

Date: March 19, 2023
 Scripture: Colossians 1:15-20
 Series: *God's Grand Story*
 Title: "Who is Jesus---REALLY?"

In his book, *The Call*, Os Guinness tells a story from the life of Arthur Burns, a man who was quite prominent in economics and government for decades---advising presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan.

- Under Eisenhower he chaired the Council of Economic Advisors.
- He served as the tenth Chairman of the Federal Reserve.
- He was the first counselor to the president under Nixon.
- He taught and researched at Rutgers and Columbia Universities.
- Reagan appointed him as the Ambassador to Germany.

So, Arthur Burns was VERY SMART. He knew a thing or two about balancing a checkbook and a thing or two about pretty much everything else. As Guinness puts it in his book, "*When Burns spoke, his opinions carried weight and Washington listened.*"

In the 70's, there was a group that met in the White House for informal fellowship and prayer and Burns began attending the gathering. This was surprising because, as I said, Burns was kind of big deal---plus, he was Jewish. Yet there he was at this Christian prayer fellowship week after week. Burns never led in prayer, and no one ever asked him to pray. Prayers were voluntary, and no one pushed Burns out of respect for his position and his Jewish faith. But after a few months, a newcomer in the group turned to Arthur Burns and asked him to close the group in prayer. The veterans of the group watched closely to see what would happen. Guinness writes,

"Without missing a beat, Burns reached out, held hands with others in the circle, and prayed this prayer: 'Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ. I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ. Finally, Lord, I pray that you would bring CHRISTIANS to know Jesus Christ. Amen.'"

I don't know about you---but those first two parts about Jews and Muslims coming to know Jesus sound good---but what about that last part? Why would this brilliant man pray for Christians as he did? Is it possible that there were Christians then who didn't REALLY know Jesus? Is it possible now?

Well---without getting into a theological debate---I would say Burns prayer was and is needed.

Too many of those of us who call ourselves Christians know Jesus---but not REALLY---not fully.

And this lack of complete knowledge about our Lord is nothing new. In the 1st century. Paul addressed this issue in his letter to the church at Colossae. You see in that church---like in too many churches today---there were varied opinions as to who Jesus is. Jesus is this. Jesus is that.

And one reason Paul wrote this letter was to set the record straight: THIS IS WHO JESUS REALLY IS!

We must remember these words are not Paul's---like all the words in this book they are the words of God Himself. So, the things we read about Jesus in our text are not a suggestion or a perhaps. They are absolute truth.

As we continue our study of GOD'S GRAND STORY, I want us to look closely at what Paul says so we can be sure we have an accurate understanding of our Lord. Take your Bibles, turn to Colossians 1 and follow along as I read verses 15-20. As is our custom---if able, let's stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

Colossians 1:15-20

15 - The Son is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn over all creation.

16 - For in Him all things were created: things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities---all things have been created through Him and for Him.

17 - He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

18 - And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the Firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.

19 - For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him,

20 - and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on Earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.

Okay, here's the question for the day. What do we need to know about Jesus to REALLY KNOW ABOUT Jesus. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says three things.

1.) Jesus is GOD.

Look at verses 14 and 19: ***"The Son is the image of the invisible God...For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him."*** Could it be any clearer? Jesus is God. As we read in John's gospel, He is GOD---the WORD become flesh. Dale Bruner says, *"Jesus was the audible, visible Word Who expressed the heart of the inaudible, invisible God. Jesus Christ is God's great Visual Aid."*

In the third century Origen, one of the early church fathers, illustrated this fact in a story he told of a village with a huge statue---so immense you couldn't see exactly what it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so one could see the person it honored. Origen said, *"That is what God did in His Son."* In our text Paul tells us Christ is the self-miniaturization of God, the visible icon or image of the invisible God. In Christ, as humans we see and know God in a comprehensible way. In Christ God came to visit our planet.

