

## Col 1:15-20, Christ the Firstborn (Easter 2020)

### Motivation

Our studies in Hebrews have led us to the title “firstborn,” used of our Lord in Heb 1:6 (chart)

Heb. 1:6 And again, when he bringeth in the **firstbegotten** into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

This title is used frequently in the NT of our Lord, Of special interest to us today is an expression we find in Colossians and the Revelation, in relation to the Resurrection:

Col. 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the **firstborn from the dead**; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Rev. 1:5 And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the **first begotten of the dead**, and the prince of the kings of the earth.

Colossians is the only book other than Hebrews to use the term more than once, the only book to use it more than once of our Lord. Let’s meditate on it there.

### Overview

Figure 1 shows the structure of Paul’s opening prayer, which includes our section. At the outset, he and Timothy are the subject of three verbs: giving thanks, praying, and hearing about the Colossians. The same three verbs in chiastic order develop what follows, though the subject of “giving thanks” in v. 12 is no longer Paul and Timothy, but the Colossians.<sup>1</sup> As Paul and Timothy give thanks, their minds are drawn to the Colossians, and they want the Colossians to join them in this thanksgiving, which is developed in vv. 12-20.

Here is a major application of our study today. We are to join with Paul, and Timothy, and believers everywhere in giving thanks for our Lord and God.

1:12-20 begin with what the Father has done. Note how the subject changes from clause to clause.

- The **Father** is the subject in vv. 12-13, graciously acting upon us. The Son is introduced as the head of the kingdom into which God has translated us.
- Then **we** become the subject in v. 14, and the Son is now the means by which our sins are forgiven.
- Finally, in vv. 15-20, the Son becomes the subject of the verbs.

Paul wants us to give thanks for the Son. As he continues, his comments fall into two parts, with many terms repeated between them (chart, Table 1).<sup>2</sup> In both parts,

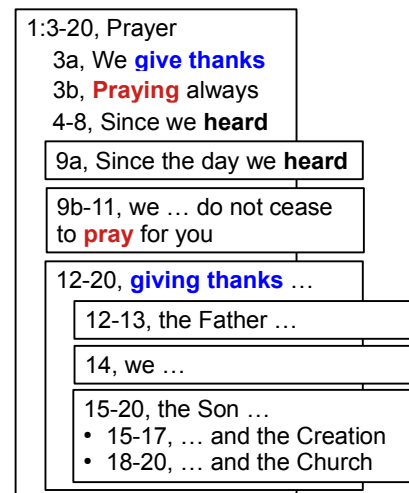


Figure 1: Overview of Col 1:3-20

<sup>1</sup> Anita Parunak emphasized this point to me.

<sup>2</sup> Findlay in the Pulpit Commentary

15-17, the Son and the Creation	18-20, the Son and the Church
15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the <b>firstborn</b> of every creature:	18b who is the beginning, the <b>firstborn</b> from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.
16 <b>For</b> by him were all things created, <b>that are in heaven, and that are in earth,</b> visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers:	19 <b>For</b> it pleased <del>the Father</del> that in him should all fulness dwell; 20b by him, I say, <b>whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.</b>
all things were created <b>by</b> him, and <b>for</b> him:	20a And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, <b>by</b> him to reconcile all things <b>unto</b> himself;
17 <b>And he is</b> before all things, and by him all things consist.	18a <b>And he is</b> the head of the body, the church:

*Table 1: Christ as the Firstborn in Colossians 1*

- Our Lord is called “firstborn.”
- Paul explains this title, using the only two instances of “for” ὅτι in Colossians 1.
- This explanation involves our Lord as the means and object of the work he does (“by him and for/unto εἰς him”),
- and includes all things “in heaven and in earth.”

The verses that form the transition between the two paragraphs (17, 18a) show their difference.<sup>3</sup> The first describes our Lord’s relation to the creation; the second, his relation to his church.

Today we study the term “firstborn” (vv. 15, 18) in relation to the creation, and to the church.

## 15 The image ... the firstborn

In both passages, the title “firstborn” appears in apposition with another noun (“image” in v. 15, “beginning” in v. 18), and it will prove fruitful to pay attention to these.

**15 Who is the image of the invisible God,**—“The image” takes us back to Gen 1:

Gen. 1:26 And God said, Let us make man **in our image**, after our likeness: and **let them have dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

God’s purpose for man was to represent him on the earth, ruling over it and subduing it.<sup>4</sup> Adam failed in that mission; our Lord has come as the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45), the second man (1 Cor 15:47; cf. Rom 5:12-21). Understanding this allusion will help us with the next reference.

