

Dr. Daniel K. Darko, Prison Epistles, Session 3, The Christ Hymn, Colossians 1:15-2:5

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This is Dr. Dan Darko in his lecture series on the Prison Epistles. This is session 3, The Christ Hymn in Colossians 1:15-2:5.

Welcome back to the Biblical Studies lecture series on prison epistles. So far, we've been looking at the general introduction of prison epistles, why we call these letters prison epistles, and we've moved on to look at the general background of the letter and establish that this letter was addressed to the Christians in Colossi and to also deal with some syncretistic tendencies in the church.

In the last lecture we look at how Paul introduces the letter and the thanksgiving and the prayer he begs for the church. I drew your attention towards the end of that lecture. One of the great things that Paul highlights is the reason for which we should give thanks or be filled with gratitude.

He actually mentions in verse 13 that he delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, who is in whom we have redemption and forgiveness. As we go to the next phase of Christ's hymn, I would like to remind you about two keywords there in the transferring transaction. Redemption.

He redeemed us from a state of corruption. I've often explained redemption from the Greek in this sense. Imagine a precious wedding ring that was bright and shining, selling for \$20,000, got lost, got dumped in this rubbish dump, got rusted and nasty.

Someone discovers that and asks what use this ring is for. The process of redemption is restoring that ring to the beauty and quality of its original state. In the transfer, he redeemed us from the corruptible state, the rusty, shaped by all kinds of things of the world in the world of darkness. And guess what he did? When he transferred us at the end of verse 12, he brought us into the light.

Now we can see. Rusty people are playing in darkness. Playing hide and seek, perhaps.

Now in the light. He redeemed us. And because of the redemption, yes, we can sit back and thank God.

He forgave us. We were the guilty ones. In the course of the transfer, part of the transaction that needs to take place is a person who is actually in debt with

something, has sinned, and has broken a relationship with God. Then, guess what God does? In the kingdom of his beloved, he forgave.

He wrote off our debt. You know, I learned a song. I can't remember exactly what stage in school, in grade school, I learned a song that I came to realize some people in America know.

He said he paid the debt he did not owe. I owe the debt, and I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away.

And now I sing a brand-new song, Amazing Grace. Christ Jesus paid a debt I could never pay. In the transfer, he redeemed the rusty nasty to its original shining state so that he could locate us in the place of light to be seen with all glory.

And he forgave us all that we owe so that we can be part of the kingdom of his beloved son. It is the reason we should know something about his beloved son. And Paul writes what we will call the Christ hymn in this verse.

He is Christ. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him, all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, namely the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, and in everything, he might be preeminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace, not achieve peace, but making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, verse 21, who once were alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he will say, in that Christ he made a change. So, take note of some key things about him.

In Christ Jesus, the one who brought redemption and forgiveness, as I mentioned earlier, is the image of God. He is not only the image of God. In him, all things were created.

He is the fullness of God. So, let us not have any doubt about who Christ is. The fullness of God is found in Christ, and Christ is God.

He is the means of reconciliation. Wow! And then, quite controversial, he is the firstborn of creation. Paul makes this point and brings up this Christ hymn to draw our attention to the fact that it is this one who has come to make it possible for us.

Those who were then not in a good state, not in anything admirable, have now been transferred through him into a place where we can identify the place as a place of light. We can identify the place as the kingdom of his beloved son. In Christ, who is the firstborn of creation, Christ is also the firstborn of the dead.

I should just pause here and go back a little bit to draw our attention to the fact that verse 15 has been very controversial in the history of the church. And it reads, he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. There was a very popular preacher in Alexandria.

This popular preacher, Arius, had all kinds of issues that would actually turn the church into some remarkable decisions. Arius was the one who taught and actually grounded one of his teachings in Colossians chapter 1 verse 15, specifically this verse saying that this verse actually teaches that Jesus is not God. For Arius, Arius would put up a few things here.

You know, he would say Christ was not actually God. Christ and the spirit were created. The father created them.

It is on that basis he would be referred to as the firstborn of creation. Arius, for him, verse 15 of the passage we are looking at is clear. When the Bible says he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, it just means Christ was not.

He only became when God created him. So, he was the first to be created by God, not Adam. Arius would spark a lot of controversy, and the church would struggle with what Arius had to say.

We have a whole council meeting to discuss what we should do with this Arius controversy. By the way, he uses other terms, but one of his key terms is from Colossians. Later on, as he develops this theological framework, he brings in even some of your favorite verses.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. You know what? He gave his only begotten son. The only son he actually begotten is the firstborn of creation.