C. J. Coffee, pastor of the Well Spring Community Church in Portland shares a story about a time he and his wife lived and ministered in London. He writes:

"We made a friend who grew up in a fundamentalist Muslim country. In that country then, as it is now, Christians are being thrown in jail and are suffering for their faith. He, and a friend, were in their early to mid-teens, and like lots of teens wanted to take risks. The risk they thought that would perhaps trump all risks is to try to find a New Testament. So, they dared each other, 'Let's go find a Bible.' These two teens found a church, knocked on the door, and the priest opened the door very suspiciously. He said, 'What do you want?' They said, 'We want a Bible.' The priest then asked them what their names were---trying to protect himself. They said their names, which were both Muslim names, and the priest said, 'Oh no,' knowing that he himself could be in trouble with Muslims in the area. My friend and his friend were persistent, and finally the priest gave in and gave them a New Testament."

Coffee writes,

"My friend read that New Testament in about two to three days, and his conclusion was if God is like Jesus---he was in. He has followed Jesus since that day, has been barred from returning to his own country. His wife has been kicked out. They can't go back for fear of their own lives. They now live in Europe, working with people from their country, who have settled there."

This young Muslim teen read about Jesus and in doing that found out what God is REALLY like---because Jesus REALLY is God.

Just to be clear, we serve a triune God. The Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is God. And of course, God is God---and they are all ETERNAL. A few months ago Bob Michael shared a great illustration of the trinity---that I think would help us at this point. He said,

*"If you shine a light through a prism it separates the light into the three primary colors from which all other colors derive, which are green, red, and blue. All other colors are made by mixing these and together in equal parts they make white. So, while there is one God in 'three persons' as the old hymn notes, they are three separate views of the same light: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. So, when Jesus came to Earth, it was God himself coming to Earth. In some way using the term Son, connotes a different and even lesser appearance of God, which is not the case. This is why Jesus said, **"When you have seen Me you have seen the Father and the Father and I are one."** (John 10:30; 14:7) For me the revelation was that God didn't send in any lesser substitute, He came himself in one of the three forms that He occupies."*

Bob's excellent illustration leads nicely into a second thing our text tells us about Jesus.

2.) He is CREATOR and SUSTAINER,

Look at verses 16-17 – ***“For in Him all things were created: things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities---all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”***

So---as God---Jesus spoke the words that brought this universe into being---and not only that---it is His power that holds everything together. Back in July of 2009, *Parade* magazine ran an article entitled, *“The Race for the Secret of the Universe.”* It focused on Fermilab, a four-mile-round particle accelerator that resides west of Chicago. The scientists gathered there are searching for the ever-elusive Higgs boson, also known as *“the God particle.”*

Quoting the article:

“Physicists believe that this special subatomic particle allows all of the other particles in the universe to have mass and come together to form, well, basically everything that is around us. [According to one Fermilab theorist], without so-called God particles, ‘atoms would have no integrity, so there would be no chemical bonding, no stable structures---no liquids or solids—and, of course, no physicists and no reporters.’”

Well, the phrase *“GOD PARTICLE”* is partially accurate. There IS something that holds everything together---but it's not an *“it”*---it's not a particle. It's Jesus. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:10, ***“Christ brings unity to all things in Heaven and on Earth.”*** To REALLY know Jesus we must understand this: He is our Creator and Sustainer.

I'm reminded of a story by William Steig: *Yellow and Pink*. It's picture book for children and in the story two wooden figures wake up to find themselves lying on an old newspaper in the hot sun. One figure is painted yellow, the other pink. Suddenly, Yellow sits up and asks, *“Do you know what we're doing here?”* So begins a debate between the two marionettes over the origin of their existence. Pink surveys their well-formed features and concludes, *“Someone must have made us and maintains us. Our paint is fresh!”* Yellow disagrees. *“I say we're an accident,”* and he outlines a hypothetical scenario of how it might have happened. He says, *“A branch might have broken off a tree and fallen on a sharp rock, splitting one end of the branch into two legs. Then the wind might have sent it tumbling down a hill until it was chipped and shaped. Perhaps a flash of lightning struck in such a way as to splinter the wood into arms and fingers. Eyes might have been formed by woodpeckers boring in the wood. With enough time. A thousand, a million, maybe two and a half million years, lots of unusual things could happen.”*

The two figures argue back and forth. In the end, the discussion is cut off by the appearance of a man coming out of a nearby house. He strolls over to the marionettes, picks them up, and checks their paint. *“Nice and dry,”* he comments, and tucking them under his arm, he heads back toward the house. Peering out from under the man's arm, Yellow whispers in Pink's ear, *“Who is this guy?”*

Who is Jesus? He is God. He is our Creator and Sustainer. But God uses Paul to tell us more we need to KNOW about Jesus.

