

MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

by Ray C. Stedman

Charles Wesley's wonderful phrase from "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing,"

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity

captures the central truth of our Christian faith. Since the appearance of Jesus on this earth two thousand years ago, Christians have believed that the man called Jesus of Nazareth is and was God the Creator; that the eternal Son dwelt in a human body, thus "veiled in flesh the Godhead see." Every other doctrine of Christianity flows out of that great truth. If it be denied, one has denied the heart of Christian faith and has embraced heresy.

Recently I attended a conference of two hundred and fifty theologians, pastors and Christian leaders in Chicago. We met to restate in contemporary terms, and apply to the problems of today, the great truths of the Christian faith. The first paper delivered was on "The Living God." It was a marvelous statement of this central truth of all: that Jesus Christ is God. The paper developed the concept of the Trinity: that God does not exist as a single individual, but there are three persons who act together as one in the Godhead. The skeptics have pointed out that nowhere in Scripture can be found a flat-out statement that God exists in three persons and thus many claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is not really taught in the Bible. But what we do find in Scripture are passages where both the Son and the Spirit are described in terms that can only be applied to God himself. It is such a passage as this that we come to today in our studies in the letter to the Colossians. Here are the dramatic words of the apostle Paul:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

That plainly states what Charles Wesley has captured in his phrase, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see." Paul brings this truth boldly to the Colossian believers for two basic reasons. As we have already seen in this letter, he is very concerned that these new Christians begin to grow up. They must not remain immature believers---born again, but still filled with all the frailty and foolishness of the flesh. They must grow up and become vigorous, exemplary, compassionate Christians, forsaking their apathy and hostility and becoming whole people. Paul is well aware that they are in danger of losing their clear vision of Christ. That was the nature of the Colossian heresy which attacked the person of Jesus. They were in danger, therefore, of losing a proper sense of the profound power and eminence of Jesus Christ in their own world.

Many Christians are like this today. Many true believers appear to have little sense that Jesus is active in their lives here and now. Some churches seem to treat Jesus as the British treat their monarch: they strip him or her of all political power, and do not expect the sovereign to do anything at all except to look good. They treat their monarchs with great respect and reverence, and pay much lip service, but they really do not expect anything from them. That is the way Christians all too often treat the Lord Jesus. This passage calls us back to face the fact of who Jesus is: simply, he is in charge of the universe!

The second reason why Paul includes this is his own unforgettable experience on the Damascus Road. As young Saul of Tarsus he believed that Jesus of Nazareth was only a tub-thumping rabble-rouser who was causing a great deal of trouble in Israel. Saul considered him nothing more than a deliberate blasphemer who was claiming things about himself for which he ought to be put to death. As an ardent Pharisee Saul hated the name of Jesus. Then came the experience on the Damascus Road. There, in the dust of the road, surrounded by a blinding light of glory, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In amazement and wonder he cried out, "Who are you, Lord?" and in the passage we are looking at today, Paul states the answer he found to his own question: "He," says the apostle, "is the image of the invisible God, the Creator of all things." That Damascus event is what changed Paul's life.

This passage is a truly astounding claim. In these brief phrases the apostle points out Christ's nature as God, his work as Creator, and his continuing relationship to the worlds that he has made. Let us look in more detail at such claims. What does it mean that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God?" I have often described the little boy who was drawing pictures on the floor one day as his mother was working. She said to him, "What are you drawing?" He said, "I'm drawing a picture of God." "But no one knows what God looks like," she said. "They will when I get through!" the boy replied.

There is a rather profound truth in that story when it is applied to Jesus. It is as though that little baby lying in the manger in Bethlehem is a picture being drawn for us. It would be proper to say of that baby that when he finishes his life's work, men will know what God is like. That is what Jesus did. Today, if you come to Jesus, you discover that in a remarkable way you have come also into the presence of God; you know God personally and intimately. That has always been the central claim of Christian conversion.

This sentence also includes a second phrase that is very descriptive: "The firstborn of all creation." What does that mean? Here is where many of the cults have had a heyday. Jehovah's Witnesses say that this phrase proves that Jesus was a created being and not God. That is the claim of several other cults as well. They say that "firstborn of all creation" means that Jesus is the one born first, i. e. the first one to be created. It is true that in Greek the word that is translated here "firstborn" is used of Jesus himself in the Bethlehem story. Luke, chapter 2, says that Mary brought forth her "firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger." Thus, say the cults, the word "firstborn" clearly implies that Jesus is the first of several children born to Mary. Scripture reveals there were other children born to her: the brothers and sisters of Jesus who would come later. Used in that sense, of course, it would mean that Jesus is the first created being. Thus, there is some sense to that argument.

