jehovah's Witnesses are modern-day Arians. So how are we to answer this?

firstborn = *prototokos* = from <G4413> (protos) and the alternate of <G5088> (tikto); *first-born* (usually as noun, literal or figurative) :- firstbegotten (-born).

It is true that this word means the first offspring of a parent—"the first to come from the womb" (Moo)—and in this sense it can be said that the parents "made" or created the child.

Sidebar: Here's a question I would put to the JW's: *Who was the mother of the "beloved Son"? Who did God the Father mate with to produce this "firstborn"?*

But the word is also used to denote "the ancient attribution of preeminence to the first to be born" (Moo). Example: Yahweh used this to describe His beloved Israel.

Read Exodus 4:22-23.

So in that passage "firstborn" is used in both senses: Israel was, in the Lord's eyes, preeminent among the nations of earth, and if Pharaoh did not let Israel go, the Lord would kill everyone's child who was the first from the womb.

But there is a psalm that gives us an even better example. Psalm 89 is already rich with messianic allusions, and in v27 this word is used to describe King David.

Read Psalm 89:26-29.

Now of course, the psalmist Ethan the Ezrahite did not mean by this that David was literally God's firstborn—if for no other reason, even by Arianism standards, that place was given to Christ, God's Son, and you can't have more than one firstborn. So the psalmist must mean something else—and it is clear from the context; he spells it out in the next line: "The highest of the kings of the earth." That is, with a messianic allusion, the preeminent king over all other kings.

And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 19:16)

Here in v15 the NIV helps us out.
...the firstborn *over* all creation.

Jesus Christ was not the first created thing of all created things; He has preeminence *over* all created things.

In our next session we will examine the extent to which Christ is supremely Lord over all creation. For now, let us close with the glorious passage we find in the first chapter of Hebrews.

In all these passages we hear the struggle of the NT writers, and then the scholars who interpret them for us, to find just the right words to describe Christ's relationship to Father God, then to creation itself. They struggle to put into *human* language the unutterable language and mysteries of heaven. My guess is that all human words fall short when describing such.

In the first chapter of Hebrews the writer gleans from the Psalms and 2 Samuel the wonder and glory that is the Son of God—and how far from being just another of Father God's angels, the Son is worshiped *as God* by those angels.

Read Hebrews 1:5-10.

And who is this we are talking about?

Read Hebrews 1:1-4.



Colossians 1:15-20

Just Jesus
a study of Colossians

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Colossians 1:15-20 NASB