3.) He is HEAD of the CHURCH.

Look at verse 18: ***“He (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church.”*** This is an important thing for US to remember in the coming months. As our last interim pastor, Dr. Charles Bugg often said, *“You may not have a pastor---but you still have a HEAD!”* And---not to reveal too much---but our nominating committee has already agreed unanimously on seven people to serve on the pastor search committee. Jesus---our HEAD---is obviously leading each of them in the same direction.

This is an important thing for us to know because even though I'm retiring---you still have a LEADER. He lives in each of your hearts. In HIM we find our amazing *“sweet, sweet Spirit unity”* even in our amazing diversity. We are ONE in His Spirit. Remember--our faith is more than standards and doctrines. It is a shared fellowship in which we love and serve each other.

This week I read about the late Dr. Howard Thermann, who served as pastor at Howard University Rainken Chapel in Washington, D. C. One morning he preached on fellowship and as he stood in line at the door greeting those who had attended---one young man lingered behind because he wanted to talk with Dr. Thermann about one part of the sermon.

As he shook Dr. Thurman's hand, he began to chide the chaplain. He said, *"Dr. Thermann, you talked about fellowship this morning. But tell me just how far would you go with that fellowship---knowing that you're a black man in a white man's world? How far would you go?"* Dr. Thermann, smiling and still holding the young man's hand, looked him right square in the eye and said, *"How far would I go? I would go all the way. And I wouldn't have any escape clauses written on a piece of paper hidden away in my back pocket."*

Jesus is the head of this church---and THE church includes all people of all skin colors down through the ages who have put their faith in Him. Speaking of THE CHURCH in this sense, every once in a while, someone will question the way I do communion. As you know I invite all Christians even if they are not members of the church to share. I always say something I learned from a pastor I served with years ago, Jimmy Fox. Pointing to the table I say, *"If you are His, this is yours."*

Some people don't like that---they believe in CLOSED communion---they believe you have to be a member of that particular church to partake. And they often justify their views by saying, *"Mark, you are not following the Baptist Faith and Message."* I remember back in 2014 when we were in Israel. We visited the Garden Tomb or Gordon's Tomb. Many don't think it was Jesus' actual tomb but there are good reasons to think it is where I Lord died and was buried and rose again. While we were there we sat down to share communion---Christians from several different churches, all of whom had put their faith in Jesus---but our guide a former leader in our state convention acted embarrassed to lead us. He was afraid that by sharing communion in that place we would break the Baptist Faith and Message. I remember thinking, *"What's with this guy?! If Christians can't share communion---especially here---what's the point of calling it COMMUNION?!"*

The Bible says nothing about limiting who and where Christians can share this memorial meal---and in my interpretation neither does the good ole Baptist Faith and Message. It says, and I quote:

"The New Testament speaks of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine---memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming."

Sounds like OPEN communion to me!

My point is we are not unified by a man-made document---we are unified by Jesus Christ---Who lives in our hearts. He is our HEAD. He directs this local body---and all Christians

So---quick summary. Who is Jesus---REALLY?

He is God.

He is Creator and Sustainer

He is Head of the church.

Finally, God uses Paul to tell us that to really KNOW Jesus we must also know that:

4.) He is RECONCILER of all THINGS.

Look at verses 19 and 20: ***“For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him---and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on Earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”***

The word “reconcile” implies that something is broken and needs to be fixed. Mankind’s relationship to God had be reconciled---repaired---and Jesus came to do that.

And this brokenness is obvious.

There’s a scene in the movie *Grand Canyon* where Danny Glover plays a tow truck driver who is called to into one of the roughest parts of the inner city. The car of a wealthy businessman from the suburbs has broken down, and he’s surrounded by a gang of thugs who want to tear his car apart. Danny Glover comes to the scene, and he looks at the driver and then he looks at the gang of thugs and he says slowly and calmly, *“Man, the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can; and that dude [the car driver] is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.”*

Those lines are great theology because it describes what the Bible teaches about the state of this world. Paul talks about it in Romans 6---it’s called *“the cycle of sin and death.”* But not just people---all of creation is a part of this deadly cycle. Remember in our text it says that Jesus came to reconcile ALL things to Himself. I mean it’s not just people who need reconciling---this broken world of ours does too.

