

KNOWING CHRIST



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Mark Jones

Foreword by J. I. Packer



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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To
Katie, Joshua, Thomas, and Matthew



*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both
now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

2 Peter 3:18.



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Foreword by J. I. Packer

The Puritans loved the Bible, and dug into it in depth. Also, they loved the Lord Jesus, who is of course the Bible's focal figure; they circled round him, centred on him, studied minutely all that Scripture had to say about him, and constantly, conscientiously, exalted him in their preaching, praises, and prayers. Mark Jones, an established expert on many aspects of Puritan thought, also loves the Bible and its Christ, and the Puritans as expositors of both; and out of this triune love he has written a memorable unpacking of the truth about the Saviour according to the classic Reformed tradition, and the Puritans supremely. It is a book calculated to enrich our twenty-first-century souls, and one that it is an honour to introduce.

Just here, however, there lies – or maybe I should say we have, or perhaps even we are – a problem. To put it pictorially, souls are small in the modern Western world, and we have less of an appetite for this kind of nourishment than our spiritual health actually requires. We would do well to ask ourselves some questions.

Have we ever, up to now, worked our way through any book that fully displays our Saviour as the brightest lights in the historic Reformed firmament have viewed him? Here is such a book: are we interested?

Have we ever formed the holy habit of contemplating Jesus in solitude, allowing Scripture passage after Scripture passage to show us his many-sided glory and to draw us out in the many-angled adoration that is our proper response? This book will help us form that habit.

Do we cultivate awe in the presence of the one who calls us who believe his brothers and sisters, and who once took the place of each of us under the unimaginably horrific reality of divine retribution for our sins? And do we often make a point of telling ourselves, and telling him, how lost we would be without him? Or are our minds as

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Christians always on other things? The present book will lead us in the right path.

Do we constantly acknowledge the presence of Christ, who through the Holy Spirit keeps his promise to be with us always, whether we cherish his gracious and triumphant companionship or not? This book will help us to possess our possession at this point.

Thank you, Mark Jones; you serve us well. May we all benefit from the wealth of enlivening gospel truth and wisdom that you have put together for us in the pages that follow.

Acknowledgments

Those who have helped with this book, either directly or indirectly, are too many to mention. Some, however, deserve a special word of thanks. Dr Robert Mckelvey has read through each chapter and made many helpful suggestions. He is responsible for any errors that remain in the book! Rev. Garry Vanderveen has also read through each chapter and offered many helpful suggestions. He, too, is responsible for any errors in the book. Jim Wright, Kevin Jones (my father), and Jonathan Tomes also read the book and offered much good advice.

The Banner of Truth Trust has been wonderful to work with. I am especially thankful for the work of Pat Daly and Jonathan Watson, who have also become friends in the process, which is a happy bonus to the publication of this book.

I also want to thank my congregation at Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church for their encouragement as I preached a number of sermons on 'Knowing Christ' during the evening services at Faith. They convinced me that this book needed to be written.

I want to thank my family. My wife has to deal with me when I write a book, and that is often a more difficult 'me' than usual. And my children show me why a book of this nature is actually important. I dedicate this book to Katie, Joshua, Thomas, and Matthew, in the hope that they will continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of their Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Finally, the joy of writing this book has far exceeded the work that I have put into it. Ordinarily, writing books has as many pains as it does joys. Writing this book has, however, been nothing but delight upon delight. I only pray that I have written the truth concerning Jesus Christ, who made this book possible.



Introduction

Think of some of the greatest biblical figures who ever lived: the Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, King David, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, Mary, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. Or what about the great figures of church history: Augustine, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Spurgeon? Or consider the great political and military heroes of world history: Alexander the Great, Constantine the Great, Napoleon, and Winston Churchill. Who are these people, even the greatest saints, compared with Jesus Christ? They are like a grain of sand compared with Mount Everest.

What is Samson's strength compared with that of Jesus, who was raised in power? What is Solomon's wisdom compared with that of the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom are contained? What is Methuselah's age compared with the age of the one who inhabits the places of eternity? What are Paul's visions of heaven compared with the sight of the Lord of heaven? What are Elisha's miracles compared with the incarnation and resurrection of the God-man?

