

ADVANCED

Bible Study



UNVARNISHED TRUTH: LIFE'S GREATEST STORY

UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

Fall 2016

UNVARNISHED TRUTH: LIFE'S GREATEST STORY

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UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

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Bible Study

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Advanced Bible Study

FALL 2016

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Unvarnished Truth: Life's Greatest Story

Why This Study Is Important:

Churches talk about the importance of evangelism and reaching the lost, but the truth is that it is a low priority in the lives of so many Christians. Yet Jesus made it clear how important evangelism is to Him when He told His earliest followers they would be fishers for people (Matt. 4:19). We need to rediscover this unvarnished truth about the gospel and accept the challenge to share our faith as personal soul-winners.

This study connects to Christ because the all-powerful, sovereign God created everything through Christ and for His glory. God is holy and righteous, and His wrath is against our sin. Jesus took God's wrath for us, forgives us when we believe in Him, and brings us into a relationship with God.

This study connects to community in that believers encourage each other to trust and follow Christ. We should not assume, however, that people have made a commitment to Christ simply because they are in our group or church. Further, we can encourage each other to share our faith with others.

This study connects to culture for we bring glory to God by living for Christ in a world that does not know Him. As believers, we are to share verbally the good news of Christ with lost individuals.

SESSION 1

ONE GREAT CREATOR

THE PASSAGE

Psalm 33:6-9,13-15; Colossians 1:15-17

THE POINT

God created us—and He knows each of us.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Bill listened intently to his pastor's sermon on the lack of priority for evangelism by most Christians. He followed the leadership of the Holy Spirit and made the commitment to make sharing his faith a priority. The next day as Bill was sitting in the teachers' lounge, Maria asked if she could sit down and talk with Bill. She told him that she knew he was a Christian by the way he acted. Maria told Bill she didn't really understand Christianity and asked if he could explain it to her in five or six basic truths. Bill told Maria that his Bible study group at church was beginning a new study called "Unvarnished Truth: Life's Greatest Story" on Sunday and asked if she would like to go with him and his wife. Maria agreed to meet Bill in the lobby of the church on Sunday morning.

THE SETTING

David, the first King of Israel, wrote half of the psalms (75 of them). Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, having only two verses. Psalm 119 is the longest psalm. Having 176 verses, it is longer than 30 books in the Bible. In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the word *psalm* (*mizmor*) signified music accompanied by stringed instruments.

The purpose of Psalm 33 is to lead God's people to praise Him for His complete control over all the universe. The 22 verses of this psalm likely recalled the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to help one memorize it. Many scholars divide Psalm 33 in this way: introduction to praise (vv. 1-3); the hymn of praise (vv. 4-19); and the conclusion of praise (vv. 20-22).

For further background, see the article "Creation: Beyond Genesis" in the current, Fall 2016, issue of *The Biblical Illustrator*.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Psalm 33:6-9

- ⁶ **The heavens were made by the word
of the LORD,
and all the stars, by the breath of His mouth.**
- ⁷ **He gathers the waters of the sea into a heap;
He puts the depths into storehouses.**
- ⁸ **Let the whole earth tremble before the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world
stand in awe of Him.**
- ⁹ **For He spoke, and it came into being;
He commanded, and it came into existence.**

God Created Me. The first three verses of Psalm 33 list a number of actions for God’s people to take: “rejoice,” “praise,” “make music,” and “play skillfully on the strings.” The reason behind these actions is listed in verses 4-5: “For the word of the LORD is right, and all His work is trustworthy. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the LORD’S unfailing love.” These five verses introduce our first focal passage, verses 6-9, which focuses on God’s creative work.

In verses 6-9, the psalmist began at the beginning—creation. The picture is that of a three-story universe: **the heavens** (the part of creation above the earth, that is, the sky, the stars, the planets, and so forth), the **earth** (the land and what lives on it), and **the sea** (what surrounds and is under the earth).

The first part of verse 6 reads, **the heavens were made by the word of the LORD.** The word **made** means “to produce,” “to fashion.” **By the word of the LORD** completes the first half of verse 6. However, in the Hebrew word order, the first two Hebrew words of verse 6 are **by the word** and **LORD.** In Hebrew, the order of words in a sentence is determined by their importance. So, these words are the most important words in verse 6.

The Hebrew term **word** represents what is spoken (v. 6, **by the breath of His mouth**; v. 9, **for He spoke**). **Word** is also used in the Greek New Testament to represent Jesus Christ (John 1:1,14; Col. 1:16). **LORD** is the Hebrew term *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God. Built on the verb “to be,” perhaps the best way to translate this term is “I will be who I always have been,” stressing God’s eternity and consistency.

