

I want to start with two updates from last week. First, after I mentioned that I had to rush Hudson to Riley Children's Hospital last Saturday night because he accidentally swallowed a toy and it got stuck in his throat, I've had about 150 people ask how he's doing. Let's just say, just like all the other toys we give him, he was done with it in about 48 hours. He's totally himself. Second, and much more importantly, last Sunday we gave an invitation for people to come forward and accept the great salvation offered to us through Jesus, and I'd love to share with you the names of the people who were baptized: Lucy, Cindi, Elijah, Jacob, Jaxon, Cooper, Colin, Lily, Matthew, Christina, Jess, Bri, Shelby, Jaren, TJ, and Rachel. Sixteen people—men and women, young and old—came forward to place Jesus at the very center of their lives. That means we have baptized over 135 people so far this year, with several more scheduled for today. God really is changing lives and growing his kingdom in this place. I have been moved to tears of gratitude and joy all week long, thinking about how good God is.

If you follow sports much, you know that with Lionel Messi coming to play soccer in the US, there is a resurgence in the age-old debate about who is the greatest soccer play of all times. Is it Messi, Ronaldo, or Pele? The same debate happens in basketball: Is it Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Michael Jordan, or LeBron James? In tennis, is it Pete Sampras, Roger Federer, or Novak Djokovic? In football, is it Manning, Brady, Montana, or Jim Brown? The debate about who is the greatest of all time is nothing new; it's been taking place for millennia. In the ancient world to which Paul wrote, including the people in the town of Colossae, the debates did not center on professional athletes but on deities. Which is the greatest god in the pantheon? Which god is worthy of devotion and worship? When it came to promoting their physical health or fertility, when it came to having a successful harvest or safely traveling the dangerous seas or fighting in a war, people "knew" there were plenty of gods they could pray to, dozens of temples they could visit, but they wanted to know which of these gods was the most powerful, the most capable, which was the greatest of all time.

In this section of the book of Colossians, Paul writes to these brand new believers, people who had only recently heard about Jesus and placed their faith in him, and he says, "I know the world around you debates which of their so-called deities is the greatest, but I want to put this debate to rest once and for all: there is only one answer to that question, and his name is Jesus." Then he begins this section of scripture that we are listening to every week in our series, Colossians 1:15-20, to show them how wonderful, sufficient, and powerful Jesus truly is.

In our passage today, we get to look at what is considered by many to be the most beautiful, poetic, lofty paragraph about Jesus, not only in all of Scripture, but in all of literature from throughout all of history. Jerry Hawthorne said, "It is as though Paul, so overcome with the majesty and goodness of the One who brought hope to the hopeless and deliverance to the captives, considered prosaic sentences totally inadequate to do justice to this person, so his words poured forth in a carefully crafted poem that not only is a literary masterpiece, but the mountaintop of Christological statements." It is hard to put into words how special and sacred this passage is. I am honored and humbled beyond words to be able to unpack it with you today! This passage highlights 10 attributes of the greatness and glory of Jesus.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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. 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. 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. (Colossians 1:15-20)

1. Jesus is the image of God. In the ancient world, every god had a statue that people could look at to see what that god looked like. Baal and Asherah, Zeus and Hermes, Poseidon and Athena—you name it, they had an image. But in the Ten Commandments, God told his people, “You may make no image of me.” God is not a part of creation, and nothing in creation can give a faithful, accurate picture of him. He has no form. In numerous places, the Bible says that God is invisible. We can’t see him. But then Jesus comes, and Paul says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He brings into the light that which for us was previously shrouded in darkness. If you want to know who God is and what he is like, look to Jesus. He is holy and righteous in all that he does; he is gentle and meek with little children yet boldly speaks truth and confronts injustice when in the presence of people with power. He befriends the lonely and feeds the hungry; he washes feet and heals the sick; he calms the storm, drives out demons, and raises the dead. God is invisible. But if he could be made visible and put into a room with us, he would look just like Jesus. Jesus enables us to see what God is really like. I know I am entering into some potentially blasphemous territory here, but I want to use an illustration about Taco Bell. Some of you may have seen this week they were sued for five million dollars in the state of New York for false advertising. On their website, as well as in their stores, their picture of the Mexican pizza looks like one way, but once you pay your money and they hand you the pizza, it looks different.



