

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 15, 2020**

**THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST  
Colossians 2:8-15**

I don't think I have ever preached in circumstances quite like this. But then, I'm not sure any of us have ever faced circumstances quite like the situation in which we find ourselves now with the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2 Timothy, the last of the New Testament letters he wrote before his death, Paul speaks of "being chained like a criminal" (2:9a). But he refuses to allow that to discourage him or dissuade him from his mission to proclaim the gospel to anyone and everyone he can. In the very next sentence he says – and this is powerful: "But God's word is not chained" (2:9b).

The same is true today. *God's Word is not chained.* Though we are not able to be in church together to worship God, to enjoy fellowship with one another, to sing together, to pray together, to listen together as God's word is taught and preached, and to grow together in the things of God, His Word is *not* chained. The message of the gospel is not chained. The power of God's Word remains as potent as ever, even though we are not all gathered together in our usual place of worship.

Remember that as we look together at God's Word. Continuing where we left off in our study of Paul's Letter to the Colossians, I'm going to read Colossians 2:8-15. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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**TAKE TEN LOOKS AT JESUS**

Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813-1843) was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Church of Scotland pastor who died of typhus fever about two months before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. He served as pastor of the church in Dundee for only about seven years, but was so beloved that 7,000 people turned out for his funeral. M'Cheyne once offered this counsel to his congregation: "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ."

*For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.* This is good advice for any season, any circumstances, any situation, or any straits in which you find yourself. Maybe it is especially wise in these extraordinary days, with our attention riveted to the latest news about the coronavirus and its impact on daily life.

*For every look at the coronavirus, take ten looks at Jesus.  
For every look at the stock market in all its ups and (mostly) downs, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at the internet or twitter or your favorite cable news channel, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at anything in this world or your own life that causes you anxiety or fear, or that seeks to steal your heart, take ten looks at Jesus.*

It is true that the coronavirus pandemic is real. It is not fake news. (Which is not to say that the news is being presented in the most objective way.) It is affecting – and has affected – real people. Some of us may get the virus. Real as it is, however, this pandemic is not forever. It will not last forever. What *is* forever, the Bible reminds us, is that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). He does not and will not change. So I want you to fix your gaze today not so much on the coronavirus and what is happening in the world as we seek to deal with the scope and seriousness of its spread, but on the Lord Jesus, who constantly reminds us: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20); and *nothing* – not the coronavirus or some other illness, “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation – will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Remember, as Paul has already told us in Colossians 1, that Jesus is “before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (1:17). He is before all things in time, since He is the eternally existing Son of God. He is before all things in terms of His pre-eminence, His sovereign power and authority, His position and glory. He has no equals. He has no rivals. There is no one like Him. And He is the One who holds all things together. He is the One who keeps this world from blowing up or falling apart. He is the One we can turn to for the strength and guidance we need in any and every situation. Not just this one. In addition, every spiritual blessing with which God has blessed us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14) is still ours, even in times of personal, family, national, and international crisis.

Jesus is still on the throne. The coronavirus is a big deal. But God is bigger than the coronavirus. Bigger than the most powerful hurricane. Bigger than the most ominous threat of war or terrorism. Bigger than anything that will ever come your way. And you can be sure that He will, in His time, either bring you through or take you home to be with Him. We still belong to God. And He has not lost control. So do not be afraid or anxious in your heart.

Psalm 118 says:

The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.  
 What can man do to me?  
 The LORD is with me; He is my helper.  
 (Psalm 118:6-7a)

In Psalm 27, David says:

The LORD Is my light an my salvation;  
 whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life –  
of whom shall I be afraid?  
Though an army besiege me,  
my heart will not fear.  
Though war break out against me,  
even then will I be confident.  
(Psalm 27:1, 3)

Even if an army of viruses besiege me, my heart will not fear. Why? Because the Lord is my light and my salvation. Because He is the stronghold of my life. As long as He is with me – and for me – I will not be afraid.

### **THE FULLNESS OF DEITY**

Paul urges us to put our trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners. Colossians 2:9 echoes what Paul has said earlier in 1:19. Colossians 1:19 says: “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him” – in Christ. In the next verse, Paul goes on to explain what Jesus has done on our behalf: “And through Him” – through Jesus – He has “(reconciled) to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”

Now, in 2:9, Paul says that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” This is Paul’s way of saying that Jesus was both fully God – “all the fullness of the Deity” is in Him – and fully man – His Deity is expressed, it is revealed, it is manifested “in bodily form” – in other words, in His incarnation, when He took our flesh and blood upon Himself and became like us in every way, except that He never sinned. He never turned away from God the Father.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse: “Everything of God gets expressed in (Christ), so you can see and hear Him clearly. You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without Him.”

*Everything of God* is expressed in Jesus. It is not just that He is God-like in His character, in His attitudes and words and conduct. He is the very essence of God. He *is* God. When you look at Jesus, you are looking at God in a human body. As one biblical scholar put it, Jesus is “the whole glorious total of what God is” (HCG Moule, quoted in Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, 199).

*For every look at yourself or your problems, for every look at the coronavirus or the stock market, for every look at what keeps you awake at night, take ten looks at Jesus.*

### **A VIRUS INFECTING THE CHURCH**

In the church at Colosse, there was a problem. A huge problem. There was a “virus” infecting the church. Not a physical virus. This virus was poisoning the minds of the

Colossians, causing them to turn away from the truth they had found and embraced in Jesus. I won't go into it in detail today. But the warning Paul gives the Colossians in verse 8 is relevant in any age, and certainly applies to our day.