This week I read something on the *Preaching Today* website about a cute little wasp called the ichneumon wasp. I imagine David and Becky McGaffin are familiar with these little bugs. This particular wasp belongs to a family of wasps that have two nasty habits: first, they sting human beings; second, they eat caterpillars. Actually, it’s much worse than it sounds. The mama wasp will find a particular species of caterpillar and inject her eggs right into the caterpillar’s abdomen. Then, as the eggs hatch and develop, the larvae eat the caterpillar from the inside out in order to become cute little wasps. I’m not trying to gross you out---this is an important story---theologically and historically. You see, this wasp’s shabby treatment of innocent caterpillars helped affirm Charles Darwin’s theories---like how evolution is built on the survival of the fittest. Darwin specifically mentioned this wasp when he spoke about how he came to adopt his theory of natural selection. Listen to Darwin in his own words:

“I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of God’s design and goodness. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have intentionally created the ichneumonida---with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars---or that a cat should play with mice.”

Darwin had a good point. If Jesus CREATOR and SUSTAINER, what’s the deal with this wasp and the poor little caterpillar--and all those cute little mice who are tortured before they are eaten? How can we say that Jesus is holding all things together when there are tsunamis and earthquakes and cancer cells and e-coli bacteria? Where did racism come from? What’s the point of schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s and bipolar disorder? Why are alcoholism and other addictive behaviors, at least in part, genetic in nature?

If Jesus is the designer of everything, then the design is flawed or at least inconsistent. I mean, what do we say to Darwin and others who cannot see the goodness of God in creation? Surprisingly, as people who REALLY know Jesus, we would start by agreeing with them. As believers, we know there is something out of whack in creation. The Bible says there is. Romans 8 says, ***“For the creation was subjected to frustration, so that the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay.”*** We know that this passage is true---all of creation has been groaning like women do who are in labor---right up to our present time---not just people---the whole universe. When we fell into sin, all creation was affected.

Matt Woodley writes, *“There’s a gigantic rupture and wound in creation. So what’s the proper response to this? We groan. We ache, because we know there’s supposed to be a better world.”*

Charles Darwin realized this too. Remember? He said, *“There’s too much misery in the world.”* Think about that. How could Darwin know there’s too much misery in the world? By what standard? Well, as a Christian I would say there is too much misery in the world because as Glover put it, *“this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be.”* God made us for a better world. And that’s where we see the importance of this final point. Jesus came to reconcile all things. When He rose from the dead, Jesus showed what OUR reconciled bodies would look like. As it says in verse 18, ***“He is the beginning and the Firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.”*** God came to reconcile sinners like you and me to God---by paying for our sin.

Of course, we don’t have to accept His offer of reconciliation. God gave us free will. But when we use our free will and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior the process of recreation starts. We are BORN AGAIN and like all newborns---begin to grow. With Jesus’ resurrection power in us---reconciled---reconnected to God---we can grow in the RIGHT way.

When He rose, Jesus BROKE the cycle of sin and death---this cycle that affects not just people but the very universe itself. And the Bible tells us what the NEWLY RECONCILED HEAVEN and the NEWLY RECONCILED earth will look like. As Isaiah 11 says, ***“The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard will lie down with the goat, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*** Revelation 21 says: ***“God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain [in this world].”***

Of course, your body’s still going to decay. If you live long enough, as Paul puts it, your body is going to embarrass you---but as a Christian you’re experiencing the power of the resurrection right now with Christ in you. And when your earth suit ceases to function---you don’t die---not really---because you wake up in a new body---and eternally young body---with a perfectly Christlike YOU inside to boot. As N.T. Wright wrote, *“The death of an obscure Jew [Jesus] on a seemingly God-forsaken hill in a backwater of the Roman Empire attracted no notice from the historians of the era---but it was the event that reconciles heaven and earth and us to God.”*

So, who is Jesus REALLY?

- He is God
- He is our Creator and Sustainer
- He is the Head of the Church
- He is the Reconciler of all things

Let us pray.