

“Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery” // *God With Us 1* // Colossians 1:15–20

Announcement:

I have spent the last two weeks recovering from a small nasal surgery I had... (no longer saying “small surgery.”) Nose job. If I sound a little nasally, that’s why.

All-In: *Another amazing experience.* In addition to having **quite a few of you renew** and increase your commitment, **more than 800** new commitments were turned in, which thrills my heart because it represents people getting off of the sidelines and into the mission.

I told you last weekend that we have an opportunity to purchase an amazing facility to serve as home to our **new campus in Raleigh**, which we are now calling “The Blue Ridge Campus”!

- For those of you who have missed the news last week, **we’ve just signed a contract** to purchase an amazing facility on Blue Ridge Road, along the **west side of the Raleigh beltline**. It’s at a **prime location** in the Triangle, is close to **NCSU** and, for many of you, will be **even closer** to where you live than your current campus. It’s got a nearly **1000-seat** auditorium and another **400-seat worship venue** and tons of **kid space**.

We’re getting a **great deal** on this building at a little less than \$6 million. Wouldn’t it be awesome to **not have to borrow** any of that, or at least very little? You could be used by God to make that kind of difference and help fund this next weekend at our Big Give. Let’s pray that God, once again, does more than we could ask or imagine.

Prayer

Introduction:

Start a **new mini-series** leading up to **DPAC** (Epic). ***God With Us***.

Here’s why: For many years my relationship with God felt distant—**cold, almost**. I knew a **lot of truths** about God; and I was trying to do the **things he commanded**, but it always seemed to be **from a distance**. He seemed kind of like a **busy teacher** who had given an assignment and then stepped out of the room, leaving us students to get it done. I knew he was coming back, so I was busy with the assignment, but **how do you love, and feel close, to someone like that?**

- You see, the **Great Commandment** is that we love God with all our heart, soul and mind.
- That means he is **first in our affections**: that we **crave and desire and feel connected** to God more than anyone else...
- I **wanted that warmth** of emotion, but didn’t know really how to develop it.

I want to show you in this series that **you can’t love God until he becomes personal** to you; until you see that what he did in history *for you*, and that leads to a **personal intimacy** with Jesus.

J.C. Ryle: *“You’ll never grow as a Christian until you develop a personal intimacy with the Lord Jesus; until you deal with him as you would a best friend—turn to him first in every need; consult him at every step; talk to him about all your difficulties; spread before him all your sorrows; allow him to share in all your joys; do all things as in his sight; to go through every day leaning on him.”¹*

¹ *“I believe that no man will ever grow in grace who does not know something experimentally of the habit of communion. We must seek to have personal intimacy with the Lord Jesus, and to deal with him as a man deals with a loving friend... To turn to him first in every need, to talk to him about every difficulty, to consult him*

- That's when **doctrine** becomes a **dynamic relationship**; when the **verse** becomes a **voice**.

Do you have that kind of intimacy with God? Do you relate to God as a man relates to a friend? For the next few weeks, that's what I want to press, because, at its very core, that is what Christmas is about.

- **Chris Green:** It's not about presents; it's about the presence.

To do this, we're going to look at **two of the oldest Christmas carols** ever written. **Sadly**, we don't sing either of them today, but they both get at this idea: *God is **for me**. God is **with me**. I am his, and he is mine.*

(Before I do that, can you **allow me just a minute** to vent about Christmas music?

- I like some of it.
- But I feel like people started playing it about **3 weeks before** Halloween, which makes me, by now, start looking for **dull, blunt objects** I can bash against my head when it comes on.
- *If you listen to Delilah during this season, you're dead to me.*

And it seems like **everyone feels qualified** to produce a Christmas album.

- From my teenage years: **Wham:** Wrong on so many levels. "Last Christmas, I gave you my heart..." (picture)
- **David Hasselhoff** (picture)
- **Roseanne Barr** (for those born after 1990)
- Duck Dynasty both have Christmas albums out (Pictures). Duck the Halls. Wish you a Hairy Christmas.

And some of the stuff is so absolutely, drippy, icky, sentimental. I feel like I'm just pounding down Nutrasweet when I hear it.

