
Focus on Jesus

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some families have observed an old tradition of naming sons after the father. So, a man named William Hartman and his wife have a son, and they name him William Hartman, II; and perhaps that son later has a son and names him William Hartman, III. This could go on for a while, but none of it could happen if there had not been an original William Hartman. He is the firstborn, who then had many others named after him. Well, something like that happens spiritually through Jesus, too. He is the firstborn over all creation—the firstborn from the dead. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at the letter to the Colossians and what Paul has to say about Jesus as the firstborn. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is our fourth and final Advent program for this year, corresponding to the four Sundays and the four weeks of Advent...advent meaning *arrival*; and of course, during the season of Advent, we principally focus on Jesus' first advent in Bethlehem, when he was born of the virgin Mary, as we say in the Apostles' Creed. We do spend a little time in Advent also looking ahead to the Second Coming, although we haven't done much of that in this series; but in this series, we have been going to key passages in the Apostle Paul, where Paul makes clear that the incarnation of Jesus—the Son of God being made flesh—the incarnation—the *enmeatment* of the Son of God...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is central; and we have been in Galatians and Philippians and 1 Timothy, and now we are going to conclude this series in Colossians.

DAVE BAST

Advent, traditionally, is the beginning of the Christian year. Our year doesn't begin Jan 1, it begins the first Sunday of Advent; and there is a reason why the Church through the ages has thought it to be very helpful to rehearse these basic facts seasonally...year after year after year...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And so, we kind of trace the whole story of Jesus' life, beginning with his birth, his miraculous conception by the virgin Mary, his birth in Bethlehem, and then his life, his ministry, his Passion, death, resurrection, and ascension; and we go through that story again and again, as familiar as it is, because our salvation is grounded in that. So, as we have seen already, Paul emphasizes that his birth was under the law in Galatians so that he could keep the law for us; and in Philippians he humbled himself...he gave up all the privileges and the prerogatives of his divine status in order to join his divine nature to a human nature; and then last

time, quite simply put, it is faithful and trustworthy, and we can stake our lives on the fact that he came to save sinners.

So, now, though, we are going to kind of open it up and see this glorious picture that he presents to the church in Colossae of the cosmic Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in the second program, when we were in the letter to the Philippians, we noted that Paul knew the Philippian congregation well. He had planted it; he had been there...he had spent time there. That is not true of the church in Colossae. The church in Colossae was founded by...planted by...a man named Epaphras. Paul knew of them by reputation and through second-hand reports, probably through Epaphras primarily. We hear that already in the thanksgiving section in the very beginning of Colossians Chapter 1, where Paul makes it clear that he has *heard* about these people.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love you have for all God's people—⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up in you in heaven, and about which you have already heard the true message of the gospel ⁶that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. ⁷You learned of it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and he told us of your love in the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, Colossae was a small city, actually, in the interior of the Roman province of Asia. It was not too far from the city of Laodicea. You may be familiar with that place from the letters of Revelation. Paul was based in Ephesus for a number of years. Now we think he is in Rome, writing from prison, under house arrest most likely, and he writes Colossians at about the same time as he wrote Philippians; but as you pointed out, Scott, there is a real, major difference between these two letters, because on the one hand in Philippi he is writing dear old friends, and in the other he is writing basically strangers, and he wants to give them some encouragement...some correctives...to what he has heard about them, but also this sense of the supremacy of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; by the way, you mentioned that he probably wrote Colossians and Philippians about the same time...we also think he may have written the very short letter to Philemon at the same time, because at the end of this book...this letter...Colossians...he says that a man named Tychicus was going to hand deliver the letter...they didn't have the mail system back then...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Tychicus was going to hand deliver the letter, and with Tychicus was going to be someone named Onesimus; and we know that Onesimus is the name of the runaway slave whom Philemon owned, and Paul writes Philemon to say receive him back as a brother, not as a slave. So, this Onesimus who went along with this letter probably also had Philemon in the back pocket as well...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just kind of an interesting little tidbit; but you are right, Dave. Paul knows about the Colossians, and he knows about the city of Colossae from the reports, and if there is one thing that Paul knew about Colossae is that it was a hotbed of spirituality and false religion. There was evidence that there were some interesting,

