

A Big Saviour

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[0:00] Mary's going to come, she's going to read scripture for us. She's going to read from Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 to 23. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Well, we're breaking into our series in James in the morning to turn to this very famous passage in Colossians chapter 1 this morning.

It's a big passage about a big saviour. There's a lot in it, and we're going to try and get through it, but more as a kind of helicopter view of the passage, we could be in these verses in a long time.

[1:39] But we're not going to do that this morning, although you may beg to differ by the end of this sermon. Many years ago I read a book entitled *The Glory of Christ* by a minister down in England, a guy called Peter Lewis.

And in the beginning of the book he tells a story about visiting a church, I think in Wales. He's on holiday with his family, and there was a lay preacher bringing the message that morning.

And the preacher concluded his sermon with these words. He said, I got to know him personally. He was a keen angler, and I used to go fishing with him. And on those occasions I was able to observe him from an entirely different viewpoint. I got to know the man, not merely the image.

And the nearer I got, the smaller he became. But God eventually led that downcast schoolboy to a new hero.

[3:11] And I've walked with my Jesus for 35 years now. And in that time I've often disappointed him. But he has never disappointed me. I've got to know him better.

And that the nearer I get, the bigger he becomes. The nearer I get, the bigger he becomes.

Now here in Colossians chapter 1, it is evident that for Paul, Jesus Christ was quite simply a massive figure.

Perhaps there are a few places in his writings where we see this so clearly as here in these verses. Here is Paul up close and personal with Jesus.

And in these words he spreads out before us something of the majesty and splendor and greatness and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[4:06] These verses are really a doxology. Worship. Paul wants the hearts of his hearers to be warmed and to be filled with Jesus Christ.

He wants our minds to be taken up with Jesus. He wants our faith to be rooted in this Jesus. He wants us to be strengthened by a personal knowledge of this man, Jesus Christ.

He wants us to draw close and see just how great and glorious and wonderful he is. He wants us to see that Jesus Christ is indeed a big Savior.

And I want to highlight just four things that Paul wants us to understand here about the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ, our big Savior.

And we'll go through them fairly quickly. The first is this, is Jesus and his unique relationship to God. Jesus and his unique relationship to God.

[5:11] One of the most basic religious questions that people ask is this, what is God like? And Paul's answer here, and indeed the answer of the Christian faith, is this, God is like Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God. That's quite an unusual phrase. The Colossian church to which Paul was writing was made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

The Jews worshipped, if you like, the invisible God, and the Gentiles were known for worshipping images. And Paul puts those two ideas together when he says that in Jesus, the invisible God became visible.

God's nature perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ. Now, that was an outrageous claim way back in the first century, just as it is today.

How can flesh and blood accurately reflect the eternal God? And that's why some wanted to say that Jesus wasn't really a man.

[6:18] They suggested he was a spirit or some kind of apparition or angel. But Paul is very clear in these verses that Jesus was a man of flesh and blood.

In verse 22, he talks of his body of flesh. The language he uses couldn't make it clearer that Jesus is to be understood as being truly human.

Of course, there are many that object to that. Those who say, well, if he was fully human, he couldn't really be fully divine.

Maybe he was somebody who was anointed by God in a special way, or he was temporarily, temporarily filled with God's Spirit. Maybe he was just someone who was used by God in an exceptional way.

But again, the language that Paul uses in this passage makes it clear that that could not be the case. Verse 19, For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

[7:26] Jesus was truly God, truly divine, and truly human. The life of God that dwelt or resided in Jesus was not something temporary or partial, but something permanent and complete.

The fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ. It's hard, really, to think how Paul could make that any clearer, that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine.

And we might say, well, maybe that's just Paul. Maybe that's just one of his strange ideas. But this dramatic claim to a unique relationship with God is one that Jesus himself made.

And we see that in the Gospels, most notably in John's Gospel, the 14th chapter of John's Gospel. John 14, from verse 8, we read these words. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father, and that's enough for us.

And Jesus said, Have I been with you so long and you still don't know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father?

[8:29] Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does His works.

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. The unequivocal claim of the New Testament is that the very form, image, and glory of God belong to Jesus in exactly the same degree as they do to God the Father.