*about every **step**, to spread before him all our **sorrows**, to get him to share in all our **joys**, to do all as in his **sight**, to go through every day **leaning** on and **looking** to him!"*

A friend wrote this up: 5 ways to survive the song Christmas Shoes...² (know that song)

1. *If it comes on the radio while you are driving in a car, don't forget to tuck your shoulder when you open the door to roll out into the street. What about your car, you say? You can always buy a new one, but you can't unhear that song.*

2. *Don't try to negotiate with it. Much like fear, the Christmas Shoes song cannot be beat with logic or rational thinking. Don't waste time with questions like, "Where is this kid's dad? Does he have a dad? Why shoes? Why not a Christmas dress? Why not a delicious bowl of queso? Has an 8 year old ever successfully purchased women's shoes in the history of mankind?"*

3. *Forget trying to make it an "acquired taste." This song isn't like algebra, it doesn't get better once you get used to it. Don't think that listening to it on repeat will solve your problems.*

4. *Keep it off of any Christmas playlist. I know what you're thinking, "Jon, I'll just hide it in the middle of a 100 song playlist. No one at the party will notice." They will, and you will notice it too, as people begin to leave your party.*

5. *Stop being friends with people who say it's not a bad song. They're wrong. Those people have terrible judgment and probably prefer unfrosted pop tarts as well. Just stop doing life with them.*

Colossians 1:15–22

Scholars say that what Paul (most likely) is doing here is quoting a hymn common in the early church. It gives you a **very clear depiction of who Jesus is**, but then at the end **Paul brings it all back around** to it being "*for you*." We're going to go through it line by line, because I

² <http://stuffchristianslike.net/2013/12/02/5-best-ways-survive-christmas-shoes/>

want you to see, in what happened at Christmas, to feel God's pursuit of you.

Who Jesus Is

Starting in vs. 15, Paul gives one of the clearest descriptions of who Jesus is. Short answer: Jesus was God. He'll say it in 6 different ways.

[15] "He is the image of the invisible God"

- Let's start with the end of that sentence... God is invisible; he is spirit; human eye cannot see him. So how can he known—perceived? Jesus was the *image* (Gr. *icon*) of God. Like a coin.
 - You say, "Well, wait a minute. **Isn't man made in the image** of God, too?" Yes, but Paul means something different here.
 - To say we are *made* in the image of God means that there are **some things about us** that resemble God—our personalities, our rational way of thinking, our relational abilities, etc.
 - But Jesus is the **exact representation** of God.
- Heb. 1:3 "**He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.**"
 - **Exact imprint.**³ All that God is, Jesus is.
 - If Jesus were not fully God, then he **wouldn't be the exact** representation.
 - **We are made "in the image** of God;" Jesus is the image of God.
- God is a Trinity, which means he has existed eternally in 3 persons. He's not 3 Gods (**polytheism**); he's not one God who puts on different hats (**modalism**); he's not one God that is subdivided (**partialism**).
 - Which is why you have to be careful with analogies for the Trinity: Dad/Pastor/Friend; cornea/lens/pupil.
 - "**Word**" (John 1:1). Theologians in the early church explained that concept this way. The Father is like the mind

that conceives the thought, the Word the expression of that thought, and the Spirit the voice that carries the thought along.

"...The firstborn over all creation"

- People see "firstborn" and they ask, "Does this mean Jesus was the first thing God created?" (**Kharis** is my firstborn... the first child I created.) That's not what the phrase means.
 - "**Firstborn**" can mean **two things in Hebrew**. It can literally, the first one born. Or, it can also mean a position of inheritance.
 - For example, **Isaac** was called Abraham's firstborn, even though technically Ishmael was his firstborn, but Isaac was the one who got the position and all the promises. **Jacob** and Esau, same deal.
- In this case, "**firstborn**" **definitely means position**.
- See, look at how the verse continues: v. 16, "**For by him (Jesus) all things were created in heaven and on earth**, (you see, if Jesus was a created thing, then this verse would mean that Jesus created himself—because "all things in heaven and earth" would include Jesus... which is, of course, impossible) **visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.**
- Jesus is in the **position of firstborn**. All of creation was **made by him and for him**.
 - Artists say that in every great work of art there is a piece of the soul of the artist. You can get to know the artist looking at the art.
 - That's how creation is. The heavens declare the glory of God!
 - **Augustine**: All of the creation is God's smile toward us. "Good gifts." Gifts that draw us to him. **All that you love in nature points you toward God.**
 - Like a **wedding ring**. No bride should say, "The ring is enough! The ring should point you to the greatest gift; the man behind the ring!"

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 30.20. See Thomas Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 11.

- **C. S. Lewis:** “The (created things) in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we cling to them; it was not in them, it only came **through them**, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, (cherished memories from our childhood) – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”⁴

[17] *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*”

- Paul says that he is the ground of our being.
 - Analogy:** Physicists still cannot figure out how an atom actually holds together. Nucleus of the common oxygen atom has 8 protons, which have a positive charge, and 8 neutrons, with no charge. They should fly apart.⁵ Earlier physicists had discovered that like charges repel each other, and opposites attract. Yet, here were 8 positively charged protons just hanging out together. And the negatively charged elements of the atom are out there spinning round the atom.

In the 1920’s and 1930’s scientists discovered that there was an incredible power lurking in the atom holding all the protons in the nucleus of the atom together—they called it a nuclear force—it was mysterious, and hard to understand—so hard that **only Albert Einstein, myself, and a few other people**

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 29.

