

# Colossians 1:15-20

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] A few years ago my wife and I moved to America and one of the things we had to get used to when we were there and please forgive me all Americans out there, I know there are many of you, we love you brothers and sisters, it's okay. One of the things we had to get used to was advertisements for doctors in shopping malls. So at West County Mall, one of the nearest malls to us, outside the Apple store and the JCPenney department store and all this kind of stuff, there's a big sign with a picture of some guy with perfect teeth saying, did you know America's leading neurosurgeon lives in St. Louis? Now I cannot remember if he's a neurosurgeon or a cardiologist or what he was, but at first I took this by surprise, then I realised that when you're a consumer for healthcare, when you get to choose pretty much where you go, you want to know that the guy you're choosing is really capable. That if you've got a brain problem, he's got the credentials and the skill and the experience that he can sort you out.

You want to know that you can have confidence in him if you're investing your money or your hard-earned insurance policy in his services and trusting your life to him. You want to make sure you can have confidence in him. So let me ask you this, because this is the issue the Colossian Christians were dealing with. Do you have confidence that Jesus Christ can take care of your deepest needs?

Do you have confidence that Jesus Christ can put you right with God, can ensure you are forgiven, can make you new?

Do you have confidence that he is up to that task, that he has the ability to do that kind of stuff? So it seems to me for many of us, we might believe that on a good day, but we can lose confidence through lots of things in life. When we lose confidence, how does that show? Well, it shows itself in many ways. Perhaps we feel like we need some extra experience to make us feel like we're forgiven or accepted by God. Or we feel like, I haven't done enough. So often I'll say to somebody, how do you feel as a Christian? Oh, I feel like I'm a terrible Christian because I haven't read the Bible today.

We're saying, if we're saying that, we're saying, actually, I need to do something to make myself right with God. Well, sometimes we just doubt we can be forgiven. I think there are things in my life that I'm not sure I can really be forgiven. Or alternatively, one way we perhaps lose sight of how great Jesus Christ is, one way we lose confidence in him, is thinking, well, maybe he's a good choice for me. But, you know, my Buddhist friend or my Hindu friend or my pagan friend is really into ancient Anglo-Saxon pagan worship. Maybe there is alternative paths for them and they're a way of getting to God too. If they're the way we're thinking, actually we're thinking in similar ways to these Colossian Christians who Paul was writing to. They have heard this message that they could be forgiven by God, become friends with God, have a new life through Christ, just by trusting in what

[ 3 : 1 3 ] Jesus had done for them. But as soon as they were sitting there, other people were coming to them and saying, it can't be that simple. It can't be that easy. And so they were thinking, well, maybe we need some radical experience. Maybe we need to keep obeying the old Jewish laws. Maybe we need some special knowledge. Maybe that's what we need to complete what we've heard about.

But they were beginning to lack confidence. And what Paul is doing here is showing them who Jesus is. It's like he's pulling the camera back so they get the big picture of who this Jesus is, who they've heard about, who they have put their trust in. So they can see that he really does work. He really is up to the task. He really is worth putting their confidence in. If you look at the verses around, the ones we're looking at, we're going to look at verses 15 to 20. You can see in verse 13 and 14, the first verses I read, Paul has talked about what God has done through Christ. He

transfers you to the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom you have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Through Jesus, your sins are forgiven. In verses 21 to 23, just after this, he talks about being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. But is Jesus really up to that task? But Paul says, yes, he is. And to show them that in verses 15 to 20, he shows them two things. First of all, he shows that Christ is the creator. He is supreme over all creation. And secondly, Christ is the rescuer. Supreme over all he has reconciled. All he has fixed. So let's look first at Christ as creator. Supreme over all he's made.

Verse 15. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. There are actually five things in verses 15 to 17 that Paul teaches us about Christ. We have to rattle through them quickly because he could be here for weeks. But the first is this. He rules over creation. He is the firstborn over all creation. Now I don't know if you've ever had Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door and they will try and tell you that this just means Jesus is part of creation. Now the reason they say that is they don't understand, they haven't looked at the context here in the passage and they haven't looked at the context in history either. So look at the context of the passage.

