

Our Great Savior, Part 1

Scripture: Ephesians 1:15–23

Code: 49-5

As we come back to the book of Ephesians, that's a delight for me. I feel most comfortable when expositing a book of the New Testament. And I think the last time that I went through Ephesians was a long time ago, and it was the right time to take a look at it again, since I doubt that very many of you were even here. You shouldn't live your Christian life without an opportunity to study this incredible book.

I want the theme to be for this week, and certainly next week as we look at the same passage again, "Christ is Everything. Christ is everything." It amazes me how the church, churches, church leaders, can totally lose their focus on Christ and wander off into all kinds of other subjects, themes. It's very sad. Christ is everything. I'm going to try to convey that to you today, and our focus should always be on Him in our personal lives and in our church life as well.

Sometimes I need to get out of the current environment that I'm in, even the current theological environment, or ecclesiological environment that I'm in; and to do that, I usually try to find some old books and go back a ways. I picked up a book that is titled *The Reformation of the Church*. It includes articles from preachers who lived in the seventeenth century. So it goes way back, hundreds of years, and it addresses the issue even then, even that close to the Reformation—within a hundred fifty years or so of the Reformation there was a need to call the church to another reformation. And in that anthology of those writers from the seventeenth century, Iain Murray wrote a forward, my dear friend Iain Murray. He wrote this in that same year, 1964—and listen to what he said; and I'm quoting, "At a time when the Christian faith is commanding so little influence on the nation, the church herself should be engaged with questions which affect her own life rather than the life of the masses of the people."

Such a simple but profound insight. When the church begins to focus on the masses of the people and what the people want, it loses its influence. It almost sounds counterintuitive. Church "experts" would tell you that if the church wants to reach the world, we have to find out what the world wants—when just the opposite is true. The Christian faith will always, always lose its influence when it tries to accommodate the world. You get the opposite results than what you hoped for.

In another statement, "It has become customary for us to act as though the gospel could progress on earth independently of the condition of the church." Great statement. We think that the character of the church plays apparently a minor role in reaching the world with the gospel. In fact there are so many, these days, so busy trying to find out what the world wants that it's a very popular notion that the worst thing a church can do, that wants to reach the world, is act like a church. That is the devil's lie. For the church to reach the world it must refuse to be like the world. It must refuse to define itself by what the world wants, what unbelievers want, what the unconverted desire. The church has one obligation, and that is to be what the Lord of the church commands—not focused on the culture but focused on Christ, not focused on passing social issues, the desires of the devil's children, but solely on the will of the Lord. Only when churches are what Christ wants them to be are they useful in the

fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Clearly, churches have little influence in the world because they are trying to give the world what it wants, rather than obey the Lord who is the head of the church. There is no text in the entire New Testament that commands the church to give lost sinners what they want; on the other hand the church is to obey the Lord Jesus Christ, to confront the culture as the church. There is nothing in the New Testament that calls the church to change social structures, to be engaged in political efforts, economic efforts. The church that effectively reaches the lost is the church that is relentlessly devoted to being what the Lord of the church commands His church to be. If a church has little influence in the world, don't ask what the world wants, ask what the Lord requires. Be the church. It has always been our passion here to obey and honor and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. We have no interest in what the children of the devil want a church to be; that is irrelevant. And furthermore, beyond being irrelevant, it invites the devil in.

In the Reformation there was a principle that was articulated called the *formal principle*. The formal principle was simply what the Reformers identified as the truth: that the Word of God is the sole authority in the kingdom of God, and therefore in the church. So the church is to be whatever the Word of God tells it to be. That is the formal principle. We have only one divine revelation for the life of the church, and that is Holy Scripture. And when you get into the New Testament epistles like Ephesians and the rest of them, you find that they are designed to make sure that every subsequent generation of Christians and churches understands the will of the Lord for their life and conduct.

And that is true of the epistles in general, but particularly true of Ephesians. Early on in the ministry here, I wanted to dig into Ephesians because it's so absolutely definitive as to the life of the church. Here is heaven's instruction book for the church to be the church. There's not a word in it about what the world wants. Nothing about how to engage politically, socially, culturally. It's all about how to follow the Lord who is the head of the church, how to be consumed with Christ. That's why the epistle begins essentially in verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."