They are being sued because this is not a faithful, accurate image of what you actually get! That is not the case with Jesus. When you look at Jesus, you see the full manifestation of God, the perfect representation of his character.

There is also a second aspect: not only does Jesus allow us to see what God is truly like, he also allows us to see what we will one day become like. Who else in Scripture is called the image of God? Adam and Eve. God made them in his image. But they rebelled and sin, they marred the image of God and brought death and destruction in their wake. Now humanity represents just a shadow of God’s likeness. Jesus shows us what humanity was always intended to be, and what, by God’s grace in new creation, we will one day become!

2. Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. When some hear the word “firstborn,” their natural instinct is to assume that Jesus is the first spiritual being brought into existence by God the Father. This has led to all sorts of heresies throughout the history of the church, with docetism and arianism centuries ago, and with Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormonism today. I am not trying to demean those faiths, but each of them believes that there was a time when Jesus did not exist, and that God the Father gave Jesus life, with Jesus as the first of all God’s creation. Not only does that interpretation violate all of Scripture, but it is also a very unfortunate, extremely misguided way of interpreting this passage. The word “firstborn” here isn’t addressing chronology but rather superiority. Philosophers would say, “It’s not chronological; it’s ontological.” Here’s a simple analogy: Let’s say that you are beginning a new career and it is your first week on the job at your new company. It’s a big operation; let’s say there are 10,000 people in the organization. During your orientation, you meet people from every department: janitorial staff and secretaries, sales people and mid-level managers, VPs and C-suite executives. As you are making your

rounds you meet someone who has the same last name as the founder of the company, and you come to learn that the person you met is the founder's one and only son. This is not one of those families where there is tension and infighting. This father and son love each other and do everything in alignment and unity with one another. You find out it is the founder's plan to one day have his son to run the entire company on his behalf. In that situation, when you meet the son, you realize that he is an entirely different classification of employee from everyone else you met. He ranks higher. He has more authority. His words carry greater weight. He has preeminence. He is in charge. That is what the Bible is referring to when we read that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation—it means that Jesus is the one the Father has put in charge to govern and rule all things on his behalf.

3. Jesus is the creator of all things. Paul writes, *“For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities.”* Jesus is not just the firstborn over all creation; he is the author of creation, the source of all that exists. Tim Keller has some profound remarks about this. Pulling from Romans 1, Keller says that when we refuse to honor Jesus as the creator of the world, we are participating in a kind of cosmic plagiarism. We all know what plagiarism is: it is when someone else created something, but then you use their work without acknowledging them or giving them credit and recognition. Keller says that is what is happening in the modern world constantly. Jesus is the creator of all. He is the ultimate source of life. But people refuse to properly acknowledge him. They take credit for life itself. They assume they, with their limited, frail ability to understand things, should define truth and morality. It is plagiarism of a cosmic order. Jesus is not only the creator of all things, Paul also says...

4. Jesus is the one for whom all things were created. Paul literally writes, “All things have been created through him and for him.” Keren and I live on six acres of land. Prior to our house being built, the entire property was farm fields. Sadly, the people who lived there before us never planted any trees. Wanting to remedy that error, I have planted over 1,000 trees since we moved there in 2017. We planted a few dozen larger trees, but almost all of them were saplings that cost about 30 cents each. They are small little trees. You can't even see them over the weeds right now. But one day, I hope our bland, non-visually-appealing former farm field turns into a beautiful wooded lot with dozens of varieties of vibrant trees. Last summer, when I was out in the yard, watering trees as I do quite a bit, Hudson came up to me, all on his own, and said, “Daddy, thank you for planting so many wonderful trees for me to enjoy.” His words hit me deeply. I was so happy that he realizes, even at an early age, that so much of what I am doing, I am doing for him, for his benefit, for his enjoyment. That is the heart of God the Father for God the Son. You get the sense that God the Father looks at the Son, points to the world, and says, “All of this is for you!” Every square millimeter of creation as well as every human heart was ultimately created for the enjoyment and glory of Jesus.

