

"THE INCOMPARABLE CHRIST
Colossians 1:15-23
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Over 60,000 books have been written about him in the last 100 years alone.
More books have been written about him than any other person who has ever lived.

We see his name on bumper stickers, billboards, Broadway marquees, even in the Wall Street Journal and TIME Magazine.

It's amazing that he should be so popular when his life was so commonplace - humanly speaking.

The statement from "one solitary life" expresses it well.

He was born in an obscure village, the son of a peasant woman.
He grew up in another village where he worked as a carpenter until he was 30.
Then for three years he was a traveling preacher.
He never wrote a book, never held an elected office, never had a family or a home.
He didn't go to college.
He never visited a large city, in fact he never traveled more than 200 miles from where he was born.
He did none of the things usually accompanying greatness.
He had no credentials but himself.

And although he was then largely unnoticed by the powers of the world he more than any other person shaped the history of humanity.

He was then obscure but now even athiestictic and otherwise unbelieving countries mark the passing of time by reference to his birth. B.C. Before Christ and A.D. "Anno Dominie" - Year of our Lord.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Christ is the central figure in the world's history. To Him everything looks forward or backward - all lines of history converge on him.

Another Englishman, Charles Lamb wrote, "If Shakespeare came into the room we would all rise. But if Jesus Christ came in we would all kneel.

No one and nothing compares with Jesus.

When Jesus was here on earth, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?"
"Tell me, men, when the local papers run their polls out there in villages and cities what are the people saying? Who do they say I am?"

And they answered him?

Some say you're John the Baptist, others say you're Elijah, and others say you're Jeremiah.

Others said he was a Sabbath-breaker, a revolutionary, a lunatic, a sinner.

Who do people, today, say he is?

Some would say he was nothing more than a gentle misguided teacher who got himself crucified and whose more enterprising followers turned into a myth.

Others make of Jesus an Eastern Guru - whose teachings on love are models for all people.

Others see him as a nobody, a non-entity, a footnote in history no more significant to us than Louis the 12th, or Pope Pious the 2nd.

But Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them, "Who do you say that I am?"

Forget what others say, what do you believe?

The Apostle Peter responding with insight that could only come by God's grace, said, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God."

Jesus popularity in the world may wax and wane.

What others say of him may run the gamut from lunatic to revolutionary hero.

But Jesus question remains personal and contemporary: "Who do you say that I am?"

Who Jesus is, makes all the difference in the world.

The conversation took place about two months ago on the 14th floor of a downtown office building.

He is about 40, good job, married before, now moving from relationship to relationship but nothing lasting.

She is in her late 20s, good job, never married, and really no different than thousands of others working all over the city.

If you were to ask them if they believe in Jesus, I suspect they would both say they do.

In a brief conversation he made the comment to her that he felt sad much of the time.

She responded that she understood that feeling because she did too.

He said, "I don't know why, but it just seems like something is missing."

And with an understanding nod she said, "Yes, that's it - that's what it feels like - something is missing."

And they are both on fast tracks searching for that something that will make sense of their lives and quell the rising fear within them.

He drinks his way into oblivion most weekends and some weeknights.
She desperately grasps any relationship that comes close.

Remember, I said they both have a belief in Jesus but their Jesus is too small.
In their thinking He doesn't make a difference in the here and now of life.

There are Christians whose Jesus is too small.
How many are there, even among true believers in Jesus, who live in fear?

Fear that God doesn't know them or that He does know them.
Fear that they aren't forgiven.
Fear that their crisis is beyond God's control.
Fear of sickness, fear of death, fear of life.
Fear that they don't know God well enough.
Fear that they aren't good enough for God.
Fear of a job and fear of not having a job.

They say they believe in Jesus but their Jesus is a little religious figure they have stuck away in a corner of their mind too small to address the real issues of life.

Apparently the Colossian Christians had a problem with an understanding of Jesus that was too small.

I say apparently because Paul never specifically says what the problem is but he alludes to it throughout his letter.

In Chapter 2:8 he says he doesn't want these new Christians to be taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition rather than on Christ.

They were being tempted to believe that Jesus wasn't enough for them to truly know God and manage in this life - they needed more.

And so in Chapter 1 beginning at verse 15 the Apostle Paul gives a description of Jesus.

A description of Jesus that will correct their misunderstandings,
fill their minds with truth about Him, and enlarge their vision of how truly great and sufficient he is.

How big is your Jesus?

The Apostle writes: "He is the image of the invisible God."

The Jehovah's witnesses make him "a" god.

The Mormons make him a lesser god.

Even many Christians make him a "jr." God - almost but not quite the real thing.

But that is not what the Bible teaches.

"He, Jesus, is the image of the invisible God."

What before could not be seen has now been made visible.

It is no one less than God, himself, who is manifested in Jesus.

The author of Hebrews says, "Jesus is the exact representation of the Father."

John in his Gospel says, "The Word, Jesus, was with God and the Word Jesus was God."

In order for Jesus to capture all that God is, he must himself be God - otherwise he would be a only a poor, a partial reflection.

Psalm 19 and Romans 1 indicate that the universe displays the glory of God but the earth and skies cannot encompass the full nature of God.

The Bible itself can divulge the will of God but cannot be inclusive of all God is.

People are made in the image of God but are only a "faint and fractional miniature" of of all God is.

BUT Jesus is not a shadowy sketch, a faint reflection, but the very image, the exact representation of God.

He is a real and perfect likeness - there is in him no feature of God missing.

He is fully God.

Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

To know Jesus is to know God.

There is nothing missing.

You don't need to get closer to God - when you know Jesus you have gotten to God - for he is God.

Not only is he the image of the invisible God but HE IS THE FIRSTBORN OVER ALL CREATION.

That word "firstborn" has caused some confusion for those unwilling to look at the context.

Because the word first obviously refers to the first child born of a parent, some have supposed the word to mean that Christ was the first one created.

But a look at the next phrase would make such an interpretation impossible - for Jesus is named as the one who created everything. John in his Gospel says it this way, "Through him all things were made and without him nothing was made that has been made."

If he is the creator of everything that has been created then he cannot himself have been created unless he created himself.

Very clearly then the word "firstborn" is a metaphor meaning "having a preeminent position."

In Psalm 89:27 King David is referred to as the firstborn King.

Now we know that he was neither the first son born to Jesse nor was he the first king of Israel - instead the word refers to status.

So with Jesus, he has the place of preeminence over all creation both because he is God (the image of the invisible God) but because as verse 16 tells us, he created everything that was created - "FOR BY HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED."

If he is the creator, then, of course, he has preeminence, supremacy, the dominant position, all authority and status.

As here and in the Gospel of John so in Hebrews we read that he made the universe.

Wait a minute! Some of you always thought God created the heavens and the earth. Well you are right. God did create the heavens and the earth. And as the Scriptures make so clear Jesus is that God.

But Paul goes on - What did Jesus create?

"ALL THINGS IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE."

Everything that exists whether you can see it or not was created by Jesus and he has authority over it.

In verse 16, Paul then spells out some of what was created that was particularly troubling the Colossians.

Apparently the Colossian Christians were being led by false teachers to fear certain demonic angels and to attempt to appease certain good angels.

These teachers were suggesting that these angels were needed for the people to get to God.

It reminds me of the spirit guides, mediators, and spirits of the dead that some in our own country are seeking to use to gain access to the spiritual.

It even makes me wonder about those Christians who are forever seeking some new truth in the interpretation of dreams, or visions or prophecies.

Or their fascination with angels and demons.

In verse 16, Paul states that the entire spirit world was created by Jesus, whether they are thrones, or powers, or rulers or authorities.

AND they were created FOR JESUS.

Regardless of their station, their status, their authority, their power - those evil angels were created by the Lord Jesus and are under his control.

Yes, the Bible teaches that demons, evil angels, do exist.

But they are not uncontrollable Frankensteins created by a now powerless God.

Instead, according to verse 16, those evil angels, like all else that has been created, are acting out their controlled roles to perfectly suit the purposes of Jesus.

Look at verse 17.

Here there is a summary.

"HE IS BEFORE ALL THINGS".

What was implicit in verses 15 and 16 is now explicit:
Jesus existed before everything else.

He was not created but has always existed - NOTE: "He is before all things, not was before all things.

As God he is the eternally existing one - there is no before or after Jesus - He's the eternal "is".

Not only is he before all things but also "IN HIM ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER".

In the daily events of history things are not as they seem.
Confusion seems to be rampant.

Rwanda, Yemen, Bosnia, South Africa, the Gaza are just a few places where bloodshed and turmoil are daily occurrences.

Our newspapers are filled with accounts of burglaries, murders, abuse, rape and racial hatred.

Even our own circumstances often seem out of control.

In the midst of the "all things" of life, even Christians grow fearful that life is out of control.

Those whose Jesus is too small are searching desperately for something they can control that will stabilize and guarantee life.

All the time increasingly aware that their best plans are scrapped when unforeseen circumstances change.

But the teaching of the Scriptures is that the Lord Jesus, is himself, guiding a unity and purpose in all those events - "In him all things hold together."

It was Barbara's and my privilege to several times meet with Corrie Ten Boom.

Corrie survived the Buchenwald concentration camp to go on to preach and witness, world-wide, about the power and forgiveness of Jesus.

I well remember the little piece of cloth she carried with her nearly everywhere she spoke.

It was a piece of embroidery and as she showed us the bottom of the cloth, with the mass of patternless stitches, she would comment on how life seemed to her while she was in the camp.

Then as she would turn the cloth over and show us the beautifully symmetrical pattern made by the stitches on the other side, she would speak of how those painful, ugly and seemingly confusing times were being woven by God into a beautiful pattern that he will one day show to the world as a product of his grace.

Jesus is at this very time ruling over every situation taking place on the face of this earth and in your life.

He is working out his plan in detail.

Nothing escapes his attention.

Nothing thwarts his purposes.

He has authority over all things because He is eternally God and because he created all things, and he holds all things together.

Is your Jesus that big?

The Jesus of history, the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus of Christianity is no one less than almighty God.

And those who cling to him have fastened themselves to the sovereign Lord.

When it seems that the bottom has dropped out of life - it is not true.

For as Paul said elsewhere:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul wrote this description of Jesus in Colossians 1 because he wanted to remind those Christians of how big Jesus truly is.

And that by knowing this they would go to him and to no one and nothing else to find strength and purpose to live life each day until he comes again.

How big is your Jesus?

I want to close this morning by having you look at page 6 of your bulletin and by listening to an audio tape I came across several years ago.

African-American pastor S.M. Lockerige has captured something of the emotion of this passage when he spins out his praise to Jesus for who He is.

The tape is long but I want you to follow the thoughts and let this description of Jesus fill your own heart with confidence in the largeness, the supremacy, the preeminence, the sufficiency of Christ.