

REFLECTION GUIDE

COLOSSIANS 1:15-23 | FIRST OVER ALL

KEY TERMS

Image of the invisible God - This term *image* was commonly used in the ancient world to refer to objects that represented gods or the likeness of Caesar that was stamped on items such as coins. For many Jews in Paul's day, the "image" of God had also become associated with the concept of "wisdom" in the OT and "logos" in Greek philosophy, as that which an invisible God had revealed to the visible world. This means that when Paul calls Jesus the *image of God* in v. 15 he is in effect saying that God (who nobody can see) has now revealed himself in a human being (who lived and died and was seen by many). In other words, if someone wants to know what God is like, they now need to look no further than to Jesus.

DID YOU KNOW?

Scholars agree that Colossians 1:15-20 is written in a poetic style. However, they disagree on whether Paul is quoting an already existing poem or hymn, or if he's writing it from scratch.

Firstborn - This term was applied to Israel (Ex 4:22), the Messiah (Ps 89:27), and "wisdom" (Prov 8:22) in the OT and it carries the idea of priority both in terms of time and rank. In v. 15, Paul seems to have the priority of rank in mind, as he calls Jesus the *firstborn of all creation*. Paul's point is that Jesus is greater than heaven and earth, human rulers and spiritual forces, or anything else. In v. 18, Paul seems to make use of the temporal meaning of the word as he calls Jesus the *firstborn from the dead*, meaning Jesus is the first human being to experience resurrection but he won't be the last.

BACKGROUND

Colossians 1:15-23 is one of the most significant passages in the entire Bible because of the way in which it exalts Jesus. Paul opens this section calling Jesus the *image of the invisible God*, making it clear that Jesus is the divine revelation of God in human form (v. 1). Paul believed that God had previously revealed himself through the OT Scriptures and through the mighty acts in Israel's history, but now Paul has come to believe that God has most fully and clearly revealed himself through Jesus, his Son. Paul goes on to describe Jesus as the preeminent one over all things who had a role in creating all things, who sustains all things currently, and for whom all things were created in the first place (vv. 15-18). This Jesus, Paul says, is the *head* of the church to which the Colossians belong (v. 18) and he is the *firstborn from the dead* (v. 18). For a Jew, this latter statement was extremely significant. Many Jews, including Pharisees like Paul had been, believed that resurrection would take place at the end of the age when God returned to make all things right. By announcing that Jesus had been raised from the dead as the *firstborn*, Paul is claiming that God has now inaugurated a new age within the present one. Paul then concludes the section explaining the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross (vv. 19-23). Paul says that through the death of Jesus, human beings (and the entire world) can be reconciled to God and can be *holy and blameless* before God—not because of human effort, but because of Jesus' work on the cross.

GOING DEEPER

Read John 1:1-18 and Hebrews 1:1-4. What do these verses say about the relationship between Jesus and God the Father? What encourages you about God choosing to reveal himself in a human being?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Colossians 1:15-23. What stands out to you? Are there any phrases or statements that seem difficult to understand?
2. Verses 15-20 are commonly understood to be a poem or hymn that describes how Christ is preeminent (or first over all others) in the *first creation* of the world and in the *new creation* through salvation. In what ways do these verses stretch your imagination and understanding of who Jesus is?
3. What do verses 19-20 teach about Jesus:
 - what is the quality or capacity of his person?
 - what is the extent or magnitude of his work?
 - what has he done to accomplish his work?
 - what is the result of Christ's work for us?
4. What do verses 21-22 teach about humanity:
 - who were we and what did we accomplish on our own?
 - what work did Christ do for us?
 - what did Christ do in order to accomplish his work?
 - what is the result of Christ's work for us?

LIVING THE WORD

5. How would you describe to a co-worker "the hope of the gospel that you heard" (v. 23)? In other words, if you only had a few sentences, how would you describe what Colossians 1:15-23 means to you personally?
6. Verse 23 focuses on how we respond to Jesus. The word "if" implies that we have a choice and responsibility to live faithfully. Why are we sometimes tempted to shift away from the hope of the gospel and turn to other avenues to look for "more than" we've been given in Christ?
7. What are some strategies that help you to "continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel"?
8. When you consider this lesson about Jesus, what is one takeaway that you want to remember and think more deeply about this week?