But (and this is the important point) there are other meanings of the word. It is most frequently translated "firstborn" in the sense of heir, the owner, the possessor of creation. This is certainly the meaning it conveys here. I found myself recently standing next to Dr. Carl Henry, whom I regard as the greatest theologian alive today. Since I knew I would be preaching on this passage I took the occasion to ask him how he would translate this phrase. This was his answer: "It should be translated," he said, "'the Primeval Creator of all created things.'" Jesus is the one who possesses, as heir or owner, all other things.

This sense of the firstborn as owner or possessor is a concept that is strongly supported in the Old Testament. Esau, one of the twin sons of Isaac, was born first, therefore he had the right of the firstborn to inherit the estate of his father. But through a strange series of events, Jacob, the other twin, tricked his father into conferring that blessing upon him. He stole from Esau, by trickery, the right of firstborn. Yet that act was honored of God. The right to be firstborn was transferred from Esau to Jacob, and Jacob became the heir of the promises of God to Isaac. Thus, we must understand that the one born first is not necessarily the "firstborn."

Jacob himself later had sons, one of whom was Joseph, who in turn had two sons whom he named Manasseh and Ephraim. At the end of his life, Jacob went down to Egypt to visit his son Joseph, and Joseph brought his two boys before him, Manasseh, the firstborn, and Ephraim, the younger. Joseph placed Manasseh under Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim under his left hand, so that Manasseh would receive the blessing of the firstborn. But Jacob did a very unusual thing. We are not told why, but for some strange reason, known only to God and himself perhaps, Jacob crossed his hands and laid his left hand on Manasseh, the one born first, and his right hand upon Ephraim. Thus, Ephraim became the "firstborn," though he was not the one born first. By means of a cross the right of the firstborn was transferred to the younger son!

This is an example of how marvelously Scripture handles events. There is significance in even the slightest details. Thus, we may rightly apply this title to Jesus, as not the one born first of all creation, but the Owner, the Possessor, of creation.

Paul goes on to describe the work of Jesus.

"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for

him."

That verse clearly reveals that Jesus could not be part of God's creation, for all created things---all created things---were created by him. He is, then, not a part of that "all." Notice the words, "by him" and "for him." He was the agent of creation and the purpose of it as well. The whole of the cosmos was made for him! This is what Paul also declares in that great Christological passage in Philippians. The time is coming when at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The realistic thing to do today is to live with that knowledge in our world, remembering that Jesus not only created all things but he is also the reason for it all.

Creation, of course, involves the work of the whole Trinity. It is proper to say that the Father willed there should be a creation. All the initiatory movements of history begin with the Father. He willed it. The Son, then, planned it. He programmed it and designed it, even to its slightest detail as its Architect and Designer. The Spirit is the executor: He carried it out. He made it actually appear, according to the plan and program of the Son.

A familiar incident in the gospel of John, the first miracle of Jesus, illustrates this. At the wedding feast in Cana the wine ran out and his mother said to him simply, "They have no more wine. " She apparently leaves it up to Jesus. He makes very clear in his response to her that he is not going to act because she asked him to. He replies, "Woman, what have I to do with you?" That is not uttered unkindly. He is simply declaring that her request is not the motive for his actions. But he does act. And, as he declared in many places, he acts only because the Father tells him to. Thus the initiation of this act is from the Father. The Father willed that when his Son appeared on earth there would be miracles that would accompany his appearance to support his claims and establish his credentials among the sons of men.

Immediately our Lord began to plan the miracle. He said to the servants, "Fill these six empty jars with water." The servants did so. It must have taken fifteen or twenty minutes at least to fill those great thirty-gallon jars with water. Our Lord waited until they did. Then, without a word---I always appreciate this: there is no fanfare, no ostentation, no magic---without a word of command the water became wine. The Spirit had changed the water into the finest of wine.