Jesus certainly isn't part of creation. Look what Paul says in verse 16. For by him all things were created. So Jesus isn't part of creation. He's the one who made it all. But also the context in history. At that time in the Jewish world and in the Greco-Roman world, if you were the firstborn son, you inherited everything. That meant you owned it. You had the rights of ownership over it. So when Paul says Jesus is the firstborn over all creation, he's telling us he is the one who rules it. He is the one who inherits it all. He is the one who has rights over it.

So firstly, Jesus rules over creation. Secondly, Jesus reveals God to us. You see that very first line. He is the image of the invisible God. Now the Bible tells us right back at the start that you and I as human beings are made in the image of God. We are made to reflect God's character. In a sense we're like mirrors put around the world to show some of the beauty and glory and majesty of God. That is why as human beings we love. Because we're made in the image of a God who is love. It's why as human beings we have a sense of justice.

[ 6 : 43 ] It's why we get angry when we see human traffickers pushing people across the Mediterranean so that hundreds of them die. Because we are made in the image of a God who is just. It's why we are creative, or at least many of us are creative. I'm not, but my wife is. Because we're made in the image of a God who created everything and who is a worker himself. The trouble is because we have rebelled against God, because we've turned away from him, his image is now broken. We're now no longer good mirrors reflecting back what God is like. We're broken mirrors.

The mirror is cracked and we need to be renewed. We need the mirrors to be fixed. You see that breakage in the fact that we hate as well as love. We destroy as well as create. We act in unfair ways as well as acting justly to exploit people. But Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He is everything we were supposed to be. But he has been like that throughout time, from before time began in fact. As the beloved son, as verse 13 put it, he has always been exactly like his father, like father, like son. He has been the exact character of the living God. And when Jesus came into the world, when he was born as a baby in Bethlehem, when he took on human flesh, he then became in the flesh the perfect image of God. The one who was everything we have failed to be. The one who in his life shows all God's character. So he has revealed God to us. He's revealed God to us. He rules over creation and he reveals

God to us. So we don't have to guess what God is like anymore. We can look at Jesus and what he did. I don't know if you've ever heard someone say, you know, I like to think God is forgiving. Or I like to think that God is a sort of energy force that I can tap into.

Or I like to think there are many ways to know God. Well, it's all very well what people think, but often what we think bears no relation to reality, does it? I'd like to think I'm a wonderful singer, and I'd like to think Scotland will win the Rugby World Cup this year. If you've ever had the misfortune of standing near me in church, you'll know I cannot sing.

And if you've ever had the misfortune of watching Scotland play rugby, well, you know that's not going to happen either. See, my personal ideas are nothing if they do not correspond to reality. So here with Jesus, he reveals God to us. The guessing is all over. We don't have to speculate what God is like. We look at Jesus. We see how he lived, how he acted, what he did. We said that's what God is like. Well, to put it another way around, there is nothing un-Christlike about God. There's nothing un-Christlike about God. So Jesus rules over creation. He reveals God to us. And thirdly, he made all of creation. Look at verse 16 again. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on

earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. Paul says, look around.

[ 9 : 59 ] Everything you see, everything you don't see, it was all made by him. It doesn't matter whether it's planets or penguins, stars or seas, galaxies or gorillas, heavens and earth. It was all made by him. It doesn't matter whether it's visible or invisible, whether it's the Himalayas or the Higgs-Boson particle. All made by him. It doesn't matter whether it's the spiritual powers, the angels, the thrones, the rulers or authorities, or the structures.

That support human life, family, government, structures in society. All created by him. They're all his. But do you notice he's the goal of all creation as well. All things are created through him and for him. It's all for him. Last summer, my mother turned 80. So we had a meal for her up in Scotland. So my middle brother and his family flew back from Malawi.

They were coming anyway. But they made sure they were in time for mum's birthday. Her sister flew up from the south of England with her family. My eldest brother came down from Edinburgh. We flew up from down here. We had a big meal. Who was it for? It was for her. It was all about her. Paul says this whole creation, everything you see, everything you can't see, it's all about Jesus. All by him and for him. He made it all. He's the goal of it. And he holds it all together.