The second part of Psalm 33:6 reads: **and all the stars, by the breath of His mouth.** Technically, this is known as

synonymous parallelism, emphasizing the first line by writing the same ideas in the second line using different words. Hence, **the heavens** of verse 6a reflects **the stars** of verse 6b; **the word of the LORD** of verse 6a reflects **the breath of His mouth** of verse 6b.

In verse 7, the psalmist described creation in more detail, using the second part of the verse to repeat the first part of the verse using different words. The word **heap** is also translated as “boundaries” (“He assigned the sea its boundaries,” NLT). The second part of verse 7 uses the word **storehouses** as parallel to **heap**.

As the result of such a creation (vv. 6-7), the psalmist presented the response that all created beings should make (v. 8). The response of **the whole earth** (v. 8a) or **all the inhabitants of the world** (v. 8b) should be to **tremble** (v. 8a) and **stand in awe** (v. 8b). The psalmist addressed this response to everyone, not just God’s people. In earlier centuries, most in American society—not just Christians—recognized God’s role as creator and trembled before Him. Unfortunately, that isn’t the common belief now. What would our country be like if we appropriately recognized God’s role as creator as well as all its implications?

In a similar way, what would our world be like if we *trembled* and *stood in awe* of God? The word **tremble** means “to fear,” “to be afraid,” and “to revere.” When we recognize God for who He is, for what He has done, and for what He will do, we should tremble. Too often society’s picture of God is that of a doting old grandfather who never disciplines anyone or of some sentimental fool we should pity. The Bible’s picture of God is diametrically opposed to these false ideas that are so prevalent in our society today. We also should fear God. What are the implications for us and our culture if we use society’s concept of God (the old,

doting man upstairs) or the Bible's concept of God (the all-powerful, to-be-feared, Creator)?

So why should we **tremble** and **stand in awe** of God? The psalmist provided the reason in verse 9: **for He spoke, and it came into being**, or said another way, **He commanded, and it came into existence**. The word **it** again refers to creation, all of creation. That's why this focal passage's focus is "God created me." The word **He** refers to God. The words **spoke** and **commanded** give us insight as to "the how" of creation. God didn't need parts or plans; He simply **spoke** creation into existence. How powerful He is!

What are a couple of lasting truths from Psalm 33:6-9?

1. God created all things by His word alone.
2. Because of God's creative power, all people should fear Him; that is, they should stand in awe of Him and tremble before Him.

Psalm 33:13-15

- ¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
He observes everyone.**
- ¹⁴ He gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth
from His dwelling place.**
- ¹⁵ He alone shapes their hearts;
He considers all their works.**

God Knows Me. In the previous verses (vv. 6-9), the psalmist stressed God's role as the Lord of all creation. In verses 13-15, the psalmist stressed God's role as the Lord of all history. Given God's role as the Lord of all creation coupled with His role as the Lord of all history, our focus for this section is "God knows me." Steven Lawson wrote: "God observes every person on the earth. ... God who forms the

hearts of all rules over all things in accordance with His own sovereign purposes.”¹

In verse 13, the psalmist again used God’s personal name, Yahweh, translated **LORD**, that was first revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14). The psalmist also pointed out that God’s home is **heaven**. Each of the four times the Old Testament writers used the phrase **looks down** (Pss. 14:2; 33:13; 53:2; Lam. 3:50), they revealed God’s home is **heaven**.

The psalmist described the result when God **looks down from heaven**: God **observes** (“beholdeth,” KJV; “sees,” NLT) **everyone**. The word **observes** also means “to look at,” “to consider,” and “to discern.” God **observes everyone**. The word **everyone** is more literally translated “all the sons of men” (KJV). The Hebrew word translated “men” put into English letters is actually *adam* (meaning man of the red earth; it is also used as a proper name: Adam). **Everyone** is also rendered “the whole human race” (NLT). These translations point out the magnitude of what God sees, that He knows us, and that He has an intimate knowledge of us.

Psalms 33:14 is parallel to verse 13. Verse 13 reads, **the LORD looks**; verse 14 has, **He gazes**. Verse 13 says, **He looks down from heaven**; verse 14 states, **He gazes ... from His dwelling place**. Verse 13 notes, **God observes everyone**; verse 14 declares, **He gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth**. The parallel words in verse 14 either repeat, clarify, or expand the words in verse 13.

How impossible it is for us to try to hide from God! What difference does it make for you to know that God is watching what you think, say, and do? Who does God **observe**? These verses provide the answer: **everyone**.

