

DISCOVER YOUR PRICELESS STEWARDSHIP

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ANCHORING YOUR LIFE IN THE GOSPEL

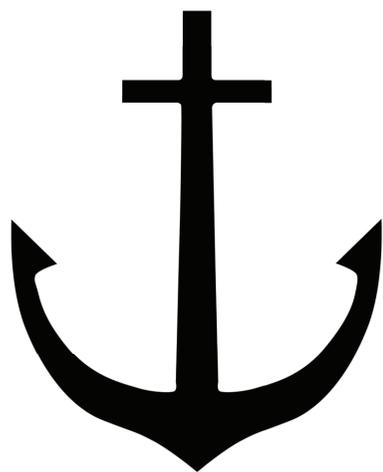


DAVID SHIBLEY

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TWO



THE GOSPEL— CAPTURED BY ITS SUBJECT

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

1 John 4:9

*Who is this who spreads the victory feast?
Who is this who makes our warring cease?
Jesus, risen Savior, Prince of Peace!
God and Man at table are sat down.*

Robert Stamps
God and Man at Table are Sat Down

It's all about Jesus.

The star of this story is Jesus Christ. Paul said that the gospel is “concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:3). In His life He is humanity’s only perfection; in His death, humanity’s only Savior; in His resurrection, humanity’s only hope.

Yes, we are the objects of His love, but the subject of the gospel is Jesus. Let’s not confuse the object with the subject. Our personal salvation stories are not the gospel; they are testimonies to the power of the gospel. We’re not saved merely because we gave our

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... we are the objects of His love, but the subject of the gospel is Jesus. Let's not confuse the object with the subject.

lives to Jesus; we are saved because Jesus gave His life for us. The gospel is not first about you. Or me. It's about Jesus, the soul-saving, death-destroying, life-giving, freedom-granting, kingdom-conquering, eternal Son of God.

Ed Stetzer writes, "Jesus isn't just part of the Bible story, He is the point of the Bible story I believe that interpreting God's word must be mediated through Jesus Christ. He is the lens through which we see the Scriptures every story casts His shadow. Every word, every verse is His testimony—the holy Messiah. Jesus Christ. Eternal King."¹

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, returned late one night from a preaching assignment. His brother, Charles, inquired as to the subject of John's sermon that night. "What did you give the people?" Charles asked. John Wesley replied, "I gave them Christ."

That is my hope and assignment for this chapter. Jesus Christ—God in flesh, mighty to save, King over all, Savior of all who look in faith to Him—He is the subject of the gospel. May we be so captured by Him that we can affirm with Paul, "Christ, who is our life" (Col. 3:4).

GOD IN FLESH

For me, the greatest miracle in history is the Incarnation. "God contracted to a span," as Charles Wesley extolled, "incomprehensibly made man."² His birth births infinite possibilities and undiluted hope. If the Creator-God has broken into time and space, this spawns a whole new way of viewing life:

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All things are possible. God can intervene in your life!

Jesus is God in flesh. All His other attributes both as God and Man flow from this assertion. This one born of a virgin (the only one so born) has unique powers and a unique qualification. He is, as one tuned-in child described Him, “God with skin on.” This God with skin on is the only one capable of spanning the chasm between the holy Creator-God and His rebellious creation, humankind. And He did it! His cross became the bridge that brings God and man together. Jesus has mediated an end of God’s holy wrath against sin by taking our sin on Himself. And it all began when love found a way—in a manger.

In a real sense, the gospel took root in our world that holy night. The angel of the Lord announced to the amazed shepherds, “I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10). The word in the original Greek, *euangellizomai*, can literally be translated, “I proclaim the gospel of great joy ...” This joyful announcement, though brief, brings great revelation as to who this baby is—He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The scope of the gospel is also declared—this good news is to be “to all people.”

