

1:13. Being qualified is only one reason to be thankful. He has **rescued us from the dominion of darkness**. God delivered us from the ruling power of darkness, and the good news doesn't end there. God has also taken a positive step: he has **brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves**. God has transferred us; he has moved us from one place to another. He has taken us from Satan's dark realm and placed us into the bright light of Jesus' kingdom.

1:14. God's work of salvation, for which believers are joyfully to give thanks, is pictured further with **redemption** and **forgiveness**. To redeem someone means "to buy them back and set them free." Jesus' death was the price paid to buy us back and set us free from sin. Because of Christ's death on our behalf, we are set free from both the penalty and the power of sin.

Forgiveness parallels redemption. *Forgive* literally means "to send away, to cancel." Through the death of Jesus, God has canceled the debt of our sin. It was a debt we could never repay; but since Jesus paid the debt for us, God has forgiven the debt.

Paul wants us to know the truth about pleasing God so that we won't be victims of the well-disguised lies of those who

might lead us astray.

D. The Truth about Jesus (vv. 15–23)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Jesus is the visible manifestation of God and our eternal Creator and Reconciler, who has supremacy in the universe and the church.*

1:15. When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he was countering a clever company of false teachers who sought to replace the Colossians' enthusiastic devotion to Christ with only a mild approval of him. They didn't encourage anyone to forget Jesus altogether; they just said he wasn't the only show in town. According to these false teachers, Jesus got equal billing with a vast number of emanating spirits flowing out of God. They said Jesus could be prominent, but he certainly wasn't preeminent. In contrast, Paul—along with telling believers the truth about the gospel and pleasing God—tells us the truth about Jesus.

Jesus is the **image** of God. The word for *image* was used in Paul's time for likenesses placed on coins, portraits, and for statues. It carries the idea of correspondence to the original. It is the nearest equivalent in ancient Greek to our modern photograph. Jesus is the perfect repre-

sensation of God. This verse and others (John 1:18; 1 Tim. 1:17) tell us that God is **invisible**. J. B. Phillips translates verse 15, “Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God.” Hebrews 1:3 tells us that the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.

Not only is Jesus the perfect picture of God, but he also holds the highest rank in the universe. Jesus is **the firstborn over all creation**. **Firstborn** is a term of rank more than it is a word of time (see Ps. 89:27). The right of the firstborn was the right of privilege and priority. It was the honored position in the family. In the case of the patriarchs, we know that the honored position didn’t always go to the first son born in time. Jesus is the firstborn—the highest rank—in all of creation.

1:16. Jesus holds the highest rank in creation because he is the Creator of **all things**. There is nothing in the created order that Jesus did not create (see also John 1:3). Because he is the Creator, Jesus has absolute supremacy over all creation, including any spirit beings who were being worshiped by the local heretics. Since only God can be the Creator, this means that Jesus, the perfect image of God, is even more than an image. He is divine. He is God.

1:17. Jesus is eternally existent (an attribute that can only be true of God) because he is **before all things**. Jesus is also the powerful sustainer of the universe. Because of him all things **hold together**. His power guarantees that the universe is under control and not chaotic.

1:18. Jesus is sovereign over creation. He is also sovereign over the **church**, the new creation. Jesus is sovereign over the church because he is the **head**. While scholars debate whether **head** should be understood as “origin” or “authority,” both are certainly true of Jesus in relationship to the church. Jesus began his church, and HE is its source of life and vitality. Jesus is also sovereign over his church. The church takes its direction from Jesus and is under his authority. While both concepts are true, the context of supremacy certainly lends itself to the idea of authority.

The church is the **body** of believers who owe their allegiance to Jesus. The position of supremacy in everything (and particularly the church) belongs to Jesus because of his resurrection and work of reconciliation. He is the **firstborn from among the dead**. Again, **firstborn** here has nothing to do with time. Others preceded Jesus in rising from the dead. Lazarus is one example (John 11:38–44).

Jesus is first in rank. Others were raised only to die again. Jesus was the first person to rise, never to die again. He is the first person to conquer death, and all other resurrections are based on his.