**the firstborn of every creature:**—In the incarnation, our Lord became a creature, but this phrase has been badly abused by those who want to deny his eternal nature. Certainly, the noun “firstborn” can refer to the eldest son in a family (as in Matt 1:25; Lk 2:7; Heb 11:28). But the importance of being born first was prestige belonging to the eldest son, and the noun often refers

<sup>3</sup> These are the only two instances of the emphatic “and he is” in the book; the only other instance in the NT is Eph 5:23.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/special/KingdomOfGod>

to this prestige even for someone who is not first temporally:

Ex. 4:22 And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my **firstborn**: *though Israel is not the earliest nation on earth—obviously, Egypt is earlier*

Jer. 31:9 for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my **firstborn**. *Manasseh, Ephraim's brother, was older than Ephraim.*

Note especially God's promise to David, who was neither the earliest king nor Israel's first king:

Psa. 89:27 Also I will make him my **firstborn**, higher than the kings of the earth.

Not only was David not Jesse's first-born (he was the youngest), but God gives him this title later in his life. Compare sale of the "first-born ship" to Esau (Heb 12).

In the NT, the word describes preeminence (7x) more often than priority (3x). The parallel with Gen 1:26 requires this choice here: "firstborn of every creature" corresponds to "have dominion over" the creatures. The rest of this paragraph emphasizes this dominion.

**16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities ἀρχαί, or powers:**—Adam was over the animals, but our Lord's preeminence is over heavenly beings as well, angels as well as men. Notice in particular the word "principalities," which is used elsewhere in the NT to refer both to earthly rulers (Tit 3:1) and to angelic powers (Eph 6:12) (chart).

**all things were created by him, and for him:**—Note the prepositions. He did the creating, and their ultimate purpose is to serve him.

**17 And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.**—This final verse of the paragraph summarizes his sovereignty over the creation.

**18 And he is the head of the body, the church:**<sup>5</sup>—Note the similarity with v. 17. Our Lord is not only creator of the physical world (like Adam), but also the head of the church.

**who is the Beginning,**—The word has no article, making it a title. It appears three other times in Colossians, translated "principalities": 1:16, 2:10, 15 (chart), describing authorities including angels. The Jews were accustomed to calling some of the angels "beginnings." Paul replies, "the true Beginning is the Lord Jesus."<sup>6</sup> He is the ultimate Principality." Cf. Rev 1:5, where "firstborn of the dead" is linked with "prince" ἀρχὼν.

**the firstborn from the dead;**—Now we come to "firstborn." In the previous paragraph, it referred to preeminence, not priority, and Paul goes on to emphasize that theme here:

**that in all things he might have the preeminence.**

This leads to two questions. 1) What does it mean to be preeminent in death? 2) Why does Paul say he is firstborn "from" the dead?

## OT Background

In the OT, the grave shows the futility of human prestige, in rebuking pagan rulers, examples of "principalities." Ezek 32:17-32 rebukes Pharaoh: as proud as he is, he will one day descend into the grave, along with the rulers of Asshur, Elam, Meshech, Tubal, Edom, and Sidon (chart).

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the same complex of ideas as Eph 1:19-23, which repeats several of these terms

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rev 22:13; Isa 41:4 (which combines ἀρχή and πρῶτος).

Ezek 32:17 It came to pass also in the twelfth year, in the fifteenth day of the month, that the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 18 Son of man, wail for the multitude of Egypt, and cast them down, even her, and the daughters of the famous nations, unto the nether parts of the earth, with them that go down into the pit. 19 Whom dost thou pass in beauty? go down, and be thou laid with the uncircumcised. 20 They shall fall in the midst of them that are slain by the sword: she is delivered to the sword: draw her and all her multitudes.

Isaiah earlier issued a similar rebuke against the king of Babylon:

Is. 14:4 That thou shalt take up this proverb against the **king of Babylon**, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased! ... 9 Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the **chief ones ἄρχοντες** of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. 10 All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? 11 Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.

The point of these passages is that death is the great leveler. Once you die, nobody is preeminent. Everybody is equal—or at least, everybody was equal, until the Son of God died. Then, all of a sudden, someone among the dead was preeminent over the others. What made the difference?

## What makes the Difference?

Why does Paul write that our Lord is firstborn *of* every creature, but not firstborn *of* the dead? When he was “conceived by the Holy Ghost [and] born of the virgin Mary,” he became a creature, and still is one. But though he was “crucified under Pontius Pilate,” our Lord is no longer dead. He is preeminent over others who have died, because he rose from the dead (chart). Unlike them, he was not abandoned to Sheol, nor did his body see corruption (Ps 16; Acts 2).

Paul unites the resurrection with our Lord’s preeminence in Philippians, written from prison about the same time as Colossians. He recalls the death of Christ:

Phil. 2:8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Because of his obedience to the Father, he rose from the dead:

Phil. 2:9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

Because he came out *from* the dead (Col 1:18), he is preeminent *of* the dead (Rev 1:5), those “under the earth,” and they will bow to him:

Phil. 2:10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, **and things under the earth**; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The shades in Sheol might mock Pharaoh or the king of Babylon when they descend into the grave—“You are no better than we.” But when they face our Lord at the last judgment, it is as one who entered death and returned, and at that time they will bow before him and acknowledge that he is indeed Firstborn, the one whose name is Principality, God’s ruling image. And this is the one whom God has given to us as our head in the church.