C.S. Lewis has a comment on this that is pertinent to our study:

If we open such books as Grimm's Fairy Tales or the Italian epics, we find ourselves in a world of miracles so diverse that they can hardly be classified. Beasts turn into men and men into beasts or trees. Trees talk, ships become goddesses, and a magic ring can cause tables richly spread with food to appear in solitary places. Now if such things really happened, they would, I suppose, show that nature was being invaded. But they would show that she was being invaded by an alien power. The fitness of the Christian miracles, and their difference from these mythological miracles, lies in the fact that they show an invasion by a power which is not alien. They are what might be expected to happen when nature is invaded, not simply by a god, but by the God of nature, by a power which is outside nature's jurisdiction, not as a foreigner but as a Sovereign. They proclaim that he who has come is not merely a king but the King---nature's King and ours!

Surely that is what the apostle Paul is proclaiming here when he says that Jesus is the "creator of all things...things were made by him."

Now, as this verse goes on to say, that includes more than merely the material universe around us: more than stars, galaxies, superstars, planets, and solar systems, or even trees, grass, mountains and seas. It includes the earth, Paul says, but also heaven. Both the visible and the invisible. It would also include all forces. Electricity was invented by Jesus (not as a man, but as the Eternal Son) before the creation of the world. It would include radiation, magnetism, and the peculiar and mysterious dance of electrons from one level of energy to another within the atom that makes light. All this was the design of the Eternal Son.

But not only forces, but concepts and attitudes as well: grace, mercy, truth, love, and life itself. Jesus is the

originator of all life. And, as Paul specifies here, a whole pantheon of invisible beings (and their visible counterparts in earthly government): "thrones and rulers and powers and authorities"---all were created by him.

The Colossian heresy here becomes visible in our modern experience as well. The Colossians began to believe, because of the Greek teachers among them, that the universe consisted of a "hierarchy of angels." One must begin down at the bottom, with raunchy, unpleasant angels, and work one's way up through the whole hierarchy to the good angels and, finally, to God. From that idea has come the eastern concept of reincarnation for that too was part of the Colossian heresy.

We find a counterpart today, not only in the theory of reincarnation, but also in horoscopes and astrology---the idea of stars influencing and governing our lives. The claim that Transcendental Meditation is the means of getting in touch with invisible beings is another example. We are told that there are Astral Teachers and Divine Masters who appear from time to time to impart degrees of knowledge to the human race. Gradually, we are told, this is to result, after centuries and centuries of progress, in our being lost in the Divine presence. All this is nothing new. It is very old, but it is also new, appearing again and again in history. This is what the apostle labors to correct. He is telling the Colossians, "Jesus is above all angels. You are freed from bondage to these lesser beings when you see the true authority and power of your risen Lord."

Bishop Lightfoot, who wrote in the last century, captures this well in a paraphrase of Paul's words:

Paul is saying, "You dispute much about the successive grades of angels. You distinguish each grade by its special title. You can tell how each order was generated from the preceding. You assign to each its proper degree of worship. Meanwhile you have ignored and have degraded Christ. I tell you it is not so. He is first and foremost, Lord of heaven and earth, far above all thrones or dominations, all principdoms or powers; far above every dignity and every potentate---whether earthly or heavenly, whether angel or demon or man--- that evokes your reverence or excites your fear."

That is the supremacy of our Lord in his own world! Nothing can make us more confident and enable us to speak boldly of our faith than to bear in mind the tremendous truth that Jesus is Lord. He is in charge of all life. Nothing can happen in history or in space without his permission. He rules over the present age.

But creation is not only by him, it is also for him. It all operates for his honor and glory. A few decades ago Albert Einstein announced to the world a new view of space. He declared that space is not, as we had thought for centuries, a linear concept, extending outward in a straight line, but that it was curved upon itself. This is what this passage is proclaiming as well. Though creation originated with the Eternal Son---perhaps in a "Big Bang"---it also converges again toward him in a great concentric cosmic cycle. Thus it is totally under his control. He is the reason why all things have been made. Eventually all the cosmos and all the events of history will find their place in the great purpose of the Father to honor and glorify the Son.

Verse 17 declares, in two marvelous phrases, just how Jesus controls space and history:

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

"He is before all things," means he is outside his own creation; he was there first. This describes his eternity as the Son of God. As C.S. Lewis has pointed out, he is over creation as a King and a Sovereign, not subject to it or part of it, but intimately related to it.