Everything is in Christ, everything. It's all about our relationship to Christ. It's all about knowing Him, loving Him, adoring Him, declaring Him, and becoming like Him. That's what the church needs to be. The more it's like the world, the more it forfeits its influence. The more it tampers with the world, the more divisive it becomes, the more cantankerous it becomes, the more fractured it becomes, the more exposed its weakness becomes. It is a deadly danger for the church, any church anywhere, to be anything other than what the Lord of the church has designed the church to be. And we have all the information in the revelation of the New Testament.

So as we look at the book of Ephesians, we're going to notice that in the first three chapters the emphasis is on doctrine—that is what we believe. And the last three chapters is the practical section—how we behave. And how we behave is predicated by what we believe. So we're going to see, first of all, what we believe and how that impacts how we behave.

But we're going to jump above the text of Ephesians in a prayer, right there in chapter 1. This prayer, you almost feel, is a kind of interruption in the flow of Paul's revelation for the church. It's almost as if he can't go another step unless he offers a prayer for the church. He's writing to the church in Ephesus; it's been four years since he was there. Not only to the church in Ephesus, but Ephesus was a major town in Asia Minor, and there were other churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3; they

also would have received this letter. He starts out with that amazing set of blessings, spiritual blessings in Christ; and then before he starts to go into some more detail about the church and what it believes and how it behaves, he raises a prayer starting in verse 15. So look at it with me. This is a prayer for the church.

“For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, and you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

That is just filled with Christ-centered truth. And Paul’s prayer is that the church would focus on fully understanding what is theirs in Christ. Every faithful pastor should be leading His church into the deep knowledge of Christ. Every faithful pastor must live in the constant expression of a desire to see the church filled with the wisdom and knowledge that comes with a deep revelation of Christ. This is the church being the church, being Christ-centered. Certainly this is my prayer for Grace Church.

So let’s look at that prayer, at least by way of an introduction this morning. Verse 15, “For this reason”—we’ll stop there. What reason? What prompts this intercession? What prompts this gratitude and this request for a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ? “For this reason.” What is the reason? The reason is because of the incomparable blessings of Christ listed from verses 3 through 14. Now if you weren’t here when we went through that, you can download the messages. It’s beyond comprehension how rich the blessings and the promises are in Christ that have been granted to every true believer—on the basis that we have, as verse 3 says, been “blessed . . . with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” On the basis that “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.” On the basis that He chose us “that we would” one day eternally “be holy and blameless before Him” because “in love He predestined us to adoption as sons”; because, in verse 7, “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses”; because “in all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose,” verse 10, of “summing up everything in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.” That is, He’s even given us the end of history—it all resolves in Christ because, verse 11, “we have obtained an inheritance,” to which we were “predestined according to His [divine] purpose,” because “having believed,” verse 13, we “were sealed . . . with the Holy Spirit of promise.” And nothing can ever alter that future fulfillment, because, because—because of all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. “For this reason” I’m praying that you would have “a spirit of wisdom and knowledge in the revelation of Him,” “wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.”

What is Paul’s desire for a church? That they would know Christ—that they would know Him deeply, profoundly. That’s why Paul in Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, richly.”

Now he knows he's writing to a true church because if you look at verse 15 he says, "I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints." Why does he mention those? Because those are the evidences of true salvation: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and manifest love for the saints.

How did he know about this? How did he know that the Ephesian church was doing so well after four years? Well he says he heard; he heard about it. How would he have heard about it? He's a prisoner in Rome, he hasn't seen them in four years, he's incarcerated. But prisoners could receive letters, and they could receive visitors. And over the period of time of his imprisonment he had received both letters and visitors. And the testimonies were always the same; it was about the faith of the people in Ephesus, and it was about their love for the saints. These are evidences of a true church.

Paul says the same things to the Thessalonian church, as he opens that letter. First Thessalonians 1:2, 3, and 4, he says, "I know your work of faith and labor of love." Faith and love: trusting in Christ, loving the saints. This is the mark of a true church. That's what a church is. That's how you know it's a real church of redeemed people—because their faith is in Christ, and they manifest the transformation by loving all the saints.