⁵ Karl Darrow, physicist at AT&T, says, “(In short)... *nuclei have no right to (exist) at all. Indeed, they should never have (evolved), and, if (evolved), they should have blown up instantly. Yet, here they all are... some inflexible inhibition is holding them relentlessly together... (held together by a secret power).*” D. Lee Chesnut, *The Atom Speaks*, 31–38. Cited by J. MacArthur, *Colossians*, 47-48.

really understand it. When they fired protons into the nuclei of an atom it would release incredible energy known as nuclear power. This power holds the nucleus together, *but they are not quite sure how it works*. Its kind of like gravity—they know it is there, and how it works, but not why. They give it names like “quarks” and “gluons” and etc.

I am not saying that there’s not a natural, physical principle built into the atom that keeps it together. I suspect there is. I’m saying that just that just like there is mysterious, invisible power behind the atom, there is a mysterious power in all the universe’s being that gives it, and us, life. His hand is in everything. It’s in you. It is power. It’s joy. It puts longing into you.

- Our lives fall apart if he is not the center. Like the sun, which must be at the center.
- He is the firstborn. It’s all by him. It’s all for him. It’s all about him. He was there at the beginning. He writes the story in the middle. He will be there at the end.

[18] *“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.”*

- **Two ideas here:**
- **Firstborn from the dead:** In Jesus we get a glimpse of what we, and creation, will be in the future.
 - Jesus was physically resurrected, as a man who ate, conversed with friends, flew, walked through walls.
 - Misconception about heaven: sitting on a harp, singing all day long. Like one **eternal choir practice**. Chris: only thing worse is one long sermon.
- We see in Jesus what God is making us.
 - (Biblical accounts of Jesus imply that he was not physically impressive. No form or comeliness. Not **overly strong** or athletic. **Just average**. Jim Caviezel? Yet when he was

raised he was glorious and beautiful and could walk through walls. This is our future, as well as all creation.)

- **He's also the head of the body**, meaning the source of new life, so that the closer we are to him, the more his life flows in us.
 - You want God's resurrection power in your heart; relationships; family; draw close to him.
 - **Analogy: SPIRITUAL FRUITS.**

“...that in everything he might be preeminent.”

- There's your application. We'll come back to that.

[19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

- PLUROMA. All of it. There's **not a “God-pie”** of 3 equal parts, but in each one the fullness of the other two dwells. Father dwells in the Son... One God in 3 persons. It's a mystery.
- But Paul's point is, as Christ dwells in you, the fullness of God dwells in you.

[20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

- **Has any other king or government agency ever done that?** We were the criminals; he was the one who paid. Not only did he come after us to rescue us; he paid the debt for our sins in our place.
- **He did it himself, so that he might be preeminent!** Let me tell you why I'm not a JW or Mormon.
 - **Someone else paid for my sin.** Makes us love someone else. **Pre-eminent.**
 - **Best practical joke I've ever played...**
- VERSE FOR GREEARS: **Psalm 130:4:** “*There is forgiveness with you, that you might be feared!*” Why did God save us? That he might be feared. (Fear trips people up sometimes. Think of it like you fear the sun. The sun is necessary for life. You'd never want to be

in wrong relation to it. To be in wrong relation—death! To be in right relation, health and warmth.)

- Paul's way of saying that is: “That he might be preeminent.”

And then watch how Paul makes it personal:

[21] And *you*, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [22] *you* 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,

- Paul says, “This is mine. And yours!”
- And this makes him burst into praise.

This is what I want for you: I want you to sit in stunned awe at who Jesus is, and what he has done... and let all of your life flow out of that.

And then I pray he become preeminent in four areas, here:

1. May Christ be preeminent in our worship

- Paul can't talk about these things without breaking into a hymn of praise—it's not something he did once a week. His life exploded with this reality.
- I want you to worship in the mystery of the incarnation! Let it overwhelm you!
- Augustine: “Man's maker was made man that he, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at his mother's breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.”⁶
- And what he was doing, he was doing for you. Think of it:

⁶ Augustine, *Sermons* 191.1.

- *As the Son of God he could feed 5000; but as the son of man, he became hungry; so he could say to you, and to me, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger."*
- *As the Son of God, he turned water into wine; as the son of man, he was thirsty; so he could say to you, "Whoever thirsts let him come to me and drink. The water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life."*
- *As the Son of God, he spoke the worlds into existence. As the son of man, he grew weary; so he could say to you: "Come unto me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*
- *As the Son of God, he dwelt in the palaces of glory. As the son of man, he was born in a stable, and grew up in poverty with no place to lay his head, so that he could promise me an inheritance that can never be taken away. Though he was rich for my sake he became poor, that I through his poverty, might become rich. He took the stable so he could prepare for me a place with many mansions.*
- *As the Son of God, he was adored by angels in the perfections of holiness. As the son of man, he was condemned by Pilate; scourged by whips; scorned by man. God made him who knew no sin to become sin for me...*