Christians are commanded to know Jesus. Our faith, through which we are saved, is also one that grows. We are as justified at the beginning of our Christian life as we will ever be, but our minds, which assent to the truths of the gospel, grow in the knowledge of the gospel and of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Shortly after becoming a Christian (at around twenty years of age), I read J. I. Packer's book *Knowing God* at a Seattle Mariners' baseball game. The book was riveting – a great deal more so than the baseball game. At the time I knew God, but I still did not know him as I desired. I was, and very much still am, like the man who said to Jesus, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' As I come to know God more, I realize how little I know of him. *Knowing God* had, and continues to have, a great impact on my Christian life. But what about knowing Christ, the Son of God?

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One of the heroes of this book, John Owen, made the point that any writers claiming to love Jesus sincerely must ‘give testimony in a peculiar manner unto his divine Person and glory ...’ He then confessed:

I have thought myself on many accounts obliged to cast my mite into this treasury. And I have chosen so to do, not in a way of controversy (which formerly I have engaged in), but so as, together with the vindication of the truth, to promote the strengthening of the faith of true believers, their edification in the knowledge of it; and to express the experience which they have, or may have, of the power and reality of these things.¹

In line with his sentiments, this book is not polemical (*i.e.* disputational), but it is still theological. It is also (I pray) devotional. This is a book for God’s people, not the academy. This is a book designed to give God’s people a glimpse of the person of Christ. In short, I write that people may know Christ better than they already do, and so love him more. As an incentive for you to read this book, consider Owen’s comment that beholding the glory of Christ is

one of the greatest privileges and advancements that believers are capable of in this world, or that which is to come. It is that whereby they are first gradually conformed unto it, and then fixed in the eternal enjoyment of it. For here in this life, beholding his glory, they are changed or transformed into the likeness of [Christ] (2 Cor. 3:18); and hereafter they shall be ‘forever like him’, because they ‘shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:1–2) ... this is the life and reward of our souls.²

In his exposition of the Psalms, Augustine ‘put off the 119th Psalm’ because, he said, ‘it always exceeded the utmost stretch of my powers’.³ If this is true for perhaps the greatest mind after the apostles the church has ever known, imagine the feeling for anyone writing a book on knowing Christ. Yet the apprehensions – and there have been many! – have been outweighed by the delights. Such joys are aroused by the moving words of James Allen Francis (1864–1928) from a sermon, ‘Arise, Sir Knight’:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held

an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today He stands as the central figure of the human race. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as has this one solitary life.⁴

Not many books have been written on knowing Christ. This does not mean that there is a lack of material on the subject: there is a great deal of excellent work on the person and work of Christ, and there always will be until Christ returns. Thus, as I tackle this difficult yet wondrous task, I write standing on the shoulders of many great theologians in the history of the church. For example, readers will quickly note my indebtedness to the Puritans especially, and to a few of them in particular. Far more skilfully than any other men in church history thus far, they were able to express rich theology from eminently pastoral hearts. They were the consummate pastor-theologians. They sought in their writings to ‘preach’ Christ in a way that minds could clearly understand and by which hearts would be powerfully moved. The goal of this book, then, is to look at the person of Christ and give readers – particularly those in the church – a reason to love him more. We can only love him more by knowing him better – which takes us beyond conceptual to relational knowledge. ‘To know’ in the Bible can very often mean to have a concern about something that involves the understanding of the mind, the movement of the will, and the application of the heart. ‘To know’ means ‘to know with particular interest’ or ‘to set one’s affections upon’. Let us then approach this study with wide-open hearts longing to know Christ who first knew us.



Christ's Declaration

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

Who is Jesus?

