

COLOSSIANS BIBLE STUDY

Colossians 1:15-20 (a)

Lesson #3

Introduction

The bible, though unique in its content, is nonetheless very similar to other works of literature. It uses all the same types of linguistic tools that are available to most vividly, accurately, and completely convey the information that it was written to present. Like any book, it uses many situations and examples to convey information and reveal various facts. The intention usually isn't that the reader necessarily remember verbatim every word used, as much as it is that the reader rightly comprehends the message contained in those words and examples. Words are tools that convey information. Apart from the accurate transfer of information accomplished by the use of those words, they're of no particular use or purpose.

We often hear people say that someone is "full of hot air." By that they mean that the words that he or she says have no useful meaning. That they're expounding many words, but conveying no useful information by them. Regardless of the volume of words one might write, if the intended information for which those words were written isn't clearly expressed by those words, and then rightly understood and interpreted by the reader, then nothing useful has been accomplished. In fact, misinformation can be harmful. It can be worse than no information at all. Wrong information is worse because it presents itself as truth when it isn't. Acting on wrong information usually causes harm. When one has no information at all they know it and are cautious, but misinformation makes one trustingly act on it, and can therefore be very destructive.

The bible stands completely alone in its speaking on subjects of God, and eternity, and the origin and purpose of all things. No other writing can be compared to it in sheer majesty and authority. It speaks of things that no other book can even approach. It speaks with the authority of God, and is the only writing in existence that does so. For this reason, accurately interpreting the information presented in this book is of the most supreme importance. Making errors here has the potential to be catastrophic, eternal, and irreparable. But, getting it right offers the greatest reward ever presented to humankind.

Very often, as humans, we think we already know what someone is telling us, so we just sort of casually listen to them as they speak, without carefully analyzing the words that they're saying. We've all done this haven't we? And once in a while it gets us in trouble of one kind or another. But doing this with the scriptures has the potential of causing us harm that's of a magnitude that transcends any earthly boundaries. A casual approach to the interpretation of holy scriptures can affect our eternal souls. So, let us never set upon the reading of scriptures with the attitude that we already know what they're saying, but rather with the attitude that this is God's divine revelation of truth that impacts our eternal disposition, and seek to carefully listen, and thoughtfully ponder, every word for the true and accurate spiritual wisdom, and knowledge of God, that this book was specifically written to convey to us.

In the overwhelming majority of churches that I've attended over the last 30 years, there has been the consistent thought among those churches that the first priority of God in His creation, was for providing a heavenly kingdom for His created human children. And that the main purpose of Christ, in the eyes of God, was to be the agent of redemption for this man that He had created. For the vast majority, creation is a story that's all about mankind, and God's marvelous acts and provisions for mankind's behalf. As we carefully study through these next verses, let's test that theory and see if that's really what the scriptures teach. Or, is it possible that maybe we've been missing the real main point?

THE PREMINENCE OF CHRIST (In the Master Plan of God)

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 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. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 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. 19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20 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.

Col 1:15-20 (NASB)

Verse 15a

15 He is the image of the invisible God,

No matter how many times I read this it still remains somehow more than my mind can seem to fully grasp. I know that the bible teaches that no man has seen God at any time. I somewhat understand that this is because God the Father isn't made of the matter which we humans are made of. He's not composed of tangible material as we understand tangibility. His existence is unique to Himself alone. He is the only thing that actually does exist, in the way which He exists. The God of the bible is a living being that has His very existence outside this physical and tangible cosmos. All of the laws of physics and thermodynamics are applicable only inside this sphere of created time and space and matter. Where God exists is a question without an answer, because His existence cannot be perceived in the normal terms of our thinking. This is why when Moses asks Him to identify Himself He simply answers "I am." He cannot be confined to a place, or a time, because these are limitations that He has created Himself, and placed inside this cosmos. They do not apply, or even have any points of reference, outside this finite creation. God has existence, but He does not have locality.

Consider the emotions of love and hate. No one would argue that these emotions don't really exist, because we all know they have the ability to affect our lives profoundly. But if we were asked how big is love, or how much does hate weigh, what would we answer? Our answer would be that these things can't be measured in those terms, because their existence isn't as tangible matter, but as intangible forces or perceptions within our conscious minds. And yet all tangible matter is only as valuable to us as it impresses and moves these invisible, intangible emotional responses.