So we know, then, that this is a true church; this is a church that believes and loves. And because it is a true church, Paul can pray for them that they would understand all that belongs to them. And I just have to say, there are churches with real Christians in them who have no clue what is theirs in Christ; they're cheated of that because they're not taught the Word of God. Their thoughts and their interests are all over everywhere, when they ought to be focused solely and totally on Christ. It's when you gaze at Christ, 2 Corinthians 3:18, it's when you gaze at Christ that you're changed into His image from one level of glory to the next.

"So my prayer," Paul says, "for you is that God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is one nature with the Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is the Father of glory, the source of all glory and the end of all glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom, may give you a spirit of wisdom." What is a spirit of wisdom mean? Well "spirit" here is used in the sense of perspective, disposition, attitude. This is the way you need to direct your mind and your thoughts. "I want God to give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him."

That is what every pastor should be praying for every church—that they would be lost in wonder, love, and praise for Christ. It's only then that the church becomes the church; and becoming the church is how it influences the world. Becoming like the world is how it loses its influence. Paul is saying, "I want you believers to fully grasp all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies that are in Christ" that we saw listed in that opening section. So what does a pastor pray for, for his people? Full wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ.

Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:3 essentially the same thing. He says it this way: "Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence." The riches of God's grace—which Peter says, "all the things that pertain to life and godliness" —become ours through the true knowledge of Christ. The more you know of Christ, the more you comprehend, the more you grasp, the more you enjoy the fullness of your riches in Him. "I want you to know the fullness of your riches in Christ. I want you to know Christ, everything about Him."

“All spiritual blessings,” chapter 1, verse 3, “all spiritual blessings, every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies.” Every single spiritual blessing that heaven has is deposited in the lives of those who know Christ. Do you understand that? Do you understand the fullness of that? That’s where your preoccupation should be, that you become so much like Christ that you radiate His glory. That’s how the church influences the world. But muting that or hiding that and trying to act like the world makes the church not only irrelevant but ungodly.

Listen to what we have in Christ—just a few passages. John 1:14 and 16, “And the Word”—speaking of Christ—“became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.” He’s full of grace and truth, and in Him we receive grace and truth—grace upon grace, upon grace, upon grace.

Do you know Christ in that depth, so that you comprehend all that is yours in Him? John 15:5 Jesus said, “I’m the vine, you’re the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, bears much fruit” —much spiritual fruit. It’s when you look at Christ that you find all your spiritual blessings. Colossians 3:11 says, “Christ is all. Christ is all; He’s everything.” Romans 13:14 then says, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” —put on Christ; wear Christ, as it would be. “Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” Be consumed with becoming like Christ.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 1, verse 30: “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus” —and I love this—“who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” It’s Paul’s way of saying everything is in Christ. What more could you want than wisdom from God, righteousness, holiness, and to be redeemed? It’s all in Christ.

Later in 1 Corinthians 3, listen to what Paul says: “All things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.” Or to reverse it, “God is the one who possesses all things; Christ, being God, possesses all things; Christ living in you makes you the possessor of all things.” All things belong to you—all things that pertain to life and godliness, all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. Paul in Philippians 1:11 puts it this way: You’ve “been filled with the fruit of righteousness. You’ve been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

To the Philippians in chapter 3, Paul—beginning to understand the depth of these spiritual blessings and riches—said this: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . . I count them but rubbish” —that’s the word for garbage—“so that I may gain Christ.” Everything in this world is garbage, except Christ. I’m glad to give it all up, all the rubbish, for Christ.

This is how the church should live. We should live with this consuming preoccupation with the person of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, He’s anticipated; in the New Testament, He’s revealed. And He is the revelation of God that is the most clear revelation. God spoke in time past through the prophets and the writers of the Old Testament. In these last days He’s spoken unto us by His Son. God is on display in Christ. To know Christ is to know all the riches of heaven that are yours because you are His. Churches struggle with this. They get caught up, they get seduced away from Christ.

Turn to Colossians 2, and I'll give you an illustration of this. Colossians, verse 2. The end of verse 2 says, "Christ Himself," and then verse 3 says, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ. They're all in Christ. That's why—back up to the end of chapter 1—Paul says, "Here's the goal of my ministry": "We proclaim Him," that is Christ, "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." "I have one objective in my life, and that is to bring people to Christ. And then once they've been brought to Christ, to admonish them and teach them with all heavenly wisdom, so they may be complete in Christ." Christ is everything to him.