There exists no more important question than the one Jesus asked his disciples, 'But who do you say that I am?' (Matt. 16:15). No query has been more hotly debated, completely or partially misunderstood, ignored to one's peril, and answered correctly to one's great gain. The right answer to this question is simple enough to save a child, and at the same time complex enough to keep theologians busy for all eternity. If eternal life means knowing Jesus Christ (John 17:3), we cannot afford to be ignorant about the one who is 'chiefest among ten thousand' (Song of Sol. 5:10, KJV).

Peter confessed Jesus to be 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). John spoke of Jesus as 'the Word' who became flesh (John 1:14). Paul described Jesus not only as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col. 1:15), but also as 'the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5). Similarly, the author of Hebrews identified Jesus both as 'the radiance of the glory of God' (Heb. 1:3) and as the one who partook of flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14). After touching Christ, Thomas memorably claimed Jesus to be his 'Lord' and his 'God' (John 20:28). In the Old Testament, Isaiah had a vision of Christ (see John 12:41), following which he called him 'the King, the LORD of hosts' (Isa. 6:5); later, however, he also called this king the servant of the Lord who had 'no beauty that we should desire him' (Isa. 53:2).

Jesus also said much about himself. In John's Gospel, home of the well-known 'I am' sayings, Jesus refers to himself as the 'bread of life'

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(John 6:48), ‘the light of the world’ (8:12), ‘the door’ (10:9), ‘the good shepherd’ (10:11), ‘the resurrection and the life’ (11:25), ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (14:6), and ‘the true vine’ (15:1). In summary, the Saviour testifies, ‘I am’ (8:58), echoing the self-disclosure of the eternal God (Exod. 3:14).

Elsewhere, the Scriptures call him teacher (Mark 1:27), prophet (Matt. 21:11), Son of David (Matt. 9:27), servant (Matt. 12:18), Son of Man (Matt. 12:8), Lord (Matt. 14:30), Lamb of God (John 1:36), Holy One of God (John 6:69), the beginning (Col. 1:18), high priest (Heb. 5:1–10), living one (Rev. 1:18), deliverer (Rom. 11:26), and the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16).

Considering that the world itself could ‘not contain the books that would be written’ about all that Jesus did (John 21:25), we confidently testify that the descriptions and names of Christ above barely scratch the surface. Indeed, as John tells us, Christ ‘has a name written that no one knows but himself’ (Rev. 19:12). There is much about Christ that we will learn in the future.

Our chief desire

Few people this side of eternity can claim to have known Jesus as the Apostle Paul did. Yet as a man not outside of Christ but ‘in Christ’, Paul considered everything as ‘dung’ in comparison with knowing Jesus. Indeed, as a man sometimes privy to direct revelation from God, Paul’s great desire on earth was ‘that I may know him’ (Phil. 3:10). This desire of Paul’s was a direct answer to Christ’s prayer for all his people in John 17:3 – that the Father would give his people eternal life, which is to know God and his Son, who was sent into the world to save sinners. There is little doubt that almost all Christians are content to have won Christ and thus to have received the gift of eternal life. But how many are equally concerned to know him? How often we cut Jesus in half, wishing to know that we are saved and that all is well with our destiny, but forgetting that to be truly saved means we must truly know him! On the gravestone of the Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford (d. 1661), we read of his passion to know Christ:

True godliness adorned his name,
He did converse with things above,

Acquainted with Emmanuel's love ...
Most constantly he did contend
Until his time was at an end.
Then he won to the full fruition
Of that which he had seen in vision.¹

Such words describing him at death correspond well with what he wrote in life in his Letters:

Put the beauty of ten thousand thousand worlds of paradises, like the Garden of Eden, in one. Put all trees, all flowers, all smells, all colours, all tastes, all joys, all sweetness, all loveliness, in one. Oh, what a fair and excellent thing would that be! And yet it would be less to that fair and dearest Well-beloved, Christ, than one drop of rain to the whole seas, rivers, lakes, and fountains of ten thousand earths.²

Put all the pleasures of life such as family, job, recreation, music, sports, entertainment, cuisine, and technology in one. Oh, what excellent joys they are! Yet such joys pale in comparison with the delight of knowing Jesus and basking in communion with his person, not just his work! Is Christ the 'drop of rain' or is he the 'whole seas, rivers, lakes, and fountains of ten thousand earths'?