almost cult-like features of people trying to worship angels, catch glimpses of angels, seeking spiritual transport and kind of a spiritual high; but, there was also kind of a complicated scheme of a whole hierarchy of gods, and there is some evidence of syncretism...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where some people in Colossae were starting to weave Christianity into these other systems, and one implication of that is that well maybe Jesus is just a god, and maybe not *the* God; and so, he kind of fits in the wider Greco-Roman hierarchy of gods; and Paul needed to get right at that in this letter.

DAVE BAST

In some ways, Colossians is extremely relevant to our situation in North America today, or throughout the West, because we too are increasingly living in the midst of a cross current of spiritualism, religious ideas, syncretism, mashing different religious ideas together into one personal cocktail of spirituality; and Colossae was exactly like that. They sat smack in the middle of an area...on the Silk Road, actually...a major trade route east/west...where there were all these cross currents of Near Eastern religions, of Roman religion and the worship of the emperor, and local traditions and gods and all the rest; and so, Paul has to emphasize to these believers now: Look, you've come to know and love and worship the Lord Jesus, and he is the one who's got to be the be-all and end-all for you. Don't mix him up with anything or anyone else.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jesus cannot get shoehorned into some other religious scheme. He is the one; and in just a moment, in a breathtaking passage that rounds out Colossians Chapter 1, we are going to see how Paul reminds them of who Jesus *really* is, and it is a powerhouse of a message. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are opening Paul's letter to the Colossians, as we have said, this was a church that was not personally known to him, but he had had a full report from their founding pastor and evangelist, a man named Epaphras. He had heard about some of the issues that were going on there, and he wants to take them head-on by pointing them to the glory of the cosmic Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so here is Colossians 1, beginning at the 15th verse: The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him, all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of [the body,] the Church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

And Dave, I read that purposely just a little bit breathlessly right now, because the first thing to notice here is that all those verses I just read are one sentence in the Greek language, over 270 words. Most translations break it up into six or seven sentences, not in the Greek. This is just one, effervescent gush from the pen of Paul.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and through that passage, we can hear Paul is obviously writing from the post-resurrection perspective, and he mentions Christ's death on the cross—his sacrificial shedding of his blood for our redemption, and the

redemption of the whole creation, really; but we also hear echoes of Christmas...of the Advent season...of the original story of Jesus' birth...because Paul says that he was the *firstborn*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And that inevitably makes us think of Mary's firstborn. He was also Mary's firstborn, in fact, he uses that word or that phrase *firstborn* a couple of times; and he says: He was before all things, which reminds us of John 1:1. We have mentioned it before: In the beginning was the Word. He was already there in the beginning, just as Genesis starts: In the beginning, God... John's gospel starts: In the beginning was the Word, or the Son. So, Paul hits on those notes, too, in this passage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and he is the one who did all the talking in Genesis: Let there be, let there be, let there be. That was the Word of God, whom we now know as Jesus...