The glorious truth for us is this: because of his resurrection, we are assured of our own resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

1:19–20. Jesus has supremacy over all things because all of God's **fullness** resides in Jesus: He is the full embodiment of God's attributes and saving grace. Through Jesus, God is able to **reconcile to himself all things**. Reconciliation is the removal of hostility and the restoring of friendly relations to parties who have been at war. Paul also calls reconciliation **making peace through his blood, shed on the cross**. What God has done is to move toward us to restore harmony, patch things up, cease hostilities, bury the hatchet, smoke the peace pipe, and heal the breach.

1:20 At this stage, Paul took up his second concern, which was the work of Jesus. Like the previous statement, this has God as the subject: God delighted in Jesus' central role of redemption. Thus his person (truly and fully God) and work (reconciliation) occur in complete harmony with God the Father and fulfill the divine plan precisely. The nature of the reconciliation may be understood in considering its scope, its goal, and its means.

The scope of reconciliation includes the material creation, the animal world, humanity, and spiritual beings. It may be tempting to think of reconciliation as affecting humanity only; the text goes far beyond that: He reconciled "all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven." No doubt this more succinct expression intends to call to mind the more extended statement of **1:16**. There Paul included supernatural, spiritual beings specifically as the things in heaven. In using the term "reconciliation," Paul assumed that something had gone wrong. All of creation was touched by sin. The world was out of order and needed a correction. This was provided in Christ.

As a helpful digression, some discussion of the biblical view of this disorder will clarify Paul's thought. There are

three specific concerns: the spirit world, the human world, and the material world. Each has been alienated and stands in need of correction. The spirit world suffered a fall when many of the angels rebelled.¹⁰⁴ The human fall is recorded in **Gen 3** and its theological implications explored in **Rom 5:12–21**. The material world was affected as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve, as recorded in **Gen 3:17ff**.¹⁰⁵ The various situations explain the spiritual battles between demons and God/angels, the moral dilemma faced in the human condition, and the natural disasters and diffi-

¹⁰⁴ Fallen spirits are recorded in Jewish literature in **1 Enoch x-xvi; xxi; Apocalypse of Baruch lvi.12f; Jubilees v. 6; 6QD ii.18–21**, and elsewhere. The Old Testament seems to refer to the fall of angels in **Isa 14:12ff.** and **Ezek 28:11–12**, where the prophet addressed the historical kings and the "spirit" which motivated them to be anti-God. This is particularly pronounced in **Ezek 28:13** where the prophet said, "Thou wast in Eden, the Garden of God" (ASV) when obviously the King of Tyre of Ezekiel's day was not that old.

¹⁰⁵ This account explains the turmoil of the creation which is also expressed by Paul in **Rom 8:19–23**. These texts also demonstrate an expectation that redemption will affect the earth as well.

culties in the material world. Thus, sin affected every area of creation, and the work of God in redemption extends likewise to every area of creation. That is the subject of this portion of the hymn. Nothing lies outside the realm of Christ's reconciling work.¹⁰⁶

The goal of reconciliation is important to consider. Paul spoke of being reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:20), but here he spoke of reconciliation to Christ. This emphasizes some significant points of Pauline theology. Since Christ reconciled things to himself, this statement clearly assumes the deity of Jesus. The sin that affected all creation was primarily against God. The reconciliation must also be toward God. Paul spoke in broader terms here, however, by saying that the reconciliation is to Christ. Thus the way to reconciliation with God is to be reconciled to Christ. He is the intermediary between God and all things.

According to 1 Cor 15:20–28, because of the resurrection, Jesus brings into reality the blessings of the new age. These two passages are complementary in that they include both the resurrection of Jesus and the organizational structures

¹⁰⁶ That, of course, does not mean that everything is brought into a proper, "saving" relationship with God.

that come because of the resurrection. First Corinthians describes Christ as the one who subdues hostile and opposing parties. He also reorganizes all of life, making harmony out of chaos. Jesus himself is the focal point. He has been given the task of making right what has gone wrong. By his power and authority, he will correct every aspect of creation. Ultimately he will present this properly arranged universe to God who will be glorified in all. Thus everything that exists is organized around Christ.