While verses 13-14 focus on God’s actions toward all people, verse 15 seems to narrow that focus to individual people. In verses 13-14, God’s actions toward people were

passive; in verse 15, God takes an active role: **He alone shapes their hearts.**

When we consider God's gift of free will to us, how do we understand our free will in light of God's sovereignty? When the psalmist wrote, **He alone shapes their hearts**, what did He mean? Perhaps different versions and translations of the Bible can help us understand. Since the psalmist had been speaking of creation and history, possibly the translation "he fashioneth their hearts alike" (KJV) or "He made their hearts" (NLT) refers to God's creative act and not to God's ongoing influence over a person.

On the other hand, if **He alone shapes their hearts** refers to God's actions in guiding people, how can we be responsible for the choices we make? Artur Weiser wrote: "Nothing remains of the divine presence hidden from Him who created the heart of man, not even the most secret thoughts in the innermost recesses of man's heart. Whatever man may do is done in the sight of the omniscient God; and this accounts for the ultimate seriousness of man's responsibility."²

Certainly this argument does not exhaust the depth of meaning to understand the tension between all the Bible's references to God's sovereignty and His gift of free will for humans, but this approach can help us understand what the psalmist meant in verse 15. Notice also that God and **He alone** has the ability to create our heart, our innermost being. We may be able to influence another person, but we can't create their hearts; only God can make their hearts (Ps. 139:13).

In addition to looking at creation to help us understand the phrase **He alone shapes their hearts**, perhaps creation will help us also understand what the psalmist meant by the phrase **He considers all their works**. The New

Living Translation renders this, “so he understands everything they do.” In other words, “so” links what God did in creating their hearts with the results (**considers all their works** or “understands everything they do,” NLT).

What are some lasting truths in Psalm 33:13-15?

1. God is present and active in His creation.
2. God is present and active in history.
3. God sees everything; therefore, He knows everything.
4. God—and God alone—shapes and forms people’s innermost beings.

Colossians 1:15-17

- ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.**
- ¹⁶ For everything was created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things have been created through Him and for Him.**
- ¹⁷ He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together.**

Jesus Is Central to All Creation. So far, we have studied how God created the universe (and us as a part of it; Ps. 33:6-9) and as a result learned that God knows us (all of our actions; Ps. 33:13-15). In Colossians 1:15-17, we find that Jesus is central to all creation.

New Testament scholars agree that most of Paul’s letters were written to address various situations. Colossians was written to correct false teaching about who Christ

was and is and what He had done and is doing. Many Bible students also recognize through linguistic study that Colossians 1:15-20 forms a “hymn” (a poem used in worship) or an early creedal statement of faith. Many scholars also agree that verses 15-17 present truths about Jesus and creation and that verses 18-20 present truths about Jesus and the church (re-creation). However, Bible students disagree about specifics of the authorship of this hymn and its exact form. For example, did the Holy Spirit inspire Paul to adapt and correct a poem the church at Colossae already used? Did the Holy Spirit inspire Paul to write these words years before and use them when he wrote his letter to the Colossians? Or did the Holy Spirit inspire Paul to write the words as he was writing the other parts of the Book of Colossians? Although we can’t be absolute about answers to these questions, we can be absolutely sure that the Holy Spirit did inspire Paul to use the words of this hymn or early confessional statement.

Likely, Colossians 1:15-17 forms the first stanza of a hymn or a section of a creed dealing with Christ’s supremacy to and involvement in creation (see also John 1:1-18; Heb. 1:1-4). These verses from Colossians elaborate on the verses we studied in Psalm 33. Maxie Dunnam explained: “The ‘false teachers’ [in Colossae], trying to ‘*deceive with persuasive words*’ (2:4), were demeaning Christ, proposing a substitute philosophy for the gospel Paul preached, which gospel the Colossians had received through Epaphras.”³

In Colossians 1:15, Paul continued his description of the real Jesus Christ as opposed to the Christ of the false teachers in Colossae. In this verse, Paul described God’s Son by two titles: **image** and **firstborn**. Whereas **image** describes the relationship between Son and Father, **firstborn** describes the relationship between Son and creation.

The descriptive title **image** reflects the Greek word behind our English word *icon*; it means “visible expression,” “an exact likeness.” Whereas Jesus is the visible representation of God, the Father Himself is **invisible** (John 1:18). One translation of Colossians 1:15 makes this explicit: “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God” (NLT). In Jesus, God revealed Himself. Although this points to Jesus’ pre-existence, Paul’s next title for Jesus makes that point more clearly.