Look at verse 17. He is before all things. And in him, all things hold together. Some people have this idea that God is somehow distant and not concerned with his creation. Paul says no. Here is Jesus holding it all together. Sometimes my children make a model. It's usually pretty hard to understand what it is. Zoe or Joel say, Daddy, can you bring it through to my bedroom? Pick this thing up and try not to break it. And actually it's not stuck down very well, so I end up having to hold it all together. And that's sort of the picture of the universe. That this powerful Jesus, this powerful Christ, is holding it all together.

[ 12 : 07 ] There's four fundamental forces that physicists tell us hold the universe together. The gravitational force, the electromagnetic force, the strong and weak nuclear forces, they're all finely balanced so the universe works. It's like Jesus was the one who turned the dials on all the settings to make sure they're absolutely right. In him, it all holds together. So he rules over creation, he reveals God to us, he made all of creation, he's the goal of creation, he holds it all together.

What difference does that make? It should make all the difference to the way we think about him, doesn't it? How do we naturally think about Jesus? I suspect most people don't naturally think of him as the one who holds the whole universe together, the one who is the purpose of all life, of all existence. Yes, that is what he is. That is who he is. See, if our approach to life is like going into a cafeteria and we'll choose the dishes we like, we'll choose the philosophies, the religions we like, sprinkle on the extra garnishes we want and just make do with that.

If we think Jesus is just one of the dishes on offer, then we haven't understood him. He's not just a kind of optional extra. He is what the whole universe is about. He is at the heartbeat of the universe. He is supreme over all creation. He is the creator.

But there's a problem, isn't there? As we look around at the world around us, this world that apparently exists through Jesus and for Jesus, it doesn't look like it's being held together at the moment sometimes, does it? We look at the earthquake in Nepal and see the dreadful suffering there. We look at the tragedy of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean.

We see conflict all over the world. We can feel fragmentation and breakdown in our own lives. Sometimes it's health going wrong. Sometimes it's dreams breaking, relationships falling apart. Physical health or mental health suffering. The Bible says we feel those things.

[ 14 : 24 ] Those things are real and exist because as a race we do not live for the one we are made to live for. We sought our fulfillment and our life and our joy and our identity and other things. And that's created a fracture in the universe, if you like. The universe no longer functions properly. It no longer runs smoothly. And as we've seen, as the earthquake in Nepal reminds us, where there's a fracture, terrible destruction can come. That fault line leads to the earthquake. It can bring dreadful destruction. And so it is. The fault line that runs through the universe, as human beings have turned away from Christ, turned away from the living God, causes problems. But there is good news. And that's where Paul comes to now in verses 18 to 20. Not only is Christ the creator, supreme over all creation, but Christ is the rescuer, supreme over all he has reconciled. As I say, the universe has this fault line because we've turned away from the living God. Now how can that relationship be mended? How can we be reconciled with God we've turned away from? I'd like you to think for a minute about how reconciliation, how repairing relationships happens in a human, in the human

realm. For example, I have some friends. I'll call them Bob and Sue, that's not their real names. But a few years ago, Bob had an affair, committed adultery when Sue was pregnant with their first child. How in the world can a relationship like that be mended again? Well, it can only come in the first part because the offended party, Sue, was willing for reconciliation to happen. The offended party has to be willing. But also then there has to be a cost on both sides. It always costs to forgive someone, doesn't it? If someone breaks something of yours, it costs to forgive them.

You have to either go without the thing that they broke or pay to replace it yourself. There was a cost to forgiveness. So for Sue, there was a cost to forgive. But equally, that's to be some cost from Bob, her husband. He had to leave behind the other relationship, the adulterous affair, and give it up. And she had to then not keep bringing it up, but truly forgive. So there was a willingness, a cost, and then there had to be a fresh start. And as we look at these verses here, we see that is exactly what God has done through Christ.