In Col 1:20 the common understanding of reconciliation must be broadened. At the most basic level, reconciliation means the restoring of a broken relationship. Typically in Scripture it involves persons because the Bible was written to transform human life. Reconciliation usually involves two prerequisites: Both parties must have a willingness to be reconciled, and there must be an occasion that brings them together. God has demonstrated his willingness and provided the occasion by taking the initiative to send Jesus as reconciler. The willingness is produced by the work of the Holy Spirit. A felt need, often prompted by circumstances of life, provides the occasion. Thus reconciliation is normally voluntary and volitional.

Here, however, reconciliation involves

more than a voluntary movement. The natural creation was subjected to sin “not by its own choice” (Rom 8:20), and its reconciliation will be of God’s choosing in his time. Regarding the spirits, in Col 2:15 Paul employed the language of warfare in stating that the spirit powers will be subdued by Christ.¹⁰⁷ Their ultimate destiny was settled when they chose either to rebel or submit to God’s glory in eternity past.¹⁰⁸ Now, God offers no possibility of renewal to those who rebelled, presumably because they had a full knowledge of God when they chose sin.¹⁰⁹ Now they

¹⁰⁷ The setting of that text is drawn from the language of battle in which Christ is seen as the conqueror disarming and pacifying his enemies.

¹⁰⁸ The theme of fallen spirits permeates first-century Jewish literature (see note 104). It makes its way into Scripture in the New Testament in such passages as 1 Pet 3:19 and Jude 6.

¹⁰⁹ When Adam and Eve sinned, they had a precise and accurate knowledge of God, but it was not the same as the spirit beings who saw God with clear, “spiritual vision.” If God’s grace toward humans can be explained by reason (which is highly unlikely), perhaps this is the way. The sinful act of humans was not as insightful as the rebellion of spirit beings. Therefore, it was not a final act in the same

live in an intermediate time in which they exercise limited powers of rebellion. Some day, however, that will cease. The work of Christ’s death will be applied completely to them.

As regards the human world, there is the possibility of a voluntary reconciliation; but for those who are not reconciled to Christ there is the sentence of death (2 Cor 2:14–16). Thus reconciliation may be effected by voluntary submission to Jesus, which brings the blessings of salvation, or by involuntary submission, being conquered by the power of his might. Reconciliation must be defined in this context, therefore, as all things being put into proper relation to Christ. Those who respond to his voice will be brought into a relationship of grace and blessing. Those who oppose and reject him will receive eternal punishment involving removal from God’s blessings and the active outpouring of his judgment. In the end, everyone and everything will be reconciled in this sense.¹¹⁰ Everyone and every-

sense. God offers to humans a chance of renewal.

¹¹⁰ For a helpful study of this aspect of reconciliation, see P. O’Brien, “Col. 1:20 and the Reconciliation of all Things,” *RTR* 33 (1974): 45–53, and *Colossians, Philemon*, 53–57. Of the many ideas suggested by scholars, the position

thing will be subordinated to Christ.¹¹¹

The means of reconciliation is described in another rather strange expression for Paul, “by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (1:20). The Greek text has a more direct statement, “through the blood of his cross.” Several aspects of this statement demand attention. First, the blood of the cross points to the theology of the blood atonement which runs throughout Scripture and speaks of the radical death of Jesus (blood actually flowed from the body). Second, it identifies the substitutionary aspects of the death of Christ by recalling the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament, which were substitutionary in nature. Third, the expression identifies blood with the cross. Paul did not often put blood and the cross together. For him, they were synonymous: Each stands for the other. Although [Rom 3:21–31](#)

above is in harmony with the conclusions of O’Brien who quoted Lohse approvingly that the “universe has been reconciled in that heaven and earth have been brought back into their divinely created and determined order ... the universe is again under its head and ... cosmic peace has returned.” (*Colossians, Philemon*, 56; Lohse, 59).

¹¹¹ Note the parallel in [Phil 2:5–11](#). Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

reveals that the two may occur together, to find the two in one statement emphasizes Paul’s thought. The use of “blood” dramatically pointed to the blood which was shed at Christ’s death. The emphasis is no doubt physical and theological. It is physical in that the terms “blood” and “death” point to the real experiences of human beings. It is theological in that Paul calls to mind the history of the blood tradition in Israel.