Money and riches are only perceived valuable to us by virtue of the invisible responses that they invoke. They are only as valuable as the intangible, invisible emotional pleasure that they bring to us by having them. The tangible material itself is actually of little use, unless it invokes pleasure to our senses. All of tangible creation could be viewed as God's means of conveying His invisible and intangible thoughts and feeling to us, His created beings. It is His means of displaying the magnitude and multitude of His glory to those chosen ones whom He loves. Therefore, everything that exists works toward that end. (v.16)

His existence is more understandable to us as that of a living consciousness that has no form and perceives no boundaries. "He is," which is to say that He has always been, and forever will be. Everything that we perceive as life and matter, as thought and energy, is a function of His intentional cognitive desire for it to exist. And just like our understanding that we ourselves have many invisible attributes that make us who and what we are, so God has various intangible attributes that define who and what He is in His nature and character and very existence. For all intents and purposes, we are what we say and what we do in the eyes of those who know us. And likewise, God is what He says and what He does in this magnificent creation plan that we inhabit. The whole creation itself is primarily a visible display of the manifold power and glory of God. It is His chosen means of communication. (Ps 19:1; Zec 12:1) **God's version of virtual reality.**

These intangible things of which we speak are those personality traits, and sense of values and affections that shape our behaviors and define how others perceive us. The only way we have to display these invisible characteristics is by our visible actions and audible words. Our bodies are the tangible means by which we may communicate our most intimate and precious invisible attributes with others of our own kind. We don't have the ability to simply share our feelings over some kind of cosmic network connection to all humanity. So, we must have a visible body to demonstrate, by its words and actions, all the things that we are inside, and that we want to share with others. These feelings and attributes are only possible for us to share and communicate through the use of a visible and tangible body.

This analogy is as close as I can come to what I perceive as Christ's relationship to the Father in the context of this verse. Jesus Christ is the tangible expression of all that God is, in His character and person, and displayed as a tangible object through which to communicate that information. He is the word of God that has become tangible flesh for the express purpose of displaying the glory of God to humanity through visible demonstration. (Jn 1:14,18) Christ is the tangible and visible embodiment of God the invisible Father. He is the means through which God the Father may eternally live in close cohabitation with His creatures and have a genuine relationship with them. We will never become gods, so He makes the accommodation necessary for us to live together as a genuine family. Christ is that tangible and visible accommodation, eternally and in every sense of the word. And all of this without losing His own distinctive personality?

Verse 15b

the firstborn of all creation.

We've probably all heard discussions on this verse as to what is the intended meaning of the term "firstborn." In today's vernacular we would most likely think it was talking about a chronological order of progression. Firstborn as opposed to second or third. But this isn't the only way it can be viewed. The term "firstborn" was a common way of referring to the one to whom authority would be passed on in the succession of a family. It had the connotation of authority as well as chronology very many times. So which one does it mean here in this verse? It's very easy to answer that question by simply looking at the next verses and seeing what is the subject of the discussion. The subsequent verses are altogether about authority, not about chronology, so we may be confident that this verse is saying that Christ is the

“firstborn” as pertaining to His position as absolute ruling authority over all creation. Besides, it would be nonsense to tell someone that the one who created something existed before that thing that he created, which is precisely what the next words say. And it’s this misinterpretation of “firstborn” that has led to the erroneous speculations that if He was the firstborn then there must have been a time before He was born. This heresy that de-deifies Christ immediately disappears when we simply read the verse in context and apply common logic.

Verse 16a

[For by Him all things were created,](#)

Christ is the “firstborn” in the eyes of God positionally, as His ruling agent over all creation, in as much as it is through Him that creation took place. When I first read this my mind immediately jumped back to Genesis 1 where it’s written that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Aha I said, here’s a problem. It took some time I must admit to resolve this, as Christ was a mystery not yet revealed in the Old Testament (Col 2:2) and the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity weren’t used. This problem clears itself up as one matures in their knowledge of the scriptures and the Trinitarian nature of God himself. However, it is the next words that really expand the scope and depth of the position Christ holds in the plan of God.

Verse 16b

[both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities](#)

Here we get to see a little more concerning the position Christ holds in His Father’s house. He isn’t just the ruler over this tangible cosmos that we perceive, but He is the creator of every force and element of it, things that can be seen and things that can’t. All that is, everything that does exist, tangible and intangible, was created by Him, and apart from Him nothing that is or was has ever come into existence. (Jn 1:3) Every angelic creature, both the faithful and the fallen, was created by Him, as well as the positions of authority that they hold and the functions they perform. If we take this verse at face value then it’s beyond debate that God, through Christ, is the sole source of everything that is, tangible or intangible, visible or invisible, earthly or heavenly, thrones or dominions, rulers or authorities.