Jesus Christ has a unique relationship to God because He is truly God. I came across these words of John Owen writing on this, the image of the invisible God.

He writes this, This is the foundation of our religion, the rock on which the church is built, the ground of all our hopes of salvation, of life, and immortality.

All is resolved into this, namely, the representation that is made of the nature and will of God in the person and office of Jesus Christ.

[9:38] Here is Jesus and His unique relationship to God, truly God, truly man, God in the flesh, the image of the invisible God.

That brings me to the second thing here, and that is Jesus and His unique relationship to creation. The firstborn, He says, over all creation. By Him, all things were created.

Heaven and earth, visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, all things created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him, all things hold together. Paul calls Jesus not just the image of the invisible God, but the firstborn of all creation, the Lord of creation.

Now, some suggest that these words mean that Christ was a creature, the first created being, indeed a heresy that developed in the first centuries of the church did just that.

[10:38] That was known as Arianism. And today, those who take such a view, generally speaking, liberal Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses. But Paul does not say that Jesus is the first created.

He says, firstborn. And in the ancient world, this title was a designation of supremacy. The law of primogeniture means that the firstborn was the inheritor of a father's wealth, power, and status. And so, calling Jesus the firstborn of or over all creation is actually just another way of saying that Jesus is equal with God the Father. Jesus shares equally in the Father's power and authority and supremacy over creation.

He is incomparably great. And that thought is developed in the verses that follow. You notice how Jesus is described as the agent of creation. By Him, all things were created.

Now, if all things were created by Jesus, it stands to reason that He Himself could not be a created being. All things were created through Him. He is the creator of all things and therefore Himself not a created being.

[11:54] Jesus is not part of creation at all. How can this be? Because He is truly God. every last corner of this universe was created by Jesus Christ.

He is sovereign over all that He has made. Even those unseen powers and authorities in this world were made and controlled by Him. He rules over all things.

And Jesus here is not just the agent of creation. He is the sustainer of creation. He is before all things, verse 17. In Him all things hold together. And the claim here is that Jesus sustains, preserves the very fabric of the universe.

Why we live in a cosmos and not a chaos? Because Christ holds all things together. Because of Him there is structure, order, stability. So, behind all that there is, it's not some grand unifying theory, some abstract mathematical principle, but a divine personality.

It's Jesus who gives order and structure and coherence to the universe He's made. In Him all things hold together. He sustains everything by the power of His Word.

[13:10] And so, as we explore this universe, as we enjoy this world that He has made, as we work in it, as we discover more of its grandeur and beauty, we come to see that it's all really the theater of His glory.

Jesus is the agent, He's the sustainer, and also here the goal of creation. All things were created through Him and for Him.

The universe has a purpose or a goal, it is for Him. Jesus Christ is the key to unlocking the mysteries and the deepest secrets of the universe.

It's because of Him that there is purpose and meaning in any of it. As human beings, we have embedded deep within us an intuition of destiny and purpose.

No matter how hard we try, some today are trying very hard, we cannot erase or eradicate that sense of ultimate significance.

[14:11] Consistent atheists like Richard Dawkins and others say that even to ask the question about purpose and meaning in human existence is stupid and irrational.

Everything is a cosmic accident. And theirs is an unbearable and, I think, in the final analysis, an unlivable perspective.

Whether or not we believe in a Creator makes a profound difference in how we look at ourselves, how we look at other people, and how we live our lives.

It makes all the difference in the world. And Paul asserts here that everything that exists finds its origin, existence, and purpose in Jesus Christ.

And that is true for you and for me today. Jesus Christ is the only place where you can find eternal meaning and purpose in life.

[15:11] Tim Keller once wrote, if you don't let your thinking lead you to Jesus Christ, it will end in despair. Jesus is the Lord over all creation.

That is a dramatic and outrageous claim, an astounding claim. Jesus and His unique relationship to God. Jesus is truly God.

Jesus and His unique relationship to creation. He is the Creator. Thirdly here, Jesus and His unique relationship to the church. Verse 18, He is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. Jesus is forming a new community around Him, the church of Jesus Christ.

It comprises all those who have been joined to Him by faith. The Lord of creation is the Lord of the church. Jesus is ushering in a new creation.