Go back in that same chapter to verse 15: Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the premier one of all who've ever been born. By Him all things were created." He's the Creator "both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions 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."

He was before anything was created; He was the Creator of everything created. And He is the one who sustains everything; He is what holds it together. When science says there's a quantum leap—something over here in this atomic subparticle goes out of existence and comes into existence over here but never traverses the space in between—that's called the quantum leap, and it's inexplicable. How can something go out of existence here, come into existence here, and never pass between the two? And that is where Christ is. He is the one who holds everything together. He is the undiscoverable one—at least in a microscope.

"He is the head of the body, the church," verse 18. He is the beginning" —again, the premier one—"the firstborn from the dead" —of all who have risen from the dead, He is the premier one. He is the one, end of verse 18—"to have first place in everything." That's so simple. He should be the consuming preoccupation of the church, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." Everything is in Christ; Christ is everything. That's why in Ephesians, Paul said, "I pray that God would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him." Everything is about knowing Christ. And so at the end of that first chapter Paul says, "That's my goal in ministry, is to proclaim Him, proclaim Him." I hear a lot of things from a lot of so-called preachers these days. I say this too often; I say, "Why doesn't anyone ever talk about Christ? Why?" We proclaim Him. Completeness is in Him.

Well look what happened to the Colossians. Go over to chapter 2, verse 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive." In later uses in Greek, that verb was used for kidnapping. "See to it that no one kidnaps you through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." Don't let any human philosophy, ideology, empty deception, elementary principles of the world take your focus off Christ.

It seems to me that in the current form of evangelicalism—whatever form that is as it morphs—there is a consuming preoccupation with everything but Christ. There will be an endless seduction effort made at the church from human minds—philosophical, psychological, social, religious, political—to take the church captive, to kidnap the church, with vain deceit in the traditions of men. "Traditions of men" is a very obvious thing, just human ideas. That's where philosophy comes from. And philosophy is empty deceit. "Elementary principles," that is a very interesting phrase. It basically means ABCs, baby talk.

Now I know that when you think about the world, you think there's a certain degree of sophistication in the world; and on some level there is. There certainly is from the hard sciences and things like that, mathematics and so forth. But when it comes to philosophy, which is a way to understand the world while ignoring God or rejecting God, you get nothing but empty deception, and you get nothing but human ideas passed down from one person to another person. And in reality, human philosophy is simplistic. *Simple* is good; *simple* means it's not complicated. *Simplistic* is a bad word. If somebody says, "You're simplistic," that means you are not giving a reasonable response. *Simplistic* is to underestimate the reality of something.

I was at camp this week with a thousand teenagers over in New Mexico, and the seniors from Grace Church got together and wanted to have a question and answer session. It was wonderful; I love doing it. And perhaps the most telling question came from—these are high school seniors—they said, "What do we need to know, facing university, facing college, going forward? What protections should we have?" And I said, "You need two things, two things, without which you will be a victim of the world. Number one: You need conviction. You need conviction. You have to have some non-negotiables, you have to have some hills you die on. And you have to know why, and you have to be able to substantiate those in the Word of God and in your own conscience. Without convictions you are a cork in the surf; you'll end up wherever they take you. You need convictions." And what a blessing to have been, for most of them, brought up in the influences of Grace Community Church where they have those convictions from those who surround them here; and for many of them, their own families. You have to have convictions.

Your convictions are the immovable pillars of your character. They're the structure. Because what they're going to want to do in the university is crush those convictions because they're biblical convictions, and they're true. And the world is ungodly, and the world is run by Satan, who's a liar. They're going to attack you with lies, and they're going to attack your convictions about God, about man, about sin, about righteousness, about conduct, about morality, about everything. You have to have convictions.

The second thing you have to have is critical thinking, critical thinking. And I think for this particular period of history, this is what is most under attack. And let me tell you how to look at that.