Therefore, if something is, that is if something exists, then it can only have come into being as an intentional action of God in His creation plan, as there is no other source, and nothing has come into being but that which He has Himself brought into being. (Jn 1:3) Now my desire is to continue on with the thrust of this verse that’s dealing with Christ’s authority and position of preeminence, but, there’s a huge dilemma that this verse brings up, and if it isn’t faced head on then we aren’t doing the scriptures justice.

We are forced by the texts themselves to deal with the obvious question “if God is the source of absolutely everything, then doesn’t that mean that He would have to be the source of evil also?” It’s clear that this verse, and that in John 1:3, are speaking literally about the source of all things existent. The whole point of these verses is that there is nothing that isn’t under His control and dominion because He is the creator of all things. There is absolutely nothing, visible or invisible, earthly or heavenly, tangible or intangible, powers or dominions, that has sneaked in the back door, or done an end run around the creation of God through Jesus Christ. If there’s even one thing that exists that He didn’t create, then this statement simply isn’t true in its literal interpretation. If we take such a position, then we’re allowing for something in this creation that isn’t created by God, and therefore may, or may not, be under His dominion and control. This position violates the whole point of this verse, which is to establish beyond question His power and authority, because He is the sole source of everything that exists, in every aspect of its existence.

So now comes what we perceive as our dilemma. If these verses are actually true, then we’re forced to accept that the dominion of good, and the dominion of evil, are both part of God’s creation plan, and they exist because He perceives them. He is able to make the distinction in His conscious mind. Therefore such a distinction exists. As we said earlier, nothing has sneaked into this creation apart from God’s knowledge and intent. The only things that do exist are those which exist by virtue of their being perceived and understood in the conscious mind of God. (Jn 1:3)

By this I mean that the practice of evil didn’t exist prior to created beings, most likely Lucifer, who rebelled against God. And then it was spread to mankind through his influence and deception. And evil, as a functioning practice, began to take place for the first time ever, because God doesn’t practice evil. But, evil as a factual concept already existed in the knowledge of God before it ever started in the practice of angels and men. We, angels and man, were the first to ever put it into practice, and therefore we are responsible ourselves for that, but, it exists because God himself comprehends it, and He understands the distinction. The very existence of the concept of good and evil has its source in the conscious mind of God. God understands good, and He understands evil, and He knows the difference between them. This is the source of the knowledge of good and evil. It is a knowledge that starts and exists in the conscious mind of God. And this is that knowledge that God put within the grasp of mankind. Good is good because God approves and endorses it. And evil is evil because God disapproves and forbids it. This is what good and evil is. They both exist and are defined by the knowledge and preferences of God alone. God doesn’t instigate or author specific evil actions, but He is most certainly the source and author of the knowledge by which they get their distinction as such.

I just heard a very respected preacher say that if God had created evil then He himself would have to be evil. He seemed to accept this as axiomatic. But is this really a logical conclusion? If both good and evil are among those dominions that verse 16, and John 1:3 are declaring, then does that mean that God himself must be both good and evil? Perhaps this whole controversy stems from a failure to distinguish between who is the source of the definition of evil from who are the parties guilty of the practice of evil. The scriptures clearly define God as the source of the distinction, but angels and men as the sole and only practitioners of it. Why is there a problem declaring that God is the source of the knowledge which creates the existence of both good and evil? The scriptures have no problem saying this.

(Examples)

- (A) Does a father have to be an adulterer himself to be able to perceive and detest it, and to teach and warn his son about the dangers of it?
- (B) Does a man have to have committed murder himself to perceive the evil of it and write laws explaining it in detail and prohibiting its practice?
- (C) Did God have to be a murderer and a coveter Himself so that He could perceive the evils of them and write those laws on stone tablets for Moses to present to His people?

If anything is axiomatic, it's that one **doesn't** have to **be** something to be able to perceive it. So why do we believe that God would have to be evil to perceive evil and warn His children about it? I respectfully suggest that this just isn't a logical conclusion. It's really more like a reactionary response to a **perceived** intrusion into the holiness of God. But are we to conclude then, that the word of God is and intrusion into the holiness of God?