Colossians 1:15 is John Tracy's theme; he marries them and creates a doctrine. What then happens? The doctrine of the Trinity suffers because of how Colossians is read. So, what does the expression firstborn mean in Colossians? The firstborn of creation, does it refer to a created being or that which has precedence over creation? Does the reference or the language of the firstborn actually mean Christ is actually the one who has a preeminent role, trying to get my tongue to pronounce these English words well over creation? Or it means literally the one who was born first, and then everybody else follows.

You may want to ask, what about the firstborn of the dead in the passage? What does it mean? I think, and I found in recent years, James Dunn, a professor I mentioned earlier in this lecture series, who was a professor in Durham, a Lightfoot professor in the University of Durham in England, handles this particular subject quite well in his commentary. Dunn writes it echoes the earlier Pauline talk both of Christ's resurrection, referring to the firstborn of the dead as temporary prior to the resurrection of all in Christ, first in order, firstfruits, and of Christ as, using the Greek word there for firstborn, among many brothers, eldest in a family destined to share his archetypal image. So here, the firstborn of the dead is easy to explain.

The firstborn of creation becomes something that scholars are wrestling with and what to do with. But even that, I think Dunn explains it well because the firstborn of creation does not mean God gave birth to Christ as the firstborn. That is to say that somebody had a child with God sometime earlier on, not Mary, and had Jesus, if we are going to drag that subject too far.

The firstborn, as Dunn puts it, must denote primacy over creation and not just within creation. It is indicated by the conjunction linking the two verses. He is firstborn of all creation because in him were created all things created.

That is everything, the universe, the totality of created entities. It is his primacy or his preeminency that is in question here and not what Arius would bring out. By the way, this controversy of Arius is what will influence the convening of the Council of Nicaea just outside Constantinople for the Church to discuss and to really determine strong issues in the 4th century on the Trinity and the doctrine of Trinity.

That is a subject that belongs to what we call systematic theology or the study of doctrine in academic settings. But here I brought you back to Arius just to establish that this issue that has been big in Christianity and continues to brood in our churches and our belief system is partially rooted in the text we are working with, namely Colossians 1:15. Giving you something to think about as we go on, I hope as you enjoy the Christ hymn that the understanding of the firstborn of creation and the firstborn of the dead is clear enough. But in your living room, wherever you are, sitting, standing, listening, think about this.

What words would you say if you had read Colossians 1? I used to highlight cognitive dimensions or mental processes in how the church grows to become resilient to false teaching. Why do we ask such a question? Well, I ask that question because normally, when we have false teaching and issues related to false teaching in our context today, one of the things we like to do is, oh, this brings confusion. Let's go and pray about it.

Yes, we need to pray about it and ask God for grace to deal with the issue. But look at one of the primary things Paul puts forward. He prays for the church, and in his prayer, he ends with something we should give thanks to God for.

In the prayer, I highlighted knowledge as an essential part of what they need to combat false teaching. And so, if you begin to look at this text carefully and begin to think through this question I pose here, you begin to see things like this. You have heard and were expected to process what you have heard and make it part of your life.

You have heard it and understood it to be able to process and comprehend what is going on. Verse 7, you have learned. And if I add one more to the list, he prays that you may be filled with the knowledge of God.

Wow. So, when we are dealing with false teaching, it's not enough just to move around and say, oh, no, this is just easy, you know, just go and pray. We need knowledge.

We need an understanding of the truth. Let me just suggest one more thing for you to think about. And if I have an opportunity to give you homework, since you are doing this at home and you don't give me something to grade, I'll give you one of these homework to do.

Let's do it. In what way is the boundary between the pre-Christian past and Christian status shown in the prayer wish for the church in Colossae? How do you see Paul's prayer and his aim for prayer showing departure from pre-Christian life and Christian life? That's homework. I wish I could contact you to get the homework to be graded.

That is one of the sessions for professors. Just in case you are thinking that way, that's not true. Most of us don't like grading.

We like teaching. But think about the discussion. And as you think about that, you look through the passage and you look at some of the internal dynamics and words that are used like love, beloved, truth, and how all these things are shaping what Paul is trying to convey.

And then I will draw your attention to what Paul will build on from the Christ hymn from verse 21 of chapter 1. And he writes, and you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. If indeed you continue in the faith stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. Wow.