A motivation

All of us share guilt in our sinful refusal to know Christ better. Such guilt cannot, however, rectify this seemingly universal problem in the church; we must pursue other solutions, even apart from the significant fact that our loving Father forgives our lack of love and knowledge of him and his Son.

One compelling yet not immediately obvious solution involves turning our thinking for a moment on Christ. Of all the human desires that he retained as he entered his glorified state in heaven, few exceed his desire to know his people. Jesus, the Lord of glory, supremely satisfied in the love of the Father, Holy Spirit, and elect angels, remains unsatisfied if he cannot know, love, and ultimately be with his people. How can a good husband enjoy life apart from being together with his wife?

As Jesus uttered his high-priestly prayer in John 17, he made a most remarkable statement: 'Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that

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you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world' (17:24).

In his heavenly glory, Christ meditates upon his people. He desires not only to know us, but also to be with us. We must always remember that when he calls one of his loved ones home to himself, he has gained more than we have lost in the death of our loved one. He desires to be with us because he knows us, and that demands that one day he will call us home to be with him. Ultimately, this happens not because of something such as a disease or fatal accident, but rather because the Father has answered the prayer of his Son. There is for Christ something lovely, enticing, and satisfying in loving poor, sinful creatures as we are, who have nothing in us to commend ourselves, except that we belong to him.

Now, if this much remains true of Christ, are we somehow exempt from knowing Christ in the confident hope that we will one day be with him? Consider the words of the psalmist in Psalm 45: aware that the king desires us in our beauty (45:11), we cannot help but aspire to know the one who is the 'most handsome of the sons of men', who has grace poured upon his lips, and is anointed with 'the oil of gladness beyond [his] companions' (45:2, 7).

Most of us are constantly faced by the reality that there are many things we cannot afford in this world. We often mightily resist this fact, sometimes even by 'affording' what we cannot pay for (*i.e.* going into debt). There is, however, only one eternally significant thing that we cannot afford: namely, to remain ignorant of our beautiful Saviour. We must know Christ, the Son of the living God.

Fortunately for Christians, Jesus, who meditates upon his people, has taken the initiative by praying to his Father that we might know him. If we belong to him, we must out of necessity be those who will know him: 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me' (John 10:14).

'That they may know'

If eternal life means knowing God and his Son, Jesus Christ, then the child of God must understand what it means to 'know' him. Knowing him is apprehending his person and works as revealed in the Scriptures. This involves not only an understanding of who he

is, but also a fuller knowledge of his mind and will. Our faith and obedience fix themselves on the person of Christ as we come more and more to think his thoughts after him and perform his will in subjection to him.

When asked by one of the religious scribes which was the most important commandment, Jesus answered: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' (Mark 12:28–30). Christ essentially quoted Deuteronomy 6:4–5, thus showing that the requirement for God's people has always been the same, and indeed will always be the same, even into eternity. To love the Lord our God also involves loving the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking at the requirements of the '*Shema*' ('Hear!', Deut. 6:4) helps us to understand what it means to know Jesus.

The one who answered that question also happened to be the one who, unlike any other person since the Fall, knew what it was to love God perfectly with all of his being. Jesus had as his one duty on earth to love his Father. While on earth, he did not merely avoid sinning, but he also recognized the Father's presence with him and affirmed that he 'always' did what was pleasing to God (John 8:29). In fact, Jesus kept God's commandments in order to abide in his Father's love (John 15:10). If he had shrunk back even once as the Son, his Father would have had no pleasure in him (Heb. 10:38).

Just as Christ said to his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15), so the Father could say the same to Christ. He kept his Father's commandments because he loved him. The *Shema* was Christ's great confession. His heart, soul, mind, and strength were in perfect unison as he loved his Father with an intense faultlessness that should humble us to the very core of our being.