I’ve always appreciated the ability of the best lyricists to encapsulate profound truths in a few choice words. Graham Kendrick did this as well as any composer of our time on the topic of the Incarnation when he wrote,

*Wisdom unsearchable
God the invisible
Love indestructible
In frailty appears.
Lord of infinity
Stooping so tenderly
Lifts our humanity
To the heights of His throne.*

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*O what a mystery
Meekness and majesty
Bow down and worship
For this is your God.³*

To be clear on what the gospel is, we must be clear on who Jesus is. There is unquestionably a uniqueness about Jesus. Meekness and majesty are conjoined in Him. Let's delve deeper into the person and redeeming work of Jesus of Nazareth, God in flesh.

WHO HE IS

Of all who have ever lived, there is simply no one like Jesus. There's a reason for that—He is the uniquely born, eternal Son of God, “Very God of Very God,” as stated in The Nicene Creed. Theologian F. F. Bruce observed, “That one Who had His being eternally within the unity of the Godhead became man at a point in time, without relinquishing His oneness with God.”⁴

No wonder Jesus has always been captivating—not only to His followers, but to the entire world. Some three hundred years ago a young, wealthy man named Nikolaus von Zinzendorf was touring one of Europe's great art galleries. As he observed many masterpieces suddenly he was transfixed by Domenico Feti's magnificent painting, *Ecce Homo* (Latin for *Behold the Man*, John 19:5). As Zinzendorf gazed at the painting the Lord spoke to His heart, “This have I done for you; now what will you do for Me?”⁵ Gripped by Christ's sacrifice for him, Zinzendorf determined to show his gratitude by advancing the gospel message. He gave refuge on his large estate to serious-minded missionaries called the Moravians and gave spiritual direction to what became one of the strongest world mission movements in church history. It all began with an enthralled look at Jesus.

Sadly, instead of gazing on Jesus, people today are messing with Him. Many try to leverage Him for their agendas, soften

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His demands, strip Him of His deity, or make Him cool for contemporary culture. He is caricatured as everything from a heartless demagogue to a mystical pundit to a social radical. Jesus has been labeled everything from a flag-waving capitalist to a flag-burning anarchist. These contortions of the peerless God-Man range from humorous to nauseating.

But to discover the truth about Him we must return to the only fully reliable source, the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Entire libraries could be written (and have been written) on the isolated subject of Christology, the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Here we are limited to a short summary.

Jesus Himself claimed to be divine. He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). When interrogated by the high priest He was specifically questioned, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus responded, “Yes, it is as you say” (Matt. 26:63-64). The Jews understood very clearly what Jesus was claiming about Himself. That’s why He was charged with blasphemy and why they were determined to kill Him (John 5:18).

The noted Presbyterian missionary, Robert Speer, observed, “The sinlessness of Jesus and His assurance and consciousness of this sinlessness constitute a fact so lonely and unmatched that it must be set down by itself. He shows no consciousness at any time of any moral failure or of any feeling of need for personal repentance and forgiveness.”⁶ As the perfect God-Man He alone is in a position to atone for our sin.

As the eternal God, He displayed and displays authority—over everything. Depending on your understanding of who Jesus truly is, this pronouncement He made is either the most audacious or most compelling decree in history: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). He exercises authority over nature (Mark 4:39; John 2:7-11); disease (Mark 3:10); demons (Luke 4:35); and death itself (John 11:43-44). Death could not hold Him. He has destroyed its power (Heb. 2:14-15).

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Jesus Christ is so fully in charge that the decree from God the Father is that the final judgment of the world will be consigned to God the Son (John 5:26-27; Acts 17:30-31). As God, Jesus is the pre-existent One (John 8:57-58). He is both creator and sustainer of everything (John 1:3, Col. 1:17). Among His attributes as God, He is omniscient (Mark 2:8; John 2:25) and omnipotent (Heb. 1:3). He is the very icon of God almighty (John 1:1; Col. 1:15).