Take a look at that. I like to be reminded of the past so that I can appreciate the present. Sometimes, I like to be reminded of the past so that my commitment to the future can be reignited.

And Paul is doing just that and defining the pre-conversion past in verse 21. Spiritually, you were alienated from God, he reminds me.

You know, in terms of your mindset, you were hostile in the mind. And note it is in the past. In terms of conduct, you live with evil deeds.

Note that it is the past. It is not an accusation of the present, but it's a reminder of who they were, how they thought, and how they conducted themselves in the past. So, let me give you something to think about if you are following this lecture on your computer.

Paul is touching on from verses 23, 21 to 23, the past, the present, and the future, reminding them of some of the things I just showed you or told you about, about their past, establishing their current standing firm and clear so that he can point them to the future. So, past reminder, you were alienated. You were distanced.

You were separated from God. You had no standing or relationship with God. As far as standing or working with God is concerned, you were out.

In terms of mindset and thinking with clarity and knowledge of the truth or spiritual wisdom, as he mentioned earlier on zero, you were rather hostile in your mind. You think about dark things, evil things, negativities, things that do not bring glory to God.

And because of that, your way of life is characterized as evil deeds. But guess what has happened? So, look at the text—verse 21, you who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.

Verse 22, has now, look at the word now, present now, you are reconciled in his body of flesh by his death. You are now reconciled, not by cheap means, but by God's beloved Son, paying the price of bearing the cost of reconciliation in his body on the cross by means of death in order that he did this in order that not that we may glory in the past behavior, past deeds, and past mindset.

No, he did this for a purpose, so he said in order that, verse 22, we might be presented holy and blameless and above reproach before him. Apostle John verse 23 says, if indeed you continue in the faith stable and steadfast, not shifting. In the future, he wants to be reminded that we should not be shifting from the hope because it's the hope of the gospel that we heard.

And it is the hope that has been proclaimed; this gospel has been proclaimed in all creation and heaven. And Paul says, just in case you are not sure, it is of which I am a minister. It is so important that Paul nails down and really establishes clearly to the church where we came from, where we are, and where we are going.

And if we only understand this, then in the midst of false teaching, you don't throw in the towel at the slightest thing, or you don't give in to all kinds of deception that would distract you. As we look forward beyond this passage, one's attention is drawn to what happens in verses 24 to 25. Now, I rejoice in my suffering for you, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

For the sake of his body, that is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that has given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known. Now, if you notice carefully from verse 24, you should look at that text carefully and feel worried about the line that says, My suffering for you for the sake in the flesh, and I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Maybe you've not thought about that, but think about that.

Paul highlights his suffering. And as he highlights his suffering, he also highlights his commission. From there, he goes on and touches on his message.

Some of the things he says about his suffering may make you scratch your head a little bit, but let's try to unpack that. Rejoice because his suffering is for your sake. But this is the problem.

He seems to be suggesting that his suffering will bring completion to Christ's work. Is he suggesting to us that what Christ has done is not enough? Think about that. Do you actually think Paul is suggesting that the work of Christ is incomplete? Or do you think he is suggesting that Christ needed him to suffer in order for his work on earth to be completed? Is there something going on with the Jewish apocalyptic view of the world and how it's going to end? That we don't know.

We need to know to understand what is going on. Now, if you are following this biblical study series, you may not be aware of how many articles, pages, and arguments are made on this subject. Who is Paul to claim that the work of Christ is not complete, and he comes to complete it through his suffering? Who is Paul actually suggesting that without him, Christ's work would not be completed? Except when you understand the Jewish apocalyptic framework of how suffering will come in the end.

That a major form of suffering will be launched, and then some degree of suffering will come to actually consume or bring to completion some of the things that are happening in the end. Some things that we have in some of the ancient texts. Paul does not seem to suggest that what Christ has done is not enough.

In fact, he seems to be suggesting that what Christ has done is very important and is complete for our salvation. Thinking about the end time in terms of his struggle, though, he seems to be suggesting within the Jewish apocalyptic framework that Christ's suffering has triggered something. His suffering as a significant figure is adding to it to bring the completion of some of the things they would anticipate.

Again, I don't agree with James Dunn, the British scholar I mentioned earlier, on everything he says in his commentary. But I think this, too; he actually does a good job. And so, I will bring him into this conversation here, but first let's look at what one of my colleagues at Wheaton College, Douglas Moo, has to say on that.