The Scriptures are clear that our heart remains central in loving God and Christ. We must 'keep [our] heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life' (Prov. 4:23). Those who are good will have goodness stored up in their hearts (Luke 6:45). God requires this purity of heart of those who love and worship Jesus (Psa. 24:4). Indeed, only these pure ones will see God in the face of Christ (Matt. 5:8; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6), whether in this life by faith or in the life to come by sight (1 John 3:2–3).

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We are to love Jesus not only with all our heart, but also with all our soul (synonymous with 'spirit'). In our devotion to Christ, our soul is responsible for our highest spiritual exercises. It is the seat of our emotional activity. Our Saviour's obedience was nowhere tested more than in the Garden of Gethsemane, where his soul was 'very sorrowful, even to death' (Matt. 26:38). The soul expresses the sorrow and joy that inevitably accompany the life of faith (Psa. 42; 32:2). Thus, though we cannot press the distinction too far, it appears that the 'heart' relates to the will and the 'soul' to the emotions. To know Christ involves our will and emotions.

To love Jesus with our whole mind involves the seat of our intellectual life. However, this also means loving him with the right disposition and attitude that place our intellect in submission to Christ's revelation about himself, not only by thinking about him, but also by subjecting our thinking to his revelation. Moreover, because of our finiteness (the fact that we are limited), we shall never reach a point where we have no need to learn more about Jesus. God gave the 'servant' of Isaiah 50:4 (that is, Jesus) 'the tongue of those who are taught'. 'Morning by morning' God awakened the servant to teach him. The servant's love for God meant he applied not only his heart and soul, but also his mind. If it was necessary for Jesus to receive instruction so that he could love God with his mind, how much more is it necessary for us as his people?

Loving Jesus with all our 'strength' brings together all of the various elements discussed so far. Our heart, soul, and mind remain distinct in the words of Christ, but in reality they should not be over-analysed to the point that we think of them as three separate parts of who we are. To love God with all of our strength, then, is to do so with all of our being, which involves the whole person, both body and soul. This explains why, in Mark 12:30, Christ uses the word 'all' with each of these four elements. Moreover, all four terms start with the Greek preposition *ex*, (from/out of) thus highlighting that we love God not only *with* our whole heart, but also *from* our whole heart.

Certainly no one disputes that Christ loves his Father with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. However, not all Christians are persuaded that they are capable of doing the same. Yet, as Augustine famously noted, God gives what he commands and so commands whatever he desires.³

In the strength of the Spirit, Christians are able to love their Saviour with all of their being. The psalmist writes: 'Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart' (119:34). Keeping the law with the 'whole heart' may be understood legally or evangelically. In a legal sense, only Christ loved God with his whole heart because the law requires perfect conformity, which we are unable to give. Nonetheless, in an evangelical sense, God, out of his love and mercy in Christ, enables us to love him with our whole heart. Our love is undoubtedly imperfect, but God, in his kindness to his children, accepts a sincere love as the fulfilment of our duty to love him with our 'whole heart'. As we read in Romans 8:4, this occurs 'in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk ... according to the Spirit'.

This should be a great source of encouragement for us. Why? First, because our hope exists ultimately in Jesus, who fulfilled this command perfectly in our place. We do not have to stand before God with only an imperfect love as our hope for entering heaven. Second, because of our union with Jesus, what is true of him becomes true of us. God enables us to obey this command and to love him and his Son, albeit imperfectly, with the totality of our being so that he may delight in the love he receives from his people.

What a joy to know that Christ knows, loves, and meditates upon us with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength! This leaves us in the glorious position of being able to know, love, and meditate upon Christ with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In this way, God is pleased that we want to know more of Christ.



Christ's Dignity

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And 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, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent (Col. 1:15–18).

For him

Jesus did not come into the world for us: we came into the world for Jesus. We must not quickly skim over these words. They deserve our deepest meditation and most prayerful consideration.

Jesus is the reason for God's creating and redeeming activity. The decision for the Son to become flesh was not simply God's response to his foresight of the Fall. That Jesus should enter the world as the Redeemer because of man's sin ends up subjecting Christ to us, when in fact we must be subject to him in all things. Jesus is not an accidental identity, some sort of 'Plan B' God concocted because things with Adam would not work out.