“Watch out!” he says. “See to it that no one takes you captive! Don't let anyone kidnap you or hold you hostage to their hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human ideas and superstitions and false presuppositions!” Paul is not anti-philosophy. The word *philosophy* means “love of wisdom.” Paul loved true wisdom, as any Christian should, because the source of all true wisdom is God Himself. The problem was that the “philosophy” being promoted by these teachers who had infiltrated the church in Colosse was not rooted in the truth of the gospel. It distorted the gospel teaching about the deity and sufficiency of Jesus for salvation. It diluted the gospel message by adding unbiblical ideas into the mix. These false teachers weren't against Jesus. At least, I imagine they would say they weren't against Him. They wanted to add things to the gospel. They believed that Jesus alone was not enough for salvation. To be truly spiritual, you needed to have Jesus *plus* their brand of philosophy.

### **JESUS PLUS NOTHING**

Paul, on the other hand, insisted that *Jesus plus nothing equals everything*. He insisted that Jesus is all you need for salvation. Jesus is all you need to be made right with God. Everything you need for salvation and life is yours in and through Jesus.

I want you to listen to more of Peterson's paraphrase of these verses in *The Message*, beginning at verse 11: “Entering into this fullness (of life with Christ) is not something you figure out or achieve. It's not a matter of being circumcised (physically) or keeping a long list of laws. No, you're already *in* – insiders – not through some secretive initiation rite (like the false teachers in Colosse were advocating) but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin.... When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive – right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant (with your name on it) canceled and nailed to Christ's Cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.”

That last part refers to what Roman army generals did after winning a victory in battle. They returned home to Rome with a parade of weary, beaten prisoners of war straggling behind the conquering army. The conquered and now captive enemies were exposed to public shame, so that everyone could see the victory the Roman army had won. Jesus, too, won a victory, in the very place and on the very occasion He was presumed to have been defeated – at the cross. But what His enemies thought to be their ultimate victory over Him was in fact the decisive act in His triumph over them. The death of Jesus on the cross exposed the lies and emptiness of any and every system of belief or philosophy of life that either rejects Him, ignores Him, or adds something to Him. What Jesus did on the cross assures the defeat of all of His enemies – all the enemies, both foreign and

domestic, both spiritual and physical, intellectual and philosophical, political and personal – and a victory parade at His return that will be like no other.

In the fullness of God’s time, every knee will bow everywhere in all creation, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). *Because He is Lord. And all the glory belongs to God.*

### **THE TESTIMONY OF NAPOLEON**

At least once or twice in the last almost 23 years, I have shared with you a passage from an old book (published in 1896), by a famous Presbyterian missions leader named Robert E. Speer. He was a champion for international missions in the Presbyterian Church for more than 50 years. While still in his 20s, he wrote a book entitled *The Man Christ Jesus* that sets forth both the humanity of Jesus and His deity. Near the end, in a section on “The Significance of the Man Christ Jesus,” he recounts the testimony of Napoleon Bonaparte, the French military leader and emperor concerning Jesus, taken from a book written in 1867 by Henry Liddon on *The Divinity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. Speaking of Jesus, Napoleon said: “Between Him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. I know men, and Jesus Christ is not (just) a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christ and all other religions whatsoever the distance of infinity; from the first day to the last He is the same, always the same, majestic and simple, infinitely firm and infinitely gentle.”

Napoleon once asked General Montholon: “Can you tell me who Jesus Christ was?” When the General declined, Napoleon said: “Well, then, I will tell you. Alexander (the Great), Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded great empires, but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force! Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day millions would die for Him.... I think I understand something of human nature, and I tell you that all these (Alexander, Caesar, and Charlemagne) were men and I am a man. No one else is like Him. Jesus Christ was more than a man.... I have inspired multitudes with such a devotion that they would have died for me ... but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present, with the electric influences of my looks, of my words, of my voice.” [No trace of a self-esteem problem there!] “When I saw men and spoke to them I lit up the flames of self-devotion in their hearts.... Christ alone has succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen that it becomes insensible to the barriers of time and space. Across a chasm of 1,800 (now 2,000) years, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is, above all others, difficult to satisfy. He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek at the hands of his friends, or a father of his children, or a bride of her husband, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart. He will have it entirely to Himself. He demands it unconditionally, and forthwith His demand is granted. Wonderful! In defiance of time and space, the human soul with all its powers becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him experience that remarkable supernatural love toward Him. This phenomenon is unaccountable; it is altogether beyond the scope of our creative powers. Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish the sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its

strength nor put a limit to its range. This is what strikes me most. This is what proves to me quite conclusively the divinity of Jesus Christ” (Speer, *The Man Christ Jesus*, 241-242).

This is not to suggest that Napoleon lived his life as a follower of Jesus. But it does seem that, at some level, he recognized the deity and supremacy and sufficiency of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### **TAKE TEN LOOKS AT JESUS**

With Napoleon and Robert E. Speer and Robert Murray M’Cheyne and the apostle Paul, I want you to see and know the supremacy, the sufficiency, the cosmic triumph over sin and over all the spiritual forces of darkness, and the full deity, humanity, and sovereignty of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Trust in Him. Turn to Him. Run to Him. Rest in Him. Find your victory in Him.

*For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at the coronavirus, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at the stock market, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at the internet or twitter or your favorite cable news channel, take ten looks at Jesus.*

*For every look at the disruptions in your life, in our nation, or the world, take ten looks at Jesus.*

He has triumphed. He will triumph. And we will triumph with Him, through the power of the cross, where He won the victory for us.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.