The peace achieved through the death of Jesus is an objective peace. It is the peace of relationships, not feelings. Although the human heart cries for feelings of peace, the deep need is for a relationship of peace. When relationships are correct, feelings follow. Here, as generally for Paul, the peace brings order and harmony into what is otherwise chaotic and distorted. The reconciliation of all things, as interpreted here, suggests that the peace is the restoring of harmony to all things, the many dimensions of existence (“things on earth or things in heaven”). Paul identified restored order often as a result of the work of Christ. It applied to individuals in [Rom 5:1](#), where the peace *with* God is the immediate result of justification. It applied corporately in relationships in [Eph 2:1ff.](#), where peace between races is a result of

the work of Christ. Here, Paul expressed the cosmic aspects of the harmony effected by the cross.

Significantly, an act in time and space had repercussions beyond both time and space. Jesus' death at a specific point in time and in the physical dimension of life affected beings outside of time who live in the spiritual dimensions of existence. Thus there is a unity of the two worlds, physical and spiritual. They are reconciled in an act of time, and peace is forever established.¹¹² From a theological perspective, therefore, there is a unity between the two. Unity is effected by divine creation, observed in God's intervention into the world through miracles and the incarnation, and solidified in redemption. Creation is the handiwork of God, and the Christian should understand the unity of all things in Christ. Elsewhere Paul reflected on this theme in [1 Cor 15:25–28](#) and [Phil 2:9–11](#). These cosmic dimensions are as much a part of the gospel as are the personal.

In this discussion of reconciliation,

¹¹² This has a bearing on what the philosophers call the empirical or phenomenal and numinal or spiritual dimensions. No matter what identifying term is used, they are viewed here as a harmony and the work of Christ spans both realms.

Paul had two basic reference points. First was the beginning of restoration, which occurred at the cross. The death of Christ provided the objective basis upon which all else followed. Thus Paul looked backward in time, resting his hopes on what was done in Christ. Second was the culmination of reconciliation which will take place in the future. Paul expressed by faith this necessary outworking of the death of Jesus. Thus Jesus died not only to provide individuals with salvation but also to restore a harmony to the universe. That harmony is an assured aspect of redemption.

Christians are wrong to wait only for the new cosmic order. Because of this expectation, Christians must have an ecological sensitivity. The world belongs to God. When creation is damaged or creatures become extinct, the world loses a picture of God. With each of these, less of God is known and, therefore, less knowledge is available through natural revelation. Equally, since creation is destined to glorify Christ, Christians must work to encourage that now. Wise care and use of physical resources are in harmony with the Christian world view.¹¹³

¹¹³ Other applications grow out of this world view as well. For example, this means that

The hymn to Christ has a much broader application beyond the Colossian situation. Grand themes are addressed which provide a theological overview within which readers can find themselves. The contextual key that opened Paul to this lofty description of the person and work of Christ is vv. 12–14, the description of the kingdom of Jesus, the “Son he loves,” and the believers’ place in that kingdom. All Christians may legitimately see themselves exactly as the Colossians did: as sharers in the kingdom of God. By virtue of belonging to the King, the blessings of the kingdom are available. The specific application to the Colossian church will be made in the verses which follow.

Before departing this passage, an identification of the major theological themes will summarize the section well. First, God’s will is known because of and through the work of Christ on the cross. Second, God has caused Christ to rule. He has enthroned him. He rules supreme over creation and redemption, over the world and the church. Third, all of existence is united in Christ. There is unity

there is an integration of all of life so that a Christian should enjoy nature and use it as God intended. The theological principle has far-reaching ramifications.

and order in creation and redemption. Paul laid the foundations of a Christian view of ecology. Fourth, Jesus is the central figure in creation and redemption. Fifth, ultimately, redemption means that Jesus will present a restored and ordered creation to God the Father. The function of the second person of the Godhead is to administrate the affairs of earth and to subdue those who resist. Finally, Jesus is the God-man and the mediator between man and God. There is no need for another (this argument is clear in 2:8ff.).