

Jesus Christ the Firstborn

Colossians 1:15-20

This Christmas we've been focusing on the various names or titles of Jesus with the intent of expanding our view of how great a gift he actually is. Unlike so many gifts that wear out with time, Jesus is a gift that continues to surprise and amaze us as we come to know him more and more.

As we close out this series and head into Christmas Eve & Christmas Day, we're going to look at one more title or designation of Jesus. He is called the Firstborn.

I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the word, firstborn.

If you are a firstborn, you might associate being firstborn with your outstanding leadership qualities, your independence, your take-charge nature, or the gift to society of always being right. Or if you're a firstborn in your forties, you might blame your birth order for contributing to being stressed-out, obsessive-compulsive, and emotionally challenged. Not that I would know.

If you're not a firstborn, you probably have stories to tell (maybe in the next few days over eggnog) about your big brother or sister. Firstborn definitely means something in our culture.

It may or may not be good news to hear Jesus was a firstborn. But he was. And it's a big deal for reasons somewhat different than how we think of firstborn children.

To set this up, I want you to think about the stress you're feeling right now as we head into Christmas. I love Christmas and I'm excited about it, but let's be honest, there are a lot of things that make this a stressful time.

Getting everything prepared to host a family gathering, or traveling
How to pay for everything
Navigating difficult relationships
Grieving the loss of loved ones, or being alone
Simply managing expectations for this to be the best Christmas ever

Kids: what am I going to get for Christmas?

As a firstborn, I had a sophisticated strategy for dealing with this. Every Christmas Eve I would get up in the middle of the night to spy out what Santa

brought. Sometimes I would hear Santa in the garage. But most times the motherlode was there in the living room, and I would wake my little sister and make her hold the refrigerator door open so I could see the presents.

Christmas is great. And the true meaning of Christmas - the birth of Jesus - is even more wonderful. But **in our efforts to make the most of the season (or make the best of it), we can get wound up pretty tight.**

I think that Christmas stress that most of us experience can be revealing of our experience of Christianity. **In our efforts to make the most of our faith, we sometimes get wound up pretty tight.** And we might struggle to experience Jesus as the gift he is.

Today I want to take some of that stress away by helping us see Jesus as the Firstborn.

To do that we're going to look at a short section in the New Testament letter from the Apostle Paul to the Colossians.

The ancient city of Colossae was characterized by a mix of cultures and religious backgrounds from Babylon & Mesopotamia. It had also seen better days. By the time the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, other cities in the region such as Laodicea had surpassed Colossae in significance and influence. Like most situations where things aren't working great, they were stressed. There were almost certainly competing ideas over which traditions or philosophies should pave the way forward.

The church in Colossae was born in this environment and was certainly shaped by it. Men and women had responded to the message of the early Christian missionaries sent out from Paul. They had believed in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. They had taken a step of faith and begun to live differently, but naturally they were still influenced by the various religious philosophies of their culture. Reading between the lines of Paul's letter to the Colossians, they were religiously stressed. There were many voices in the church telling them how to make the best of their belief in Jesus, and it appears they were wound up pretty tight.

No church or individual is immune to the influence of its culture, and the church in Colossae is a good study in how to identify those influences and choose how your worldview is shaped.

There was evidently a destructive brand of religion prevalent in the first century church that had several characteristics. We see it described in Colossians 2:8 and following.

1. It was a religious philosophy (8). A way of thinking about God that made sense to the human mind.
2. It claimed to be “tradition” (8).
3. It involved submission to the “elemental spiritual forces of the world” (8, 20). These were also referred to as “thrones, powers, rulers and authorities” (1:16, 2:15). It referred to spiritual forces that seek to deceive us and lead us away from God into destruction.
4. It appears to be a combination of Jewish practices with ancient cultic beliefs (16).
5. It involved worshiping angels (18a).
6. It seems to have been regarded as advanced teaching for spiritual elite (18b).
7. It had an appearance of wisdom (23).

Can you feel the religious stress in that list? Can you identify with it at all?

Paul counters these teachings with a grand description of who Jesus Christ is and why true religion, a true connection to God, one that is a gift, comes only through him.

1. Rather than a religious philosophy, Jesus is the revelation of God himself (1:15).
 - a. He made the invisible God visible (John 1:18; 2 Cor 4:4, 6; Heb 1:3).
 - i. **John 1:18.** No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
 - ii. **Hebrews 1:3.** The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,
2. Jesus is called the firstborn over all creation (15).
 - a. At least two dimensions to this title:
 - i. His supremacy and priority of rank over all creation, particularly the spiritual forces of the world that were deceiving so many people (16).
 1. In him. He is the sphere in which everything was created.
 2. Through him. He is the agent of creation. He did it. He created.
 3. For him. He determined the goal of all creation.
 - ii. His pre-existence before all things as unifying principle of the world (17).
 1. **Proverbs 8:22-31.** “Firstborn in Jewish wisdom literature”
 “The Lord brought me [wisdom] forth as the first of his works,
 before his deeds of old;
²³I was formed long ages ago,

at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
²⁴When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
 when there were no springs overflowing with water;
²⁵before the mountains were settled in place,
 before the hills, I was given birth,
²⁶before he made the world or its fields
 or any of the dust of the earth.
²⁷I was there when he set the heavens in place,
 when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸when he established the clouds above
 and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹when he gave the sea its boundary
 so the waters would not overstep his command,
 and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰Then I was constantly at his side.
 I was filled with delight day after day,
 rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹rejoicing in his whole world
 and delighting in mankind.

- b. Far from a bossy older sibling, Jesus as Firstborn is one with true authority, complete knowledge and deep love for the world he created.
 - 3. Jesus is called the firstborn from among the dead (18).
 - a. Not only is Jesus the highest authority and unifying principle of the world, he is the same for the church, his body.
 - b. He is the founder of a new people
 - i. **1 Corinthians 15:20-22.** But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.
 - 4. The fullness of life with God is all in Jesus Christ (19).
 - a. Contrary to popular religious philosophy, there is no spiritual status to be gained by rituals or visions or anything else. All the fullness of God comes in a relationship with Jesus.
 - 5. Peace with God was accomplished by Jesus' death on the cross (20).
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How can this this peace replace our religious stress? By believing that when we receive Jesus, we receive the gift of all that he has done and is doing as the Firstborn. We do not receive a list of duties and assignments in order to make the most of a religious philosophy. The gift is what he does and who he is.

The verses following this section are some of my favorite in the Bible. I call it God's purpose statement for all who receive the gift of Jesus. Verse 22 says his purpose is "to present you holy in [God's] sight, without blemish and free from accusation. Verse 23 says our job is to keep believing that's what he's doing.

It's a gift to believe and rest, not believe and stress. Jesus alone is the Firstborn.

I don't know where you are in your spiritual life, but wherever you are, let me encourage you to consider taking a step to discover life with God in a new way.

1. Take a step of faith in Jesus.
 - a. Explore your questions about God and Christianity with an open mind to where faith in Jesus might lead you.
 - b. Be part of Explore God in January.
2. Take a step of growth in the Christian life.
 - a. Gain knowledge of God & the Bible, explore foundational Christian practices, and learn ways to grow as a follower of Jesus.
3. Take a step of relationship with God and others.
 - a. Learn and develop practices that cultivate a deep inner life with God and healthy relationships with others.

If you'd like to talk to someone about taking a step, grab a connect card, write your name, email or phone, which step, and drop it off in the lobby on your way out. We'd love to connect you with someone who can help you.