DAVE BAST

All things were made through him, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who did all the speaking; and throughout those verses, and I tried to punch it a little bit when I read it, Dave, the two words in Greek *ta panta*, which means all things, and again: all things, all things, all things, each thing, every thing, all things. It comes up over and over and over because Paul is saying let the whole kit and caboodle, everything from A to Z and back again was made by Christ, for Christ, and it only makes sense in Christ. So, to all of you in Colossae who have been buying into these hierarchies of other gods and angels, who kind of think maybe Jesus fits in there somehow, in the middle maybe, or maybe near the top, but not... No. Paul says no. There are no others.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is the one. As you said earlier, Dave, the cosmic Christ...this is the cosmic perspective on Christ. So, forget the angels, forget the Greek and other gods that maybe you have been told exist. Huh-uh; Jesus is it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and maybe we could say a word about his opening phrase: He is the firstborn of the creation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That was taken up by some to say: Oh, see; he is a creature. He is the first of creatures; and there was an ancient heresy still with us in some forms called Arianism after the man Arius, who proposed it: namely that Jesus is some kind of real high cosmic being, but he is not really God, he is the firstborn. It is better translated as it was in the version we read: He is the firstborn *over* creation. He holds the place of the firstborn son in the household. He is really the co-ruler with God; and just in case you are tempted to think firstborn means he was created, Paul later goes on in this very same passage to say: No, no; in him all the *fullness* of God was pleased to dwell in bodily form. So, he is it, as you said. There is nobody higher. He is God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; as we have been emphasizing throughout this series for Advent, he is truly human and he is like us in every way, except for sin; but there is one other thing that is true of Jesus as a divine human being that is *not* true of anybody else, and that is that, yes, he existed long before he became a zygote in the uterus of Mary. As my friend, Luke Powery, says: The Son of God was before was, was. The Son of God was there before there was time...before there was creation; and he is the one who made it all. So, he didn't...there was not a time when the Son of God didn't exist and then he was born. There was a time when the *human* Jesus didn't exist, and he then became alive in Mary's womb; but the Son of God, who is the core of his person, was always there. He is eternal; he is fully God.

DAVE BAST

It is also worth, I think, paying attention to that second firstborn in this passage...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Paul says he is the firstborn from the dead; and of course, clearly that points us to the resurrection. He was the first...the people that Jesus raised from the dead, and he did it only a handful of times...there are one or two examples in the Old Testament with the prophets...they were resuscitated...they were restored to life by the power of God in a wonderful way, and it is sort of a preview in a sense, but it is not exactly the same as what he did himself and what he will do for us. He rose in the sense that he came into an entirely new way of being...a new way of life...and I remember one of my seminary professors saying: If you could have seen the resurrection, what you would have seen was all of a sudden *POOF*, he's gone. The body disappeared. Not, he slowly got up and you know... It is the life of the world to come...it is the life of the age to come...and he is the firstborn in the sense that we will ultimately join him in that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is the firstfruits, Paul says elsewhere. He is the first bushel of corn in the hopper of the combine. There is a lot more to come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, indeed, as you just said, Dave, we remember Jesus' famous conversation with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3: We must be born again; and so, we become Jesus' brothers and sisters when *we* are born again of the Spirit. So, he is the firstborn, and then we are the second born, the third born, the fourth born, the *b, b, b*, you know, a gazillion born. We gain conformity to Christ when we gained spiritual rebirth through baptism. As Paul says in another passage we looked at in this series, when you are baptized, you are reborn, and now you are an heir of the firstborn—the firstborn over all creation, but also the firstborn from the dead in his resurrection. If we die with him, we will rise with him; and when we rise with him, we receive a new birth as well. That is what Advent anticipates. That is what Christmas is all about; the core of the good news that we are also reborn onto eternal life.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; we are reborn by the power of the Spirit, and we all need it, as he said to Nicodemus: You must be born again; and it happens through our baptism, but also it needs to be joined to faith, living faith in Jesus; and Paul is going to talk about the importance of that faith and remaining in that faith when we look at one last passage from Colossians.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; so, we are looking at Colossians, where Paul takes head-on the idea that Jesus is just one among many divine figures, or that you can kind of combine him, mix and match, with other spiritualities. No; he is the cosmic Christ, he is the firstborn over the creation, he is the head of all things for his body, the Church, and he is the firstborn from the dead; and then Paul goes on to talk about the importance of holding on to faith in Christ, in this passage from a little bit later in Chapter 1:

²¹Once you were alienated from God, and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard, and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the way, we pointed out a minute ago that verses 15 through 20 comprise one giant, 270+-word sentence in Greek. We just read, Dave, 21 through 23 here as one more very long sentence...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not quite as long, but Paul is at a gush here to get the good news out. Yes, Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. He is the firstborn from the dead; and as we just said at the end of the previous segment, that means lots of spiritual rebirths...our own rebirth becomes possible; but Paul says it is pretty important to have that spiritual rebirth, and he lays on the...he didn't spare the rhetoric here...and he said: Look, you used to be God's enemies, you Colossians. Your previous behavior was evil, it wasn't just sort of naughty, it wasn't just sort of meh, a little off the mark; no, evil! Strong language, but when we are sinners, we cut ourselves off from God and from the only true source of life, and so we are lost; and that is why Jesus brought us back through his sacrificed body; but as you said, Dave, that is good news—that is the gospel—but because Paul has been hearing that the Colossian Christians were being tempted to weave in foreign ideas into the gospel, Paul has to give them a warning here: Hold the faith or you could yet, you know, be lost.

Dave Bast;

Yes; you know, there is a famous verse from the beginning of his letter to the Romans...his greatest theological treatise...where he talks about the gospel, and he says: I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for everyone who has faith. There is that word again. There is a tendency...perhaps a temptation...even amongst some Christians to read that verse as if it said: It is the power of God for salvation, even if you don't have faith; because it doesn't matter whether you believe it or not, whether you accept it or not, whether you remain in it or not, whether you kind of add to it or not; and you simply cannot enlist Paul as a supporter of that view, that faith is a take it or leave it or a never mind about it. No, no; he said it is so essential for us...yes, by God's grace...but to hang in there and to continue to put our hope and trust in the death of Jesus on the cross. He says here his physical body given in death is what transformed you from that previous, sort of dead-end way of living, to this living hope that we have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you continue in your faith, established and firm, do not move from the hope held out in the gospel; and Dave, this is a timely word for us today. We don't want anything to eclipse the centrality of Jesus, or the good news of the gospel; and there are lots of things out there in the world that try to eclipse this for us today. We have noted before on *Groundwork*, you know, on social media or elsewhere we get bombarded, and our young people get bombarded with a whole marketplace of competing spiritual ideas...different religions,

different spiritual schemes...not everything we hear, even sometimes from people who appear to be fellow Christians, would pass muster with Paul.

DAVE BAST

So many ideas floating around. We have to resist the temptation as Christians to get caught up in the political dimensions of what is happening. Our citizenship is in heaven, to quote a great line from Paul's letter to the Philippians. We have a higher allegiance, and while we care about this world and we care about our countries and we care about our leaders, we must not confuse those with the hope that we have in Christ, and find that we are actually living with a mixture of politics instead of just faith in Christ alone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and there a lot of conspiracy theories out there, some of which promise other avenues of salvation; or even other saviors or co-saviors. Some of that can look seductive to us; or, there are even little glosses on Christianity that we have noted before. Something of the sociologist Christian Smith has labeled: Moral therapeutic deism. What is that? Well, it is the belief that God is just that kindly old man upstairs who isn't really paying that close of attention to our lives or our moral choices; so, you know, if you are a nice person...if you are a little nicer than the average...you will go to heaven when you die. God grades on the curve. Just be good, be kind, good enough. That can sound pretty seductive, and it can even be one of those things that you could say, well, it kind of sounds like stuff Jesus said: Love your neighbor and the Golden Rule and...if it isn't the pure gospel that centers on the only one...the only superior one that Paul talks about here in Colossians 1...if that isn't our focus at Advent and Christmas, then we are missing what it really means that the Son of God came into this world to save us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I mean, the idea of...you mentioned this deistic idea: God is out there somewhere, and we only really call on him to help us out of a jam, or to help us in a fix; but no, Paul said Jesus came into the world to save us. He is now the head over all the creation. He is the head over all the Church; and our business is to hold fast to him, to serve him, to be humble like he was humble in our service to others, and to live out the implications. Jesus came to save and he is coming again someday to finish the job.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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