Bible Facts: (1) God is perfect and holy, and in Him there is no evil whatsoever. He doesn't practice it, condone it, or tolerate it in any way. Period. No other scriptures anywhere can ever contradict this absolute fact.
(2) All things, visible, invisible, earthly or heavenly, authorities or rulers were created by Him, and apart from Him nothing has been created that is created. If it's here, then He's the source. Period. No other scriptures anywhere can contradict this fact.

If both of these are true in their literal interpretation, then does one really intrude on the other? Do these two facts force a conflict. It seems that many perceive that they do, though I, quite frankly, do not.

In the well intentioned effort to try to circumvent this **perceived conflict**, one viewpoint expressed is that evil isn't really a specific thing, or dominion. Rather it's just the absence of good. Therefore it isn't something that actually exists and was created. But Satan isn't defined as the absence of Jesus, but as an existent entity, a ruling malevolent being, with a definite dominion called evil. And it cannot be argued that the creator of Satan is any other than God the Father himself. Be mindful that the topic we're examining right now isn't that of ultimate responsibilities for various actions taken, but of origins of existence. There is a definite distinction between these two throughout the whole of scriptures. Man is always held personally responsible for all his actions. The question we are faced with by a literal interpretation of this verse in Colossians 1:16 is "can God have been the one who introduced the concept (the knowledge) of evil into creation, and established its dominion, and set its boundaries, without Himself being evil? If not, then this verse cannot be true in its literal interpretation, and we must therefore somehow justify a nonliteral symbolic interpretation. But no such justification can be found in the context of these verses.

Either this verse is true in its literal interpretation, and God, through Jesus Christ, introduced into creation both the dominion of good and the dominion of evil, or evil doesn't really exist. There are absolutely no other choices afforded to us by the holy scriptures. No matter how we mince our words, we're left with the inescapable fact that the scriptures repeatedly declare God as the only source of all that exists. I've heard preacher after preacher apply his spin tactics to try to get around this scriptural declaration. So, rather than try to tiptoe around it, or somehow craftily explain it away, let's just let the bible say what it wants to say, and then rationally deal with the conclusions, whatever they may be.

In the garden of Eden there was a singular forbidden tree, that eating from would bring the knowledge of good and evil into the perfectly created realm of mankind. Who made that tree, and to whom did it belong? Who put that tree in the garden? And why was it placed in close proximity to Adam and Eve? Where did the serpent come from who convinced them to eat from that tree, and, who made that serpent? These are rhetorical questions of course, because we all know the answer to them. None of these things were done by some other mystery god that sabotaged our God's creation. These were all recognizable and intentional actions of God himself.

Now, let's establish for the record, that there's no question that Adam and Eve were warned not to eat from that tree, and they themselves freely chose to disobey this command and bring upon themselves, and by extension all their offspring, the consequences that they were warned about. Beyond any question the responsibility for bringing evil into this worldly creation lies entirely with mankind. But, we aren't speaking of responsibility in these verses, we're speaking of source. It is beyond argument that the lesson here is that Adam and Eve were the responsible parties for the introduction of the knowledge of good and evil into creation, but they certainly aren't being displayed as the source of that knowledge.

Neither Adam, nor Eve, nor Satan made that tree and assigned to it the knowledge, that in and of itself, creates and establishes the domains of both good and of evil. That tree was placed within their grasp by God. The tree, and the knowledge that it offered, both of good and of evil was God's tree, and it was placed there with full intent by God to serve His predetermined purposes; for Himself, for his Son, and for mankind. God had prepared a Lamb of sacrificial atonement even before He had created the first human being, and a kingdom for His Son to rule for His faithfulness. All of this required that evil must both exist, and do its intended part, in the overall creation plan of God. (Rom 9:6-24)

Yes, I'm saying that both good and evil have specific purposes in the intentional creation plan of God. It is His desire that we learn to love that which is good and detest that which is evil. For this to happen we must have prolonged and diverse exposure to both of them. And we must come to recognize and understand the ultimate outcome each one has. Good brings an outcome that's eternally desirable, even when it might be costly in the short term to do it. But evil has only tragic and destructive consequences as its final outcome, even when the temporal results might be pleasurable. It takes a lot to learn this. Words alone just won't drive it home so that we know and believe by experiences that it's true.