When Paul uses the phrase, "all things by him hold together," he is speaking of our Lord's power to sustain and to prevent breakdown. The scientists who work on the great linear accelerator at Stanford University, trying to smash the atom apart, know that it takes incredible power. Years ago I was taken to see the predecessor to today's linear accelerator, a relatively small instrument. The professor who took me through showed me the power source for it. I have never forgotten what he said: "The power to operate this instrument," he said, "is equivalent to all the electricity it takes to run the city of San Francisco." Yet that was a very small instrument.

Something holds the atom together with enormous, incredible power. That power, according to the Word of God (both here in Colossians and in the letter to the Hebrews) is vested in Jesus. He has the authority to rule as Sovereign. He has the power to sustain, because he is the Eternal Son.

The great Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, who was also the President of the Netherlands, put it this way:

When Jesus looks at his universe from his exalted throne at the right hand of the Father, and he sees the great galaxies whirling in space, the planets and the people upon this planet, and all the minute details of life here including the details of our individual lives, there is nothing that he sees anywhere of which he cannot say, "Mine!"

The most astonishing phenomenon today is to see men who work with this physical universe, who intimately observe the beauty, order, and power inherent in the natural world as well as in the world of humanity, yet who fail to see the Power behind it all; the ordered Intelligence that possesses and originates all these things. I do not understand how a man like Carl Sagan can work in the field of astronomy, knowing of the great secrets that are now coming to light in the universe, and yet go on breathing air which God has supplied, eating the food with which God has stocked this earth, and relying moment by moment on a heartbeat whose continuation rests in the will of Someone other than himself, yet can busy himself telling us that only man matters! It is a phenomenon beyond my understanding.

One of the most profound incidents in the gospels is the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler. This first century yuppie, expensively dressed, very wealthy, young and handsome, knelt at the feet of this apparent peasant from Galilee and said, "Lord, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked into the heart of that young man and saw the hunger and emptiness of it. Wealth had brought him no lasting pleasure; Jesus saw his anguish and the desire for something more. He tested him as to whether he understood the Law and when he saw that the young man was in earnest about finding the secret of life, he told him to do an unusual thing: "Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor and come and follow me."

We usually focus upon the first part of that command: "Go and sell all you have and give to the poor." Some say that what Jesus is teaching is that it is wrong to be wealthy. But this is answered by the fact that he had friends among the wealthy of his own day, yet he never rebuked them for their wealth. That is not the issue of the story. What Jesus is saying is, "Your money keeps you from seeing what you desperately need. Get rid of it, for it is blocking what you really need in life." And then he makes clear what that is: "Come and follow me." What the young man lacked was a King! He had no final authority beyond himself, no cause to which he could give even his life. He had no anchor in life.

As I think of the world in which we live today surely this is the reason for the terrible sense of lostness among people. We are a generation adrift. We have thrown out all the absolutes, and found ourselves adrift on the tossing ocean of life. No one has an anchor any more. What men desperately need is a King, a God, an Authority, an Anchor to cling to. I am convinced we will never solve the terrible drug traffic until we teach people that there is an answer to the hunger and anguish of their empty lives. We cannot stop the drug traffic by simply confiscating all the drugs that come into this country. Drugs are merely a symptom of the terrible anguish of people; of their empty lives, their lack of a sense of worth. They have no King to worship, no authority to serve, no cause greater than themselves.

Thus the central truth of our faith, and one that makes for strength in the Christian life, is this truth. In Jesus is found the center of life. "He is the image of the invisible God...the Creator of all things, who is before all things and holds all things in his hand and power." Is he your Lord?

There has been a chorus running through my mind all week as I have been preparing this message. It is one we used to sing in the early days of PBC, but I do not hear it much any more. The words are simplicity themselves:

My wonderful Lord, my wonderful Lord,
By angel and seraphs in heaven adored.
I bow at Thy shrine, my Savior Divine,

My wonderful, wonderful Lord!

No distant Lord have I,
Loving afar to be;
Made flesh for me
He cannot rest
Until He rests in me.

I need not journey far
This dearest friend to see;
Companionship is always mine, He makes His home with me.

I envy not the twelve,
Nearer to me is He;
The life He once lived here on earth
He lives again in me.

Ascended now to God
My witness there to be,
His witness here am I because
His Spirit dwells in me.

O glorious Son of God,
Incarnate Deity,
I shall forever be with Thee
Because Thou art with me.

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