[16:12] And one of the marks of that new creation is the formation of this new people. Excuse me a second. The New English Bible translates to Corinthians 5, 17.

When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world. The old order is gone and a new order has already begun. In other words, Christ's people belong to a new humanity of which Jesus Himself is the head.

Now, that picture of Christ as head of the church, Paul uses it in places like 1 Corinthians 12, 12, Romans 12, 5. And there he often is emphasizing the mutual dependence of the body.

But here, the significance he is emphasizing is Christ as the head. This is as men and women are connected to Christ that they come to belong to one another in this new community of faith we call the church.

He alone is head of the church. The church is dependent on him for its life and health. Westminster Confession says, there is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17:30] Christ alone rules and reigns over his people. all must be in submission to him. He is preeminent.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead that in everything he might be preeminent, says Paul. And when Paul speaks of Jesus being the firstborn from the dead, he is clearly referencing the resurrection.

Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, a pioneer gone before us into death and then out of death. He has conquered death, drawn its sting.

And so, what is true for the head is true for all in the body. What is true for Christ will be true for his people. our very mortality is sucked up, is, if you like, hoovered up in Christ's resurrection life.

He is our only hope in the face of death. And yes, there's much in this life that we can avoid and evade, but we cannot avoid death. We cannot outrun it.

[18:35] We cannot defeat it. But the good news is this, that Jesus Christ has triumphed over death. He is its victor. He is its conqueror. He is its king.

And because Jesus has been raised, so then all who are joined to him by faith will also be raised. He has been led out from death, and so also will we be.

He partook of our flesh and blood to deliver us from death. He walked into the valley of the shadow and came out the other end in resurrection power.

And so in Jesus Christ there is good news for a world under the curse of death because this Jesus is still able to lead his people, his church, through the valley of darkness and into the light.

Jesus, his unique relationship to God, his unique relationship to creation, his unique relationship to the church as its king and head. But there's a fourth thing here about Jesus and why he is such a big or such a great Savior, and that is because of his unique work upon the cross.

[19:52] Verse 19, In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

You who once were alienated, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he is reconciled in his body of flesh by his death to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

And the key word that Paul uses in these verses is this word reconcile. We use it, don't we, when we're describing the healing of a restored, or restoring of a relationship after some kind of breakdown or fallout.

And here Paul speaks of the whole creation, of all things, being reconciled through Jesus and through his blood shed on the cross. The root of the brokenness of this world is in our alienation, our estrangement from God, our creator.

As human beings, we have turned our backs on God, we have rejected his authority and rule, and the consequence of that alienation, Paul says here, we've become hostile to God in our minds, and that hostility is manifest in evil deeds.

[21:09] And yet, from the very beginning, God has not resolved to allow evil to win the day. His righteous character is such that he has been determined to defeat all that is broken and wrong in his creation.

He has chosen not to abandon his creation to judgment and wrath, but to rescue it and redeem it, to reconcile the world to himself, to make peace. And how has he done this?

He has done this through the cross of Christ. When a close personal relationship breaks down, often there is a profound sense of anger, resentment, hurt, hatred, contempt even that can take root.

And sometimes these feelings and emotions may be justified, but if reconciliation is ever to take place, if restoration is ever to be affected, if the breach is ever to be healed, then someone has to bear the pain.

Without that happening, forgiveness cannot be offered because true forgiveness is never cheap. Restoration is not easy.

[22:20] We know this in our own lives. There is always hurt. There is always pain that has to be born. And that's precisely what the cross tells us. On the cross, we see God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, absorbing all the pain and injury awoken in Him by our hatred and sinful rebellion.

We see God making peace through the blood of the cross. And it's interesting here, the language of Paul, the physical language he uses.

Making peace by the blood of the cross. reconciliation in His body of flesh by His death.

Fashionable, theologically fashionable today to downplay the blood of Christ.

Something primitive, barbaric, even to despise the old rugged cross. Friends, we must never fall prey to that temptation.

But as the old hymn put it, what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again?

[23:30] Nothing but the blood of Jesus. A crucified Savior stands at the very heart and center of the Christian gospel.

There's an old path not far from where I grew up in Lanarkshire, in Lesmahagel. It runs over the muir to Muir Kirk in Ayrshire.