The eternal God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ. “In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col.2:9). He was worshiped by His disciples and He accepted their worship. Peter’s confession of faith was, “You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:68-69). When Thomas encountered the resurrected Christ, he exclaimed, “My lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

Yet God incarnate voluntarily emptied Himself of certain prerogatives of deity. In his famous *kenosis* (emptying) passage, Paul tells us, “Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. Instead, He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5-11, HCSB).

To the apostle Paul, as to any devout Jew, “the name that is above every name” could refer only to the Jews’ sacred name of God, the sacred tetragrammaton which is transliterated in English as *Jehovah* or *Yahweh*. This name was so exalted and set apart that reverential Jews were forbidden even to pronounce it.

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But now Paul says that this name—this name above all names—belongs to Jesus. He is Messiah; He is Lord over all!

In 451 A.D. The Council of Chalcedon succinctly summed up the orthodox view of the uniqueness of the person and nature of Jesus Christ:

1. There are two natures; a human nature and a divine nature.
2. Each nature has its completeness and integrity.
3. These two natures are organically and indissolubly united, so no third nature is formed thereby.
4. Orthodox doctrine forbids us either to divide the person or confound the natures.⁷

God became man in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God, but He is also God, the Son. Now He “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (1 Pet.3:22).

The uniqueness of Jesus as God in flesh is at the very core of our message and therefore our mission. Who is Jesus and what will you do with Him? This is the Great Divide, the all-important question.

WHY HE CAME

Almost every religion has high regard for Jesus. But whether or not He is the one and only redeemer—or if people even need a redeemer—is where biblical Christianity parts company with every other faith. Who Jesus is and what His cross is all about is the central abrasive issue. David Platt reminds us, “He was not a coward about to face Roman soldiers. Instead, he was a Savior about to endure divine wrath.”⁸

This cross—this sacrifice—that is so repugnant to others is attractive and precious to us who believe. It is at the same time the ultimate tragedy and the ultimate triumph. Beth Moore writes, “God had crossed days off the kingdom calendar, preparing

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heaven and earth for this one. The worst and the best day of all.”⁹

Here is the testimony of Jesus Himself as to why He left the splendor of heaven for the squalor of earth: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Add to this, the testimony of the apostles. Paul declared, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). John asserted, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

To use the theological term, He came to make atonement for our sins. He has restored our relationship with God, which was severed by our rebellion. Now we are in a standing of “at-onement” with God. “We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11).

Beginning with the church’s first theologians, men have tried to unpack the profundity of this greatest of all transactions. Some explain that Jesus’ death provided a ransom to free us from sin, Satan, and ultimately from death itself. Jesus came to “give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Related to this is the *Christus Victor* viewpoint that stresses Christ’s victory over the devil. His death and resurrection were literally the devil’s undoing. Once captive to sin, we are now free through Christ’s atoning work. “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). Jesus has liberated us. “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8, ESV). As the King James Version puts it, “He led captivity captive.”

Scottish theologian James Stewart wrote powerfully regarding this thrilling release: “It is a glorious phrase—‘He led captivity captive.’ The very triumphs of His foes, it means, He used for their defeat. He compelled their dark achievements to subserve His ends, not theirs. They nailed Him to a tree, not knowing that by that very act they were bringing the world to His feet. They gave Him a cross, not guessing that He would make it a throne.

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They flung Him outside the city gates to die, not knowing that in that very moment they were lifting up the gates of the universe, to let the king come in. They sought to root out His doctrines, not understanding that they were implanting imperishably in the hearts of men the very name they intended to destroy. They thought they had God with His back to the wall, pinned helpless and defeated: they did not know that it was God Himself who had tracked them down. He did not conquer in spite of the dark mystery of evil. He conquered through it.”¹⁰

In his epic work *Cur Deus Homo?* (Latin for *Why did God become Man?*) eleventh century theologian, Anselm, sees Christ’s death as the satisfying payment for our affront to God’s holiness by our sin. He paid the penalty for our rebellion that God’s perfect justice required. God’s honor stays intact because the ground has been established whereby a perfectly holy God can forgive sinners. Christ’s blood appeases God’s wrath against sin and covers our sins by His mercy. Our English word for this stunning, unique display of love is propitiation. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Building on Anselm’s observations later Protestant reformers viewed Christ’s sacrifice primarily through the lens of substitution. He took our place, receiving in Himself the punishment for sin we deserved. “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). This is why His sacrifice is often spoken of as a “vicarious” atonement.