There's a willingness for reconciliation, a cost for reconciliation, and a fresh start. Look at verse 19. For in him, that is in Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. You see the willingness? God's willingness to reconcile, God's willingness to win back, that was lost, that which was lost. God's willingness to restore a broken relationship. He did it through all his fullness dwelling in Christ. In the Old Testament, the glory, in the first half of the Bible, the glory of God dwelt in a temple in Jerusalem. That was where God met with human beings. It's where sacrifices could be made to restore relationship with God. But that was only a picture of what God was going to do one day to make the world right again. All his fullness, all his godness, was there in this man, Christ Jesus? He was the meeting point of heaven and earth. There was a willingness for reconciliation. And then there was a cost. You see that in verse 20? Through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. The cost was the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The sinless one, the perfect man who'd always lived as the image of God. He'd always lived as God intended. Died a death he didn't deserve to pay the price that we deserve to pay for failing to live that life ourselves. So it was a cost. And then there's a fresh start. Do you see that in verse 20? Making peace by the blood of his cross. But through Jesus' death, peace can be made between us and God. We can be reconciled, that relationship restored. And what does that look like in practice? Let's get back to verse 18 and see very briefly three things, or a couple of things. How do we know that this has happened? Well, we see it in the result here in verse 18. Christ is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning and firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. Now, I don't know what you think of when you hear the word church. I think many people think of old buildings, or think of an institution. Lots of people say, I have a neighbor three doors down. He says, I just don't like organized religion. That's what church is, organized religion. Yet the church is not an organization, it's an organism. Christ is the head of it. It's not a human institution, it's a divine initiative. Christ is the head of this body. And it's not merely a, the church is not merely a kind of organization of people who get together. It's the organism of people connected to Christ, connected to this one who is the image of the invisible God. All life comes from him. Imagine if your head was cut off. How would your body survive? It wouldn't, would it? And so it is in the Christian life. Life comes from being connected to the head, being part of the church, connected to Christ. He is the head. He's also the firstborn from the dead, Paul says. And what is the big problem in this world? What's the big problem we cannot solve? Well, it's death, isn't it? I think it was about 18 months ago, or nearly two years ago now, Google announced they're going to try and solve the problem of death. They're putting together databases of medical records and this kind of stuff. Well, they're not going to solve the problem. Partly because it already has been solved. Jesus Christ, fully human, fully dead, raised to life again. Firstborn from the dead. The firstborn is an indication that there's more to come. It's like in spring. We just had spring, haven't we? When I see those daffodils coming up in the garden, I know that's the firstborn. More will come.

[ 20 : 56 ] And so with Jesus. He's risen from the dead. He's the firstborn. Others will follow. He is the beginning of a new creation. And what does that all mean? The last line of verse 18. He is that so that everything, he might be preeminent. This one through whom everything was made, this one for whom everything was made, came into his own creation, died to bring his creation back. So he might again be preeminent, might be the one that everything and everyone lives for and acknowledges. That which was his by right is now his by fact, as the one who is raised from the

dead again. So where does that leave us? Well, a couple of implications. There is only one way to have peace with God. And that is through Jesus, through the image of the invisible God who has come into the world to put it all right.

There are not many ways to God. There is only one. But since he's reconciled all things to himself, does that mean it's just automatic? We can just carry on living our lives? Well, no. Because Paul had said back in verse 4 of chapter 1, he says we're thanking God because since we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus. In verse 22 on the next page, or 23 rather, he says you have all this if you continue in your faith in Christ Jesus. That's why Paul wants them to see how great Christ Jesus is. So they know he is the one you can depend upon.

He is the one you can place your confidence in. He is the one through whom all things can be put right. He is the one through whom we can have forgiveness. So here's the option.

We either put our confidence in Christ and Christ alone to be made right with God, or we keep on going our own way. We either accept the peace terms handed out to us, or we ignore them.

If we accept them, we have the life that is promised. If we ignore them, then we ignore them at our peril. Because one day Christ's rule will be enforced on everything in the universe.

[ 23 : 09 ] Even the devil, even the devil and his demons. Because Christ is preeminent. And Christ will one day be seen to be preeminent. So we can choose now to bow before him, or choose to ignore him.

Or we'll reap the consequences for all our life. How big is your view of Jesus? Let me pray for us. Let me pray for you.