The final outcome of mankind's acquiring the knowledge of good and evil is a six thousand year history of wars and crimes and lustful indulgences that will lead humanity to gather themselves together on a battlefield called Armageddon, where we are but moments from commencing a nuclear war that will eradicate forever all life from planet earth. The final outcome of Adam and Eve's seemingly insignificant act of disobedience to God, will run its inevitable course through history, and bring mankind to the brink of his own eternal destruction. Only the last minute visible return of Jesus Christ will prevent this holocaust. This is God's purpose for introducing and allowing the knowledge of evil into the realm of humanity, so that humanity will learn, by direct experience, that evil must be totally and eternally expelled and expunged from any final and eternal kingdom. Because its ultimate and unavoidable outcome is nothing less than total and eternal destruction. God already knows this, and this temporal cosmic creation, with all its triumphs and tragedies, all its pleasures and pains, all its blessings and heartbreaks, is the way He has chosen to visibly show and teach us indispensable and divine truths that we must possess to be adequately fitted for His eternal kingdom. (Rom 8:28-30)

For mankind to ever realize the concept of goodness and righteous, it was essential to also learn evil and unrighteousness, because both only have comprehensible meaning when contrasted to the other. Apart from evil there is no meaningful concept of good. Good is valued, at least in part, by its comparative contrast to evil. If God wanted to teach His children about His goodness, He had to show us what evil is. That doesn't for one second mean that God practices or advocates evil, but that He comprehends it, and to reveal its destructiveness He had to show us what it is. God has intentionally chosen to display both good and evil in His creation plan so that He may teach His chosen children to recognize the difference and to enable us to appreciate all His virtues of holiness, goodness, and righteousness.

While they were innocent, Adam and Eve didn't have the slightest concept of what these words meant, and therefore had no possible way of appreciating their value. If true worshipers are what God ultimately desires for Himself (Jn 4:23) then those worshipers must have some cognitive reason to worship, or it's just rote ritual. If someone is strong enough he can force people to kneel before him, and sing songs to him, even if they don't know him or even like him. But this isn't worship, this is forced submission. Worship is when those who kneel do so of their own volition, out of full knowledge and humble respect and affection for the One whom they're honoring. This is worship. It involves knowing who that One is, and why you are honoring Him, and doing it gladly and joyfully. **(In spirit and in truth)**

God put the knowledge of good and evil into the realm of man so that man might come to see and appreciate God for who and what He is. Holiness is only fully comprehensible as a virtue of worth when placed over and against evil and all its destruction. Such an understanding is an essential component of genuine worship. A would be worshiper, that had no concept of holiness, or even a rudimentary understanding of what is good and what is evil would be useless, because worship, at its core, is the outpouring of loving appreciation for that which one fully comprehends and appreciates in that entity whom they're worshipping. To remove the understanding of good and evil from mankind would be to remove his very foundation for worship, as worship is built with the materials of this distinction. We only fully know and appreciate that God is holy because we know that unholiness also exists and how awful and destructive it is.

The scriptures say that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all, (1Jn 1:5) but that only has meaning to us because we know that there is such a thing as darkness. For this reason God created both, the darkness and the light, even though He has no part whatsoever in the darkness. God has no part in the practice of evil, but He has put it here Himself because it has to be revealed. First to show the utter sinfulness of it, and second to establish the contrast against which His own goodness and holiness may be recognized and appreciated. What would it mean to us to choose good and abstain from evil if we didn't know what evil was? What would it mean to us to hunger and thirst for righteousness if we didn't even comprehend unrighteousness? Now I could go on and on with more examples, but I think we've said all we need to say to adequately prove our point that a literal interpretation of this verse is not, in any way, an intrusion on the absolute perfect holiness of God. To think it does is not a logical conclusion, and it violates scriptures.

Therefore, based on the evidence just presented, we may answer the question honestly, and without deception or evasion, that both good and evil got into this created realm by the intentional agency of God, because He intended it to be so. But, that doesn't mean that God either condones, allows, or practices evil in any way shape or form. In fact it exists, and was introduced into creation, for the express purpose of demonstrating that He is the very antithesis of it. And, that He has absolute authority and sovereign control over it. Because He made everything, He therefore has absolute sovereign control over everything. And this is one of the main points being made by this group of verses which are highlighting for us the preeminence of Jesus Christ in the heart of God, and His place and position as King of kings, in the eternal plan of God.

We'll pick back up right here where we're leaving off next week, if the Lord so wills, and continue with this incredible set of verses.

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