The decree for the God-man occurred as part of God's original eternal plan and was foundational to his appointment of Christ as Redeemer and his selection of a people for himself: all things, including his people, were created for him (Col. 1:16). Redemption, which we have only through Christ, is still inferior compared with the worth and glory of his person. After all, 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15). The Puritan Stephen Charnock rightly claimed that there is 'something in Christ more excellent and comely than the office of a Saviour; the greatness of his person is more

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excellent than the salvation procured by his death'.¹ The glory of his person outweighs even the glory of his work on our behalf. However, who he is enabled him to do what no man is capable of: die in the place of a multitude of sinners. We praise him first for who he is and then for what he accomplished.

As the glorious one, Christ is the goal of all things. He is the pre-eminent one who is Lord over all (1 Cor. 8:6). Psalm 8 provides a perfect example of the subjection of all things, even creation, to the man Christ Jesus. In the first instance, the psalm refers to David as Israel's king and representative of the new humanity (*e.g.* compare 1 Chron. 17:16 with Psa. 8:4; 1 Chron. 17:20–24 with Psa. 8:1, 9; and Psa. 21:5 with Psa. 8:5). Written in the context of this history of redemption, Psalm 8 should also be read with Christ in view.

Related to the perfection of Christ, the goal of man (Psa. 8:4–6), as anticipated in 1 Corinthians 15:44–49, entails his rising out of a state that is lower than that of the angels. Now man will judge the angels (1 Cor. 6:3). In the New Testament, portions of Psalm 8 are quoted or referred to a number of times. The two key passages are Hebrews 2 and 1 Corinthians 15. The writer of Hebrews argues that Psalm 8 does not yet fully apply to man (see Heb. 2:8). Therefore, Hebrews 2:5–8 does not refer to Christ, but to David as the representative of the new humanity. This makes the 'but' at the beginning of Hebrews 2:9 decisive: 'But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death ...' Where David, as representative of the new humanity, failed, miserably and absolutely, Christ has succeeded vicariously for us all, especially in his death as the victorious one.

Similarly, consider 1 Corinthians 15:25–27: 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection", it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.' In verse 27, Paul's use of Psalm 8 points to an explicit focus on Christ. His exaltation to God's right hand (Rev. 4–5) reveals the true humanity of Christ and the fulfilment of this psalm. Though our Lord was for a little while lower than the angels, he is now again supreme in all the universe of men and angels (Heb. 1:1–3). The context of Hebrews 1 proves unequivocally that the incarnate Christ is far superior to

the angels, both in his messianic divinity (Heb. 1) and in his perfect humanity (Heb. 2).

The resurrection of Jesus did not function as an isolated occurrence, as though a man were simply to rise from the dead. His resurrection ushered in a new creation of which Jesus is described as the 'firstborn' or the 'firstfruits' from the dead (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20; Col. 1:18). As the 'firstborn from the dead', Christ's dignity is in view. Jesus acted as the pioneer, the inaugurator, who opened up the way for the resurrection of all his people. Without his rising from the dead, no one will rise. All resurrections to life depend on his resurrection.

Thus in Christ all things hold together (Col. 1:17). Christ rules creation, the angels, the devil, the elect, the entire humanity – all things. God's purpose, tragically unfulfilled in Adam and David, reaches its consummation and fulfilment in his Son; but that was always the purpose for the one who 'is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb. 1:3a). Little wonder that Jesus receives the strongest affection of love from his heavenly Father and his people. He is supreme in all created reality – the wonderful Creator and Redeemer (John 3:35–36).

For the Father's delight

The incarnate Son is the primary object of the Father's love. The Father loves all things according to the degree of loveliness in them. Christ's attractiveness cannot be compared to that of any created person. Even before the incarnation, the Father spoke of the prospect of Jesus the God-man: 'Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights' (Isa. 42:1). After the incarnation, the Father's delight was renewed at Christ's baptism (Matt. 3:17) and transfiguration (Matt. 17:5).