Charles Spurgeon noted, “I have always considered with Luther and Calvin that the sum and substance of the gospel lies in that word substitution—Christ standing in the stead of man. If I understand the gospel, it is this: I deserve to be lost forever; the only reason why I should not be damned, is this, that Christ was punished in my stead, and there is no need to execute a sentence twice for sin.”¹¹

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The atonement made through Jesus' sacrifice is so magnificent, so dazzling that it must be seen from many different vantage points. All of these viewpoints have merit, yet none of them alone can fully describe Jesus' amazing transaction that brought us back to God.

I'm appalled that some preachers think they have "graduated" beyond the gospel in their preaching. Such a notion only shows they have never taken a long, loving look at the atonement and the One who procured it. For if they really looked they would see that the gospel is forever fascinating and that all other subjects of any worth are subservient to this good news and orbit around it.

LOOK AND LIVE!

One of the most sublime confessions concerning Jesus Christ also serves as a summary statement of how the Scriptures reveal Him:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of His Father, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day He rose, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall never end.

—The Nicene Creed, 325 A.D.

It is to this all-sufficient Christ we are to look for every need.

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Jesus doesn't need a makeover. We don't need to rebrand Him, we just need to unveil Him. For once He is seen for who He is, His power and glory forever impact us. Some are captivated by His love. Others are repelled by His claims. But once you really see Him you can never just walk away. Everyone who sees Him must deal with Him. He is too colossal to ignore.

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When anyone truly encounters Jesus, there will indeed be some kind of response. Jesus' enemies were thrown to the ground by the sheer authority in His voice (John 18:6). When Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of religious leaders they "sought to kill Him" (John 5:16). A pagan Roman officer watched Him die and immediately changed his whole belief system (Mark 15:39). Saul of Tarsus was thrown to the ground and blinded by His light (Acts 22:7-11). John, Jesus' friend, saw Him in His splendor and "fell at His feet as dead" (Rev. 1:17). But Jesus then called John to come nearer to Him and, unafraid, get a closer look at His majesty (Rev. 1:17-18). This is the authority, glory, and eminence of the God-Man.

And so He calls you today. Look in wonder. Draw close in love. Look—and live (Num. 21:9; John 3:14-15).

Look to Jesus, your Savior. "God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior" (Acts 5:31, HCSB). Through His blood He has saved us from sin's penalty and its power. Ultimately, we will be saved from sin's very presence as the gospel culminates in "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). Anticipating His return and rule, we "eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20).

The late Rev. D. M. Stearns wrote a booklet titled *Message of the Cross* that was circulated in the millions. After preaching in Philadelphia a stranger came up to him and said, "I don't like the way you spoke about the cross. I think that instead of

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greatest
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emphasizing the death of Christ, it would be far better to preach Jesus, the teacher and example.”

Stearns replied, “If I presented Christ in that way, would you be willing to follow Him?” “I certainly would,” the stranger said. “All right then, let’s take the first step. He did no sin. Can you claim that for yourself?” “Why, no. I acknowledge that I do sin.” “Then your greatest need is to have a Savior, not an example.”¹²

Jesus is the *greatest* example of splendid humanity, but He is the *only* candidate who ever qualified to carry the title, *Savior*. Look away from yourself, look away from your sin—and look to Him.