5. Jesus is before all things. No matter the conversation or subject matter, Jesus is always first; he is always given greatest honor. Our neighbors, who we love, attend this church. On Easter, their teenage son made the decision to be baptized. Their son loves to work with his hands. He has built seven or eight different flag poles behind their house. He flies lots of different flags for things he is passionate about. But, as is required by the US flag code, the American flag is flown prominently above everything else, a clear, visual display that our allegiance to our country comes before everything else. When Gary was still the senior pastor of our church and I was working under him, we were in a meeting together. There were eight or ten of us around a table. He and I were sitting next to each other in adjustable height chairs. Gary's chair malfunctioned and all of a sudden it dropped by two or three inches. I immediately reached for my lever and lowered it all the way down so that Gary would be higher than me. Of course, everyone laughed. But we all know there are subtle things we can do to indicate that we believe someone is more important than us, has more honor than us: gentlemen usually walk closer to the street to protect a lady, men hold doors for others, in the UK there is formal etiquette about who bows to whom in the royal

family to show honor and respect. The Bible says that all of creation bows the knee to Jesus, because he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; he is before all things

6. Jesus is the one who holds all creation together. Colossians 1:17 says, “In him all things hold together.” If you understand the philosophical conversations taking place a few thousand years ago, you come to appreciate this claim in a whole new light. The ancient Greeks, not having modern microscopes like we do, were always trying to discover and name the element or substance that held matter together and caused the universe to make sense. Take this table for example: it is wood and metal, but what causes the particles that make up this wood and metal to hold together, to stay connected to one another, to maintain this shape and form? They wanted to know—what is *that* power. Today, scientists know there are four laws of thermodynamic and 26 universal constants, but why are those laws the way they are? We have names for these laws, we can observe them, test them, and prove them, but why do they exist in the first place? What fundamental principle is there that causes creation to work? Paul says that’s easy: it’s Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the philosophers’ and physicists’ ultimate question. The laws of logic, physics, mathematics, and thermodynamics all derive from the genius and character of Christ. Some will respond, “It can be hard to believe all things are held together in Christ when everywhere we look it appears the world is falling apart.” But that is a short-sighted perspective. History is like a tapestry, with little discernible pattern when viewed from one side of eternity, but with unmistakable design and beauty when viewed from the other side. Jesus holds all things together!

7. Jesus is the head of the body—which is the church! The Bible uses several different metaphors for the church. We are the family of God, we are the bride of Christ, we are citizens in the kingdom of God. But one of the most common metaphors is the church as the body of Christ. Just like in a body, everyone in the church is united and connected to one another, but we all have a unique role and function. My hands, feet, heart, and lungs all have different functions, but each one doing its part allows a person to thrive. In this metaphor, one thing that you can never mistake is who is the head of the body, who is in charge, who sets direction, who sends the impulse that tells every other part what to do. Some people delusionally and narcissistically think they are in charge of the church. But the Bible says it unmistakably, right here: Jesus is the head of the body! When I was in England last year I was speaking with some pastors in the Anglican church, and I asked how their church is run and governed. They told me that they each lead their own churches, but they report to a bishop who oversees their area. Those bishops ultimately report to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Then I asked, “So the Archbishop of Canterbury is the ultimate leader of your church?” And they said, “No, of course not. The King of England is the leader of the church.” In my ignorance, and in my American “separation of church and state” upbringing, I stepped back in confusion and shock. What, the king is the leader of your church? I had to look it up. It turns out they were right. When the church was founded in the 16th century, the King was called the supreme head of the church. Later, they ended up calling him the supreme governor of the church. I have a lot of respect for our Anglican brothers and sisters, but the king of a country is not the leader of the church. Jesus is the one and only leader, and he governs his church by the power of the Spirit through the authority of his Word which was handed down to us through the apostles and prophets he sent.