The Father's words were spoken, first, for the sake of his Son, in order that Jesus, during his earthly ministry, should be constantly assured of his Father's love. Second, they were uttered for our sakes, in order that God might impress upon his people his love for his Son. This seems to be a constant refrain in Christ's earthly ministry: 'The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand' (John 3:35; see also 5:20). Not the Father only but Jesus himself also desires and prays that believers will know the love the Father has for the Son (John 17:23, 26).

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All of the love that proceeds from the Father to the church must come through Christ. Christ does not add to the Father's love for us; he merely draws it out. However, the Father's love for the Son does not simply pass through him, like water through a sieve. There is, rather, an everlasting flow of divine grace communicated to Jesus that perpetually flows from his head down onto his body (the church), because the Father loves Jesus (and thus his people) as the apple of his eye.

Imitating the Father

Believers should always remember that nothing makes us more like the Father than our love for his Son. If the Son in his dignity is the principal object of the Father's love, surely our souls must delight similarly in the Chosen One. There is a solemn warning to those (in the church) regarding their lack of love for Christ: 'If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed' (1 Cor. 16:22).

God, who always takes the initiative in saving sinners, bestows upon us many blessings, some of which we may take for granted. 'Every spiritual blessing' (Eph. 1:3) includes the ability and desire in our human nature to fix our love upon God and Christ. In order to love things and persons unseen, such as the Lord Jesus, we require a supernatural gift (*i.e.* faith). Without faith, we cannot please God by loving his Son. The soul destitute of faith sees 'no form or majesty' in Christ. There is 'no beauty' in Christ's person to the faithless (Isa. 53:2). To the faithful, however, love for Christ's person brings with it transforming and powerful affections. As John Owen affirms:

This is that person whose loveliness and beauty all the angels of God, all the holy ones above, do eternally admire and adore ... This is he who is the joy, the delight, the love, the glory of the church below ... This is he who is the Desire of all nations ... The mutual intercourse on this ground of love between Christ and the church, is the life and soul of the whole creation; for on the account hereof all things consist in him.²

This is Christ's dignity: that he should be the peculiar object of the love of the Father as well as the chief object of the love of the church and elect angels. All things were created for him.

Upheld by the plan of redemption

The consideration of the beauty of Christ's person prepares us to wonder in amazement at the plan of redemption enacted in eternity between the persons of the Godhead. Imagine if God had asked men and angels to come up with the plan of redemption. A sinner could not make restitution to God for his sins, and neither could a mere sinless man accomplish such for many sinners. Likewise, angels could not take the place of humans in offering up satisfaction. Before a holy God, would any suggest that he merely pardon sinners without satisfaction? We, of course, know how the story goes. Without God's disclosure of his plan to redeem sinners, angels and men could have spent an eternity planning redemption, but ultimately would have come up short with any remedy to satisfy God's requirements.

Imagine, though, that their thoughts could have reached so high as to suggest that the eternal Son of God assume a human nature and humble himself even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8). Consider the thought that the Son, eternally loved by the Father, should become a curse and thus be crushed under the wrath of the Father. Angels and men would have trembled in terror to propose such a plan if God had not first disclosed it. As Thomas Goodwin said, 'so great a plan could not have been hatched in the womb of any created understanding'.³

The Father might have wished to sacrifice anything for us except his Son; and the very thought of Jesus upon a cross could easily have been buried in eternal silence. But once the Father had covenanted with the Son in eternity to effect such a plan of redemption, the Father knew that this plan would also involve the glorifying of his servant (Isa. 49:1–12; 53:12; Phil. 2:11). Upon the Son's agreement to act as the mediator of God's elect, the whole Trinity rejoiced as they consented to the plan of salvation. These three persons, all undertaking to do their work, aimed to do one thing: bring glory to the Son of God.

Ironically, the dignity of Christ was upheld through the ignominy he suffered. In other words, Christ of necessity travelled the path of humiliation as the incarnate, tempted, suffering, dying Servant in order to manifest his dignity as our risen, ascended, exalted Redeemer in glory. It is no wonder, then, that within the context of betrayal before his death, Jesus could say: 'Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him' (John 13:31). It was when he was despised

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and rejected of men that his true majesty and glory were manifested (Isa. 53).