Look to Jesus, your redeemer. To redeem means to purchase or buy back. Jesus has purchased us at the highest possible price. Therefore, we are to be exclusively His. Christ “gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

Look to Jesus, your substitute. He died the death we should have died, taking the punishment for sin we deserved. God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This is truly the Great Exchange. Isaiah prophetically declared, “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6). The original Hebrew is much more graphic. A literal translation could read, “The Lord has smashed on Him the iniquity of us all.” Don’t ever think God’s grace comes cheap.

Look to Jesus, your life-giver. “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). When we turn to Christ and trust His all-sufficient accomplishment for us

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everything changes. There is new life because there has been new birth. “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Cor. 5:17, NLT). Before we came to Christ, the enemy of all life had a stranglehold on us, choking all hope. “The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy,” Jesus said. “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10, NLT).

Look to Jesus, your friend and brother. Jesus displayed the zenith of love when He laid down His life for us as His friends (John 15:13). But it gets even better than that—much better. Not only are we His friends, we’re family! “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11, NIV). Astounding.

Look to Jesus, your lord. As a Christ-follower, you’re under new management. We come to Christ, yielding our future to Him. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9, NASB).

In your joys, look to Jesus. In your sorrows, look to Jesus. In life’s blessings, look to Jesus. In life’s pains—look to Jesus. Look and live! Jared Wilson urges us to wake up and look up:

“Only the vision of Jesus makes sense of a broken world. He gives meaning to and fulfills suffering. He is the answer to the instinctual cry for justice. He is the ultimate threat to evil. He is the ultimate hope for deliverance. He is the puzzle piece that fits the eternity-shaped hole in the heart of man Jesus is big enough to fit into infinity. He is the true light of the world. He is the risen King, the exalted Lord. He is before all things and in him all things come together. All things were made through him and for him. That he might be preeminent to them and supreme over them. He is the radiance of God’s glory.

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One day we won't need the sun, because he will be the lamp of the new heavens and the new earth. Why in the world do we fix our eyes on anything but him?"¹³

FINISHED

After preaching some years ago in Bristol my host invited me to visit "Toplady's rock," not far away in the beautiful English countryside. The story is often told that Rev. Augustus Toplady took refuge from a sudden thunderstorm in the crevice of a large rock at Burrington Coomb in southern England. After the storm had passed, according to the story, Toplady was inspired to pen some of the most familiar words in English hymnody. Whatever the hymn's origins, potent theology is in every line:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood from Thy riven side which flowed,
Be for sin the double cure, save from wrath and make me pure.*

Toplady saw Christ's sacrifice as the "double cure" for our greatest needs before God—deliverance from His judgment of sin and deliverance from sin's power in our lives. Therefore, he appealed to Christ's sacrifice to "save from wrath and make me pure."

*Not the labor of my hands can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone, Thou must save, and Thou alone.¹⁴*

We acknowledge our abject inability to attain righteousness by our own merits and fulfill God's righteous demands. Christ and Christ alone can save us. That day as I wedged my body into the cleft of Toplady's rock, I was reminded vividly that believers in

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Christ have a strong, safe refuge from judgment in the riven side of our Savior, the Rock of Ages who was “cleft for us.”

The glory of the gospel is encapsulated in Christ’s pronouncement from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). This phrase is a single word in the original Greek language of the New Testament—*tetelestai*. It simply means paid in full.

“This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12). Mission accomplished! This was not a cry of agony, it was a declaration of victory. God’s justice had been satisfied.

Theologian F. W. Krummacher noted, “He had now reached the final completion of His work of redemption. The exclamation, ‘It is finished!’ resounded in heaven and awoke hallelujahs to the Lamb which shall never more be mute. They reverberated through the abodes of darkness, like the thunders of God, announcing the termination of the dominion of their prince. But a more blissful sound on earth does not strike the ear of the penitent sinner to this hour than the words, ‘It is finished!’ It is the sound of the great jubilee trumpet, and the proclamation of an eternal salvation.”¹⁵

Religions other than biblical Christianity start with *do* and *don’t*. Our faith begins with *done!* All that was necessary to bring us back to God and make us righteous in His sight was accomplished completely and forever through Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf. God’s torrential judgment against sin was fully satisfied.