8. Jesus is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead. There are several people in the Bible who were raised from the dead. But they were simply resuscitated and went back to a normal kind of life. Jesus wasn’t resuscitated—he was resurrected. He didn’t simply come out of the grave—he conquered the grave. He defeated death. In Revelation 1, Jesus says, “I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to death and Hades.” Jesus not only came back from the dead, he stole the keys to death itself, which means he and he alone has the access and the ability to bring others back from the dead and give them new life, too.

9. Jesus is fully God. Colossians 1:19 says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” In the Old Testament, God’s presence came down to earth in fleeting, temporary intervals. God’s presence rested on Sinai and God’s presence filled the temple. But in Jesus, God’s presence came to earth personally, completely, and permanently. In Colossians 2:9, Paul says, “In Christ, all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form.” When we look at Jesus, we are not looking at a diluted, watered down, second class version deity. We see all the fullness of God. We see the one who has existed for all eternity, who reigns supreme over all the galaxies. We also see the one who humbled himself to take the form of a man, to reveal his heart to us, and to make a pathway to be restored to us. There are thousands of other religions in the world, but no other religion has a doctrine as beautiful, profound, and awe-inspiring as the doctrine of the incarnation—God himself, coming to us. Jesus is fully God. And finally...

10. Jesus is the reconciler of all things. In the ancient world, the term reconciliation was used in two primary ways: at a political level, it was used to refer to peace between nations who were previously at war who decided to lay down their arms, and at a relational level, it was used to refer to a married couple who had planned to divorce, but decided to forsake those plans and instead renew their vows. Where there was once animosity and hostility, separation and disdain, unity has been brought about. That is what reconciliation means. The Bible teaches that our sin, our rebellion against God, not only severed our relationship with him but sent shock waves throughout the entire universe, rupturing all of creation, leaving the world and the human race in a dizzying tailspin of destruction. But Jesus is our reconciliation. This passage says that God has reconciled all things to himself through Jesus by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. When Jesus gave his life on the cross, he took the full weight of sin on himself, received the impact of sin in his own body, and having absorbed all the wrong doing from all of mankind throughout all of history, was able to bring reconciliation, perfect equilibrium, and complete peace. Where no relationship was possible before, now an intimate, eternal relationship is made available, all because of the work of Jesus for us, on the cross!

As I conclude today, I want to remind you of all we have seen about Jesus:

1. Jesus is the image of God.
2. Jesus is the firstborn over all creation.
3. Jesus is the creator of all things
4. Jesus is the one for whom all things were created.
5. Jesus is before all things.
6. Jesus is the one who holds all creation together.
7. Jesus is the head of the body—which is the church.
8. Jesus is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead.
9. Jesus is fully God.
10. Jesus is the reconciler of all things.

In our world there can be debate about lots of different things, but there can be no debate about the greatness and glory of Jesus. He reigns throughout history without a rival. He is the one who alone is worthy of all praise. Listen to some of my favorite words by theologian Frederick Faber:

We can exaggerate about many things, but we can never exaggerate our obligation to Jesus or the compassionate abundance of the love of Jesus to us. All our lives long we might talk of Jesus and yet we should never come to an end of the sweet things that might be said of him. Eternity will not be long enough to learn all he is, or to praise him for all he has done, but then, that matters not, for we shall be always with him, and we desire nothing more.

How do we respond? Here are a few thoughts:

- Surrender—allow him total control over your life
- Hope—find your joy and purpose in him
- Security—delight in the confidence and certainty he provides
- Identity—look to him to know who you are
- Worship—spend your life declaring his inestimable worth and giving him praise