Why the Son?

Cur Deus homo? Why did God become man? Anselm of Canterbury's answer to that question (*i.e.*, to make satisfaction for sin) has been hugely influential upon Christian thinking for the last thousand years. More specifically, though, why did the Son of God – rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit – become man?

The first, and most basic, reason has reference to our doctrine of the Trinity. The titles by which we distinguish the persons of the Trinity should be preserved and kept distinct. The Son of God, by virtue of his eternal title, is more appropriately also suited to be the Son of Man and the Son of a woman. It would be inappropriate for there to be two persons within the Trinity who bear the title 'Son'. If the Father, for example, had become incarnate, he would then have been both the Father and the Son of a father (*i.e.* Joseph).

Second, the position of the Son as the 'middle person' in the order of the three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) bore the best resemblance to the work that was to be effected on our behalf in the plan of redemption. The Son, who is between the Father and the Spirit, was to be the mediator between God and men.

Third, the Son was most particularly chosen to be mediator because one of the main reasons for his mediation involves the adoption of his people into the family of God (Eph. 1:5). The Son conveys sonship upon his people because of his union with them (Gal. 4:4–5). It is who he is, not just what he does, that makes us children of God. He who is the Son, and is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb. 2:11), makes us sons of God because of his work as the Son of God.

Finally, the offices of the mediator – namely, prophet, priest, and king – necessitated that the Son of God take on the work of mediation. The calling to the office of priest belonged exclusively to the eldest son in the family. As an intercessory priest the Son is uniquely able to approach the Father, which is a function grounded both in ontology (his natural subsistence) and in economy (Christ's work of mediation). As a prophet, the Son is especially fit to be mediator because he is the word and wisdom of the Father (John

1:18; Heb. 1:1). As king, there is none so fit as the heir. No one is better suited to have a kingdom committed to him than God's Son.

Thus the plan of redemption depended not in the first place upon the work that Jesus would perform, but principally upon who he is. Who he is – the eternal Son of God – provided the basis for what he would do. The decision of God to create, redeem, and glorify was ultimately a decision of God to glorify the Son.

God the Father has displayed his eternal wisdom by sending his eternal, divine Son, who is also appointed and adopted as his messianic Son (Heb. 1:2–8). Nothing else in all our theology and learning can compare to this wondrous truth (1 Cor. 1:21–30; cf. Rom. 11:33–36).

Conclusion

There are few places in the Scriptures where the glories of Christ are more clearly set forth than in Colossians 1. Verses 15–20 ought to be stamped firmly upon our minds, memorized, etched into our spiritual DNA, and daily applied. If these words cannot excite us to live for Christ, put us firmly in our place, cause us to desire to know Jesus better, and stir preachers to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ, then we have arrived at the peak of God's revelation concerning his Son while failing to see the King in his beauty (Isa. 33:17). And that is the last place we want to be.

There is, however, an alternative:

I counsel you to think highly of Christ, and of free, free grace, more than you did before: for I know that Christ is not known amongst us. I think that I see more of Christ than ever I saw; and yet I see but little of what may be seen. Oh, that he would draw by the curtains, and that the King would come out of his gallery and his palace, that I might see him! Christ's love is young glory and young heaven; it would soften hell's pain to be filled with it ... Oh, what price can be given for him! Angels cannot weigh him. Oh, his weight, his worth, his sweetness, his over-passing beauty ... If ten thousand worlds of angels were created, they might all tire themselves in wondering at his beauty ... Oh, that I could [come near] to kiss his feet, to hear his voice, to feel the smell of his ointments! But oh, alas, I have little, little of him! Yet I long for more.⁴



The Banner of Truth Trust originated in 1957 in London. The founders believed that much of the best literature of historic Christianity had been allowed to fall into oblivion and that, under God, its recovery could well lead not only to a strengthening of the church, but to true revival.

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