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ABOVE ALL

When I was a little boy I liked to play with a magnifying glass.

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Holding this glass a few inches from my hand, I could see lines and creases not seen by the naked eye. Putting the magnifier close to the ground, small bugs could look like man-eating monsters. When magnified, things quickly got out of real-life proportion. It was somehow comforting to remove the magnifier and once again give true size to things.

But this doesn't work when we contemplate the greatness of God's almighty Son. For only by magnifying Him can we even begin to grasp His true "size"—the infinite expanse of His love, His holiness, and His glory.

In David's call to worship, he says, "Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together" (Ps. 34:3). To magnify means to make large or make larger. Of course, this doesn't mean we make God the Son larger than He already is. That would be impossible. His glory fills the universe. It means He is made larger in our perception of Him.

Some lenses are crafted to either magnify or reduce the true size of objects. Too often we tend to magnify our troubles while we reduce the size and scope of God Incarnate. The inverse should be the way we view life—the true proportion of our problems is smaller than what we perceive. And the "size" of Jesus Christ? He is the omnipotent God clothed in human flesh.

Are you magnifying your problems—while reducing God's true size? I have a word from the Word for you today: Magnify the Lord! There is nothing too hard for Him. "The reason some of us are such poor specimens of Christianity," wrote Oswald Chambers, "is because we have no almighty Christ."¹⁶ Years ago J. B. Phillips wrote an important little book with the provocative title, *Your God Is Too Small*.¹⁷ Is your God too small? Is your perception of Him too little and limited? Come now to the almighty Christ!

In *Prince Caspian* (C. S. Lewis's second book published in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series), young Lucy experiences a return visit from her majestic lion-friend, Aslan. Throughout the series

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Aslan is portrayed as a type of Christ.

Lucy: “Aslan, you’re bigger.”

Aslan: “That is because you are older, little one.”

Lucy: “Not because you are?”

Aslan: “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”¹⁸

God does not grow, grow older, or get bigger. But, as “frail children of dust”¹⁹ we grow—and we grow old. Hopefully, in our perception of things we also get bigger. How? By magnifying Him. We will never have to regret that we over-exalted King Jesus or magnified Him too much. Every year we grow in Christ, we find Him bigger.

Crucified and risen Christ now reigns over all. The Father is so pleased with His Son’s atoning work that He has placed the coming judgment of the world under His jurisdiction. “He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Now “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9-10).

We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together up to this moment. And when it comes to the church—he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he’s there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so

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roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross (Col. 1:15-20, MSG).

It's hard, if not impossible, to read that and stay neutral. Either this gospel concerning Jesus is the most riveting, life-giving revelation ever delivered or it is history's most egregious lie. It's not surprising then that the laser of opposition today isn't so much against God in general, it's against Jesus in particular. Jesus Christ—His name, His gospel, His rule—has always been the point of contention. And not since the first century has the very mention of Him caused so much controversy. "Since September 11, 2001, I have seen more clearly than ever how essential it is to exult explicitly in the excellence of Christ crucified for sinners and risen from the dead," writes John Piper. "Christ must be explicit in all our God-talk God-in-Christ is the only true God and the only path of joy."²⁰

No wonder those who oppose the gospel want to either bury the very mention of His name or only use it blasphemously. But Hebrews 1:1-3 invigorates our hearts and hopes, assuring us that *Jesus* has been appointed heir over everything. *Jesus* is "the brightness of [the Father's] glory and the express image of His person." *Jesus* at this present moment is "upholding all things by the word of His power."