Moo writes that Paul is not, of course, suggesting that the redemptive suffering of Christ requires any supplementation. Paul is convinced that Christ's death on the cross is completely and finally capable of taking care of the human sin problem. It is not that there is anything lacking in the atoning suffering of Christ, but that there is something lacking in regard to the tribulation that pertained to Christ as the Messiah as he proclaimed in the world.

Dunn will clarify what seems ambiguous with Moo. Foreshadowed is the apocalyptic thought that there is an appointed sum of suffering that must be endured in order to trigger, as it were, the final events of history. Citing Revelation 6 verses 9 to 11 for Ezra 4, 33 to 43, the thought then is that the death of Christ has, as it were, activated the first trigger, but those sufferings are not yet complete.

Otherwise, the second and final trigger would have been activated too. It was because Paul saw himself as the major actor in the final drama of God's reconciling purpose that he could also see his all too real suffering as somehow bringing to completion what was still outstanding of the suffering of Christ. Crucified with Christ, by which the world was redeemed and transformed.

So when Paul says his suffering will bring the completion of Christ's work, he is not saying Christ's work is not complete. But it's alluding to an apocalyptic framework that says what Christ has begun is being completed in what he is doing in terms of the suffering he is bearing rather than confirming the vision of the church and what is unfolding—Paul's commission.

For Paul, his suffering is linked, Christ's suffering is linked to Paul's suffering, and it is something that is made known fully through the word of God. And just in case we wonder, there is a mystery that is being made known here. In Colossians, Paul is not going to actually spell out the whole mystery, but that mystery, we will say, is in Christ and is the work of Christ.

In Ephesians, just getting you thinking and excited about this series, continue to follow this series because in Ephesians, he is going to actually make clear what the mystery is. He will explain the dimensions of the mystery in many ways. Though far away, Paul rejoices because of their faith in Christ.

As I bring the discussion of Chapter 1 to an end, let me try to bring your thoughts to also the message of Christ with the outline I gave you earlier on. For Paul, the message of proclamation is Christ. If you have not noticed by this time in Colossians 1, it's Christ, it's Christ, it's Christ.

The task of his proclamation included warning and teaching people so that they would be mature. He also outlined in his message that they need to understand that his suffering is for their sake and there is a cost involved. Christ himself suffered.

And as he does all this, he tries to strengthen their knowledge base to be able to withstand the influence and infiltration of false teachers. Verse 24 to 2, verse 5, let's make this general observation so that when we come back in the next lecture, we can actually spend more time trying to get ourselves into chapter 2 of Colossians. For I want you to know, Paul begins, how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face.

Their hearts may be encouraged, knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ. In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? I say this in order that no one may delude you with possible arguments.

For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good conduct and the firmness of your faith in Christ Jesus. Paul here lays the perfect foundation. In chapter 2, he is going to touch on false teachings.

What they are, how they need to handle it, and the elements of the false teaching that need to be addressed. Remember that I mentioned the notion of kinship in chapter 1. Keep that at the back of your mind in the course of this lecture on Colossians. When we reach chapter 3, he is going to link the fictive kinship of God's family to what should happen in the macro family.

For churches that meet in people's homes. And he is going to actually encourage them to the best of his ability in four short chapters, as we have it. To be men and women, God wants them to be in the church.

Let me just recap quickly what we have been doing or trying to do so far in chapter 1. In chapter 1, we have seen the greetings. We went through Paul's prayer and underlined key things in his prayer. We saw how he ignited the heart of gratitude by showing what God has done in Christ.

And create a perfect link showing that in Christ, we have been transferred from light, from darkness into light. That is every cause to burst into this praise and heart of gratitude. And so, in the Christ hymn, he mentions Christ, who was the creator.

He was in all. He is the fullness of all in all. And in Christ, he goes on to show us what our past looked like.

How in Christ we have been reconciled. In his flesh. Through his death.

And has been given hope in the world. From there, he comes back to talk about the suffering, the message, and the commission he, as an apostle, is giving along. From here on, he will go specifically with the false teaching.

And I hope that as we follow through these lectures, you will come to realize that Christianity has never been an easy piece of cake. Christians go through challenges. And Christians are encouraged.

And when Christians are encouraged to deal with the hard things in the church, they are not encouraged only by pounding them down. But they are also reminded of who they have become. What they hope for.

Where they are going is the basis for which it is worth all the struggles, all the challenges, and all the efforts to live up to what Christ desires for his church. When we come back, we will have a lot of fun moving on through Colossians. And I hope you are learning a few things from this wonderful book so far.

Thank you.

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