And though he looked "weak" the first time he came, the second time he will not:

- At his first coming, he was born in a stable; his second, riding on the clouds.
- At his first coming, crowned with thorns; at his second, as ruler of the universe.
- At his first coming, crucified; at his second coming, glorified.
- At his first coming, he yielded up his body to crucifixion; his back to the whips, his cheeks to them that plucked out his hair. But at his second coming, the 'government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'
- At his first coming, his enemies cried, 'We will not have this man to reign over us'! But the second time, every knee shall bow, in

heaven and on earth, and proclaim that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

He's coming again, and every eye will see him and fall immediately upon their faces in worship, but I have no reason to fear, because:

- **At his first coming**, he came to **bear my judgment** and stand in my place, so that at his **second coming** there would be no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and nothing that could separate me from the love of God in Jesus Christ my Lord.

How does that not make you burst into worship?

One of our pastors, songwriters here, Matt Papa, wrote: *Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery, in the dawning of the king. He the theme of heaven's praises, robed in frail humanity; in our longing, in our darkness, now the light of life has come! Look to Christ who condescended, took on flesh to ransom us.*

...What a foretaste of deliverance! How unwavering our hope! Christ in power, resurrected, as we will be when he comes.

Paul says: ***"You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [22] you 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."***

*All this was **for me.***

The joy of the Christian life is found in worship. PERIOD. Until you get that, you'll be miserable! And worship is found in the mystery of what God did in the incarnation for you.

2. May Christ be preeminent in our affections

- Tectonic: plates. **Earthquake.** If a big truck goes across a bridge, there's a **bridge-quake.** If a big man walks across thin ice, there's an **ice-quake.** When God comes into your life, there's a life-quake. Which leads to a radical re-orientation with you life.
- I've heard people make the objection: "I'll have to quit having sex before I'm married." First, that way of seeing God and the world is terribly faulty... Life works best when lived according to the Creator. But the bigger problem with that question is that **there's something fundamentally wrong with you** when you ask it, something that makes me not even want to answer it: It's like saying that you have a rare disease that you can be cured from, but in order to live, you're not going to be able to eat chocolate anymore, and you're like... what? When you think about the infinite God coming into your life and his joy for eternity being shed abroad in your soul and you're complaining about some dumb little thing like you can't have sex before you're married, as if that were a condition on which you would know the God of the universe, that shows you little you understand the value of God.
- And when you realize how great a treasure God is, very little can devastate you any more. Analogy: **Just inherited 1 million!** Doesn't mean your heart doesn't break, but all pain is put in perspective of how rich a treasure we possess...
 - **How much you believe the gospel is measured by your ability to be joyful in all things.**
 - Depressed this Christmas. Don't feel like worship? You have Jesus.

3. May Christ be preeminent in our objectives

- **ASCC**
- That you realize his kingdom is more important than yours; his story is more important than your personal story.
- Over the years I've used this analogy—thought of it again, recently.
 - Hunger Games. Several people's story seem only to support hers. Why she is so important I don't know—she's kind of a shallow, selfish person.

- Why would I do that? Because all things were created by him and for him. His story is the one that goes on forever, and if mine is wrapped up in his, when he wins, I win, and we enjoy his victory for eternity. If I am telling my own story, then it dies with me. When the credits roll, it's over!
- I pray Christ and his story become preeminent in your pain...
- I pray Christ and his story become preeminent in your blessings.
 - In how I spend my money: is he and his kingdom pre-eminent.
 - **Tradition at Greear house:** Give the largest gift to Jesus!

4. May Christ be preeminent in our church

- May the focus never be on us, but on him.
- How does that happen?
 - **How I preach:** Pointing you to me?
 - **As we plan:** Is what we are doing about our name, or the glory of God?
 - Why we plant. Not about building just one big church, but bless other churches and plant others. Doesn't help our bottom line.
 - Summit: what are our **prayers** for? Our needs being met or God's glory spread in the world?
 - **Is he pre-eminent in our worship service?** Who or what do you come for?
 - Habits
 - The intensity of our worship

Conclusion (MUSIC)

These things grow out of seeing the incarnation as something that was done *for you.*

John Wesley (who was one of great preachers of the great awakening, and founded the Methodist movement), studied theology for several years and even served as a missionary before he was really converted to faith. (You see, it's really easy to be very involved in church and very religious without a personal relationship with God). One night he went reluctantly to a meeting at his church where someone was reading Luther's preface to his commentary on the book of *Romans*. About 8:45 p.m. "while (Luther) was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt *my heart* strangely warmed. I knew I trusted Christ, and Christ alone, for *my* salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

My sin. *For me*. That's conversion. It's where what God did in history becomes something you believe he did for you.