Universities these days—certainly in the humanities side of things, universities these days are concerned about ideologies. You hear a lot about that, an ideology. What do they mean by an ideology? It's just another word for a philosophy. But ideologies in the current climate are seductive and attractive to people because they are mindless, they are mindless.

Here's how an ideology works: "What's wrong in America? White privilege. What's wrong in America? Systemic racism. What's wrong in America? Abuse of women." They want you to buy into the fact that everything that's wrong in America can be explained by an ideology. They don't want you to think critically about it.

"What's wrong in America? Some people have money, and others don't. What's wrong in America? Corporations are getting rich, and people are being abused. What's wrong in America?" They can be reduced to an ideology, a simple, single idea. This is stupidity. And universities are really bent on teaching people to be stupid. This is infantile. You can't say, "What's wrong in America? Systemic

racism,” no matter what it is; if the bus doesn’t show up on your corner on time, “Well it’s systemic racism.” If you have mold on your bread, “Well it’s systemic racism.” That’s the stupidity of that oversimplification of everything—that is easy for people to suck up and be seduced by it because it’s a one-size-fits-all answer to everything, and you can put your brain in a bag and bury it. You have to think critically. You have to understand.

For example, I’ll give you an illustration. In the United States 99.9 percent of the population survives COVID; that’s a fact. You can’t mesh that up with the behavior they’re requiring. How about this one: “Get vaccinated.” And you’re saying to yourself, “Well let’s see, they lied about Russia. The FBI lies. CIA lies. The National Health Organization lies. The World Health Organization lies. The CDC lies. The director of all of this lies, because he says something different every time he opens his mouth. The politicians lie. They lied about an incident in Chicago. They’re just lies and lies and lies and lies and lies.” And then they say to you, “Be vaccinated; it’s good for you.” I know why people aren’t getting vaccinated—because people don’t believe they’re being told the truth. It’s simple. It’s just the old Aesop’s fable about the boy who cried, “Wolf, wolf, wolf, wolf,” there never was a wolf. And when there was a wolf, nobody showed up.

You can’t keep lying and then expect people to believe you. You have to think critically and thoughtfully and carefully. You have to realize, CDC reports death rate from the normal flu last year was 99 percent lower. Oh, really. What happened to the flu? Where did it go? It went into the COVID statistic.

The chaos of deception and lies forces you, if you want to navigate the world in which you live, to think critically. Are there things wrong with capitalism? Capitalism can be abused, just like socialism is abused. Anything can be abused because sinners are engaged in it. Any kind of relationship, any kind of anything in human relationships is going to have good, bad, and indifferent. But what they want you to do is accept the—buy the package, and shut down alternative discussions. That’s why they cancel culture, because they want you to buy the ideology, they don’t want you to think critically. But we think critically because we think biblically, and we have the mind of Christ. First Corinthians 2:16, “You have the mind of Christ.”

I don’t want to get caught up in philosophy, which is another term for human wisdom. I don’t want to get caught up in empty deception. I don’t want to get caught up in something just passed down from person to person in tradition. And I certainly want to get above the stupid level of the ABCs. You can’t reduce me to some simplistic moron. Human wisdom is infantile compared to divine wisdom.

So look at verse 9, Colossians 2. Look, we don’t pay any attention to that, but we pay attention to Christ, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made”—what? —“complete.” Everything we need is in Christ. First Corinthians 2:16, “We have the mind of Christ.” We have the mind of Christ.

That’s what I told those high school students: convictions, critical thinking. Think like a Christian. Think like Christ. Think biblically. Don’t be kidnapped by lies.

Well that is the introduction. Next week we’ll come back to this passage, and I want to show you that Paul prays that we would understand the greatness of—in regard to Christ—the greatness of His plan, the greatness of His power, and the greatness of His person. That’s for next Sunday.

Father, we're grateful beyond comprehension for all that is ours in Christ. And may the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Help us to search deeply into the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, which are all hidden in Him. Don't let us get seduced. Don't let us get kidnapped by human philosophy, deception, human philosophy, human tradition, simplistic ideas designed to deceive. May we think biblically. Grant us wisdom. Grant us full understanding of the revelation that gives us the knowledge of Christ. Help us to think like Him, as we allow His Word to dwell in us richly and are changed into His image from level of glory to the next. That's our prayer, in His name. Amen.

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