It's a part of the Scotland that was a strong covenanting area. And there are covenanting memorials littered all across the landscape.

And on that path near to Muir Kirk, there lies a memorial to the covenanter John Brown of Priest Hill. Brown was executed May the 1st, 1685 by a man known as Bloody Claverhouse.

He was a kind of enforcer for the king. Treasonable papers were found in his house and he was taken out and he was shot in front of his wife and family.

[24:42] It said that the soldiers hesitated to carry out the sentence. And so Claverhouse himself shot him. And after he'd shot him, Claverhouse is reputed to have said to Brown's wife, as she cradled the bloodied body of her man, what thinkest thou of thy husband now?

And she replied through her tears, I ever thought much good of him, but even more now. And when by faith we come to see Jesus Christ mangled in the blood of the cross for us, are we not tempted to say something similar?

I ever thought much of him, but even more now. Paul says Jesus suffered and died on the cross. You notice it there in verse 22, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. Isn't that an amazing thought?

We, stained, despoiled by all our sin, burdened and weighed down by all our guilt, presented as one holy and blameless before a righteous and holy God.

[26:08] Think back over your life, think of your mistakes and your errors, the ways that you have hurt or let down other people, the way that you have shown contempt for God, all the ugly pride and selfishness that has disfigured your life and your heart.

How on earth can someone like you, someone like me, be presented as one holy and blameless and above reproach?

It does not seem possible. And yet, it's not simply possible, it is actual. It's not a fantasy, it's a reality.

It's real because it's been accomplished by none other than the eternal Son of God. And this reconciling work of Jesus Christ is not simply something personal and individual, though it is, it's also something cosmic and universal, because Paul speaks here of God in Christ reconciling to himself all things on earth or in heaven, the whole created order.

He has opened up the way for a new heavens and earth in which righteousness shall dwell. There as King and Lord over that new world will be none other than the Lord Jesus Christ in all his risen power and majesty and glory.

[27:33] And C.S. Lewis is we always have to have either a quote from Lord of the Rings or C.S. Lewis in every sermon here, so this is the C.S. Lewis one. His second book in the Chronicles of Narnia is called Prince Caspian, and there's a scene in that book where Lucy experiences a personal visit from Aslan.

This is what we read. The great priest rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue.

His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large, wise face. Welcome, child, he said. Aslan, said Lucy, you're bigger.

That is because you are older, little one, answered he. Not because you are. I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.

Every year you grow, you will find me bigger. I was at a meeting last year, I think, one of these Zoom meetings with ministers, and an older minister, well, I thought he was an older minister until I realized he was actually younger than me.

[28:59] But anyway, that's another story. He was sharing something about his experience in ministry over many years. And he confessed that at times his ministry had been about, this is what he said, a big me and a little Jesus.

And then he spoke about his desire that his life and ministry in his later years would instead be about a little me and a big Jesus.

What characterizes your life, your ministry, your heart this morning? A big me and a little Jesus? Or a little me and a big Jesus? Jesus. The closer you get to Jesus, the bigger he appears to be. How close are you to him? In a moment we'll share the Lord's Supper. And this table is a place where we get close to Jesus.

[30:03] As we come to him in repentance and faith, he meets us, he blesses us with his presence. We come in our weakness and he strengthens us. We come in our guilt and he forgives us.

We come in our failure and he lifts us up. At the table we see him in the glory of his cross and realize afresh that he must have the place of supremacy in our lives.

I wonder if he has that in your life. Does he have first place? Does he have preeminence in our church? Does he occupy that place of supremacy in your heart?

Come to the table spread with bread and wine and draw near to a big Jesus. Come and bow the knee before him and discover afresh just how big he really is.

For the good news is this. He is bigger and greater than all the wickedness and all the evil and all the injustice of this broken world.

[31:14] He is bigger than your every sin and your every failure. And friends, that is good news.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for a big Jesus.

We thank you for a big Savior. And Lord, we ask that you may draw us closer to him by your Spirit.

and as we come to the Lord's table, that we might meet with him in a very real way, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that our eyes would be opened to see him as he really is. The great, eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, king and head of the church, the one who is the Son of God and who loved us and gave himself for us.
[32:22] And we pray these things in his name. Amen.