The descriptive title **the firstborn over all creation** has led to confusion by some. From the followers of Arius in the fourth century A.D. to the Jehovah’s Witnesses of today, some have misunderstood this title as meaning that Jesus was the first to be born. According to their false ideas, they think **firstborn** means that Jesus is not eternal and therefore He is not fully God. At first glance **firstborn** seems to focus on time, but further study of how this word is used in Scripture reveals the focus is on “priority of rank” or “supremacy” (see also Ps. 89:27). If Paul had wanted to say that Christ was the first to be born, he likely would have used Greek words translated “created first” or “formed first.” As **firstborn** “Christ is unique, being distinguished from all creation (cf. Heb. 1:6). He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since He is its Lord.”⁴

In Colossians 1:16, Paul continued his description of Christ (as evidenced by the connective word **for**). Verse 16 has a complicated structure or form. For example, **heaven** relates to **the invisible**, **earth** relates to **the visible**; **dominions** and **authorities** are **invisible**, **thrones** and **rulers** are **visible**. The first line of the verse, **for everything was created by Him** is further explained by the last line of the verse: **all things have been created through Him and for Him**. Both the first line and last line of verse 16 express our focus for verses 15-17: Jesus is central to all creation.

Although the word **for** in verse 16 links that verse to the previous and following verses, this Greek word is also translated “because,” a word that makes the connection even stronger. The grammar of the Greek verb translated **was created** (a Greek aorist tense) emphasizes the past completed act. At the end of verse 16, the Greek verb translated **has been created** (a Greek perfect tense) emphasizes the continuing result—creation’s continuing existence.

The singular **everything** and the plural **all things** refer to the totality of creation. The eight qualifiers (**heaven ... earth ... visible ... invisible ... thrones ... dominions ... rulers ... authorities**) further explain **everything** and **all things** of creation. The qualifiers **thrones ... dominions ... rulers ... authorities** may also address the erroneous ideas of false teachers in Colossae who saw these qualifiers as rankings of angels that they worshiped.

Max Anders, in the *Holman New Testament Commentary*, wrote: “In making the assertion that Christ is the Creator of the angelic host, the point is clearly made that the angels are not to have a place of priority or even equality with Christ. Only Christ can have the place of supremacy.”⁵

Verse 16 stresses the truth that the Son was the agent of creation (**through Him**, which in no way contradicts Gen. 1:1). Elsewhere, the New Testament also stresses this truth (John 1:4; 1 Cor. 8:6). The phrase **for Him** may indicate *for* Christ’s glory or benefit, or this phrase may indicate that Christ *is* the ultimate goal of creation (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 1:10). In either case, Colossians 1:15-17 certainly teaches that Jesus is central to all creation.

Verse 17 both sums up the previous two verses and introduces the next stanza of the hymn that focuses on Jesus and the church; that is, verses 15-17 focus on creation, verses 18-20 focus on re-creation. Paul began verse 17 by

stating that Jesus **is before all things**. This phrase focuses on Christ's superiority and preexistence, reinforcing the truths presented in the previous verses. His preexistence stresses that Jesus was present before He created the universe. His preexistence also addressed the error of both Arius (in the fourth century A.D.) and of the Jehovah's Witnesses (today).

Paul's second statement in verse 17, **and by Him all things hold together**, emphasizes Christ's role in sustaining the universe. In Christ, and in Him alone, we see the unifying principle of all life. The Greek perfect tense of the verb translated **hold together** emphasizes the continuing result of the Son being the agent of creation—His sustaining and unifying power (see also Heb. 1:2-3). The Greek verb translated **hold together** has also been translated "consist" (KJV) and "he holds all creation together" (NLT). The verb translated **hold together** is a compound verb, made up of two root words: the preposition translated "together" or "with" and the verb translated "stand," "place," or "put." Thus, the phrases "stand together," "put together," or "establish" help us understand the meaning of **hold together**.

What are some lasting truths in Colossians 1:15-17?

1. Jesus, the Son, was God's agent in creating this world.
2. Jesus continues to hold together—or sustain, preserve, and protect—all of creation.
3. The truths we have encountered in this session emphasize that Jesus is central to all creation.
4. Jesus existed before all created things.
5. Jesus is superior to all creation.

LIVE IT OUT

As you reflect on this Bible study, respond to the following:

How will the truth that God created all things impact your life this week? _____

What does the fact that God created all things through His word alone say about His power? _____

How will you change your life to stand in awe of Him and tremble before Him? _____

How will you respond to the truth that God sees and knows everything? _____

What does it mean for you that Jesus (who was God’s agent in creation) holds all of creation together? _____

¹ Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 1-75*, vol. 11, in *The Holman Old Testament Commentary* [Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2003], 181.

² Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, in *The Old Testament Library* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962], 293.

³ Maxie D. Dunnam, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 8, in *The Communicator’s Commentary* [Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982], 346.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, in the *Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982], 45.

⁵ Max Anders, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*, vol. 8, in the *Holman New Testament Commentary* [Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1999], 296.