IN CHRIST

It was my privilege to meet Oswald J. Smith, the renowned missionary-statesman, shortly before he died. This Toronto pastor built one of the world's foremost missionary sending churches. He also wrote great songs that served as staples for many years in

The Gospel—Captured by Its Subject

churches around the world. Perhaps his most popular song tells of the life-transforming impact of a real encounter with Jesus Christ:

*When Jesus comes, the tempter's power is broken,
When Jesus comes, the tears are wiped away.
He takes the gloom and fills the life with glory,
For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.²¹*

Yes, the gospel changes everything. More specifically, Jesus, the vortex of the gospel, changes everything when we encounter Him and yield our lives to Him. Jesus Himself told us how we obtain eternal life when He prayed, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

This almighty Christ who is the focus of everything and for whom everything exists now invites us to literally attach our lives to His. We are to draw our life from Him in the same way branches draw their life from the vine (John 15:4-5).

The apostle Paul lumps all humanity into just two groups—those who are “in Adam,” and those who are “in Christ.” Tracing to our first parent, we inherit his fallen nature. We are sinners, not only because of what we’ve done; even more fundamentally we are sinners because of who we are. In this fallen state we are literally rebellious by nature. In two different letters, Paul describes all descendants of Adam as “sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2; 5:6; Col. 3:6). As such, we were destined for the coming judgment when God’s holy wrath will be poured out against sin. This is the dreadful future of those who do not turn away from their sin. But in His love and kindness God has given a way to escape this future terror. He sent a substitute to incur this wrath in our place. And when we meet Jesus through repentance and faith we no longer tie our lineage to Adam, the rebel. Rather, we are now aligned with—and in the family of—Jesus, the redeemer! “He has

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delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13). As the old hymn writer put it, this is indeed “love divine, all loves excelling!”²²

Once estranged from God and His blessings, we now have full access to Him and His care *in Christ* (Eph. 2:13). We are now His children through faith *in Christ* (Gal. 3:26). We are a new creation *in Christ* (2 Cor. 5:17). There is no condemnation because we are *in Christ* (Rom. 8:1). So there’s no more need to hide. Just as fully as the Father accepts Jesus, the eternal Son of His love, He fully accepts us because we are *in Christ*. We are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6). No wonder A. J. Gordon exclaimed, “Nothing is more striking than the breadth of application which this principle of union with Christ has in the gospel it lifts all [believers] into a new sphere, and puts on them this seal and signature of the gospel, in Christ. So that while all things continue as they were from the beginning, all, by their readjustment to this divine character and person, become virtually new.”²³

One of the greatest hymns that shows the power of Christ’s advocacy for us and our union with Him has only recently been rediscovered. It lay dormant in dusty English hymnals for over a century, almost never sung. A few years ago a new, memorable tune breathed new life into these potent lyrics. Now its truths are once again being sung in churches worldwide. If I were a theology professor, I might call these three power-packed stanzas Christology 101:

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great high priest whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in heaven He stands*

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*No tongue can bid me thence depart.
When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.*

*Behold Him there, the risen Lamb,
My perfect spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
The king of glory and of grace.
One with Himself I cannot die,
My soul is purchased by His blood,
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Savior and my God!²⁴*

I've recited a number of songs about Jesus in this chapter. I make no apology for that. He jumpstarts singing in every believing heart. I feel I'm on safe ground in asserting that no subject (even love itself) and certainly no other person has been the inspiration for more music than the person and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This chapter could go on forever. I identify with John when he wrote, "There are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Such is the majesty of Jesus. In fact, throughout eternity God will just keep unpacking His love for us in Christ. "That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7).

What a message. What a Savior!

In our finiteness we could never know the triune God fully.

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But what dimensions of Him we do know we can know truly through the Scriptures and our daily walk with Him. As John Stott observed, “The riches of Christ are unsearchable. Like the earth, they are too vast to explore, like the sea too deep to fathom. They are untraceable, inexhaustible, illimitable, inscrutable and incalculable. What is certain about the wealth Christ has and gives is that we shall never come to an end of it.”²⁶

These riches are indeed endless. So let’s peel back yet another layer of this “grace upon grace” and explore the strength and beauty that anchor us in the gospel.



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