

The True Firstborn of Israel

This article of Colossians 1:18 is edited from the Ligonier Ministries

Expanding on the superiority and the sufficiency of Christ outlined in Colossians 1:15–17, Paul in verse 18 tells us that Jesus is the “head of the body, the church.” It is important to take note how the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ suggests an intimate union with Him and other believers. Our Savior is building a church united in faith and love, with all believers regarded as equally significant in the body (1 Cor. 12:12–31; Eph. 4:9–16).

Paul’s reference to Jesus as “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18) is a brief but theologically rich statement. The term firstborn is significant in the Old Testament, not least because the Lord spared the firstborn sons of Israel during the first Passover via the shed blood of the lamb (Ex. 11:1–12:32). Of course, our omniscient God did not need to see blood to tell Israelite and Egyptian apart. It was a sign to reveal the Israelites were not inherently more righteous than the Egyptians and that their firstborn sons lived only because a substitute died in their place (Deut. 7:6–8; Rom. 9:10–13). Israel’s subsequent sin and exile only proved that they were like everybody else (2 Kings 17:7–23); thus, the prophets foresaw a new exodus that would redeem Israel from sin’s captivity (Isa. 11:11; Micah 7:15). A new Passover would accompany the new exodus, only the substitute would not be a wool-covered animal but a lamb suited to take the place of human beings because He Himself would be fully human (Isa. 53). Paul asserts that Jesus is this lamb when He calls Him the firstborn, and unlike the firstborn Israelites in Moses’ day, the true Firstborn of Israel was not spared, achieving an even greater rescue from bondage.

Jesus’ status as the firstborn “from the dead” (Col. 1:18) is also significant because it shows us our place in history and assures us of our future destiny. Scripture divides the post-fall era in two: the present evil age and the age of righteousness to come that starts with the resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:1–3). Our Lord’s resurrection has brought this future age into the present, and the people of God now experience a taste of the power of the age to come through the ability to resist sin by the Holy Spirit. This future age will arrive in its fullness when all are raised from the dead, and our union with Christ assures us that we will then be raised unto eternal life just as He was.

Matthew Henry explains in his commentary on today’s passage that Christ “has given us evidence of our resurrection from the dead.” We are confident that we have a share in the full blessings of the age to come because the true Lamb of God died in our place, which enables the Father to righteously pass over us in His wrath, instead granting us eternal life. Without the resurrection of Jesus, we are without hope in this world.