

It's All True and Good and Beautiful Enough

I'll start with a familiar Christian joke. A devout believer is trapped in his home in the middle of a flood. The waters rise, and he must retreat to his rooftop, where he prays for God to rescue him by some miracle. Along comes his neighbor in a rowboat and offers him aboard. He replies, "No thank you, I prayed for God to rescue me and I'm waiting for a miracle."

Disappointed, the neighbor paddles away. A few hours later, a Coast Guard rescue team arrives by helicopter and offers to lift him up. Again, he replies, "No thank you, I prayed for God to rescue me and I'm waiting for a miracle." The helicopter flies away. Days pass, the man starves and dies and goes to heaven, and when he meets Jesus, he angrily demands to know why his prayer never was answered. I won't finish the joke because you already know how Jesus replies.

It's a silly situation. God works through ordinary people and it's dumb to expect more—that's the lesson. But I'd like to imagine a similar joke that should make us all a little uncomfortable.

Imagine you're going about your day, lost in thought and questions about how you'll pay your mortgage, whether you can trust your sister's complaints about her boyfriend (because you know she often exaggerates), and whether you're a good person for believing her or not or paying or failing to pay your mortgage. All these thoughts and questions lead you to the biggest questions, "what's true, anyway? How do I know how to direct my life to do the right thing and live it in the right way? How do I know whether I'm alright, whether this world is alright, whether anything is right? And God, why aren't you helping me figure it out?"

You then feel the weight of these questions upon your conscience. And the weight, far from holding you down, in fact begins to feel good: *I must be so thoughtful for asking all these deep questions*—that is the conclusion many books written by famously skeptical authors and

many advertisements paid by famous influencers and publishers (who profit from your questioning) have inspired in you. But then along comes a dirty man with a cross tattooed on his forehead and he tells you that he already knows the Absolute Truth about everything: where you come from, where you're going, how to think about your mortgage and your sister and her boyfriend and yourself and whether you're a good person and whether there's anything right and good in this strange world. The cross-tattooed man promises that if you just listen to his story (free of charge!) about some other dusty man who lived and died and came back from the dead about 2,000 years ago, then you too can learn that Absolute Truth and the answer to all your questions. How do you answer?

We Christians think we know how we'd reply. But I don't think the answer is that easy. After all, Christians still have lots of questions: we still don't know what to think about our sister's boyfriend or our mortgage. Some days, we still don't know what to think about ourselves and God and all the rest. But the truth is, if we're Christians, then we're in the situation of having some plain ordinary person telling us everything we need to know. If we go to church, read the Bible, pray, believe in Jesus Christ—God tells us—then we already have the answers to all our questions. But we still keep asking them. Why? It might have something to do with the fact that, like that man on his rooftop, we want something big and extraordinary to happen. But the hard truth is that that's already happened, 2,000 years ago. We should already know it, yet we keep demanding something more.

In our Bible study series, we've been studying the book of Colossians. Its subtitle has been the "Fullness of Christ." I can't think of a better way to put it. Paul puts it that way in our passage this morning:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created: things on heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether

thrones or powers or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that in everything he should be preeminent. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.¹

I've been thinking about this passage for years. It might as well be as big as the whole Bible.

And I often think about how it relates to how we think about everything else—largely because it's claiming that it does.

I admit, I like smart people; they're very fun. And there are many very smart people in this world trying to discover the great secret to everything: whether it lies in atoms or energy, spirit or matter or money, some great forgotten past or a new hopeful future. I'm particularly fond of the theoretical physicists involved in that search, largely because they're the least bashful about it: some years ago, they had the gumption to admit they were looking for the "God particle." At least someone these days is still searching.

And yet, it is odd, but I must say it, we already have a God particle: it's Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher who lived 2,000 years ago, was crucified by Roman authorities, then rose from the dead on the third day. This man and his story are that secret to everything, the answer to all the great big questions, the questions the scientists and thinkers have and the questions you and I and all of us have.

I suppose I should spend more time fleshing out *how* exactly Jesus Christ is that great answer to all our questions. Yet at least right now, I'm struck most by the fact *that* we have this answer. Want to know the secret to the universe? Learn about Jesus, that's all there is to it! And

¹ Col. 1:15-21

yet the rest of the world is still going on searching, as if we don't have any answer, only more questions.

Our world is in a bad way right now, as usual. On the surface, it seems that's because we don't have the right answers: we're left feeling around, blind and in the dark trying to figure everything out for ourselves, without anyone to help us. Some other people think they have the lights to guide us, but those lights always fail, and the people promoting them often turn out to have bad motives (and money to make). But that's only how it is on the surface. For the Gospel is telling us here that *we are not in the dark, we are not without an answer to our questions, in fact we don't need to be feeling our way around blind anymore*. In short: *we are not empty*, not as we think we are. The fullness—which is a very strange word in the original Greek, because Paul had to invent it just to express what he was fumbling to say—*the fullness of everything* about you, me, everyone, the world, the universe, and *God*, is right here in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

But here the world still is, in the dark. And here we still are, in the dark too. That's why we're here this morning, isn't it? We need to hear from God. Have you ever wondered why we need to go to church so often to hear someone preach to us? Martin Luther once said, "We need to hear the Gospel every day, because we forget it every day."

So, here am I to remind you. But what about your mortgage, and your sister and her boyfriend, and whether you're a good person, and whether you can trust anyone or anything? Well, I'll give it a shot. The Holy Spirit, through the inspired words of the apostle Paul, has plenty to say about these things. About that mortgage? "Be in debt to no one, except to love one another."² I take that to mean you should pay your mortgage if you can, and try not to be in

² Rom. 13:8.

financial debt about anything else. If you can't pay it, you have an infinite debt of love shared between you and other Christians here to rely on—maybe we can help you. Maybe we can help each other. About your sister and her boyfriend? “Love keeps no record of wrongs,” “does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth,” and “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”³ I take that to mean, in this situation, that you should charitably hear your sister out, continue to love her, and hear her boyfriend out, so you may learn what's really going on between them and how you can best love them both—maybe invite them to supper, for starters. And now about you and whether you're a good person: “because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—by grace you have been saved! ...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so no one can boast.”⁴ I take that to mean that whether you're ‘good’ does not rely on anything you do, not how you think about your mortgage or your sister or her boyfriend, and least of all about how you think about yourself. It is God, rich in mercy, who made you, and made you *alive, in Jesus Christ*. By grace you have been saved! So, you can trust God, stop worrying about yourself, stop worrying about the rest of the world, and be happy and obedient and become holy, day by day. That's all there is to it.

Now, understand that I'm an academic in my day job. And what I've just done is commit a very, very bad error. I just pulled these words out of the Bible and said they immediately apply to you, here and now. I didn't cite one commentary to tell you about the original context, nor did I take pains to say that things were very different back then and we're much smarter now, so

³ I Cor. 13:5-7.

⁴ Ephesians 2:4-9.

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we're separated by two thousand years of distance from any immediate knowledge of 'what the Bible really meant' and we're left alone only with our interpretation and smarts and choices about what to do with our own lives.

But I must reply that, with respect to those academics, all that is just not true. For we are not left in the dark after Christ. The fullness of Christ has been revealed, the darkness has been overcome, and we have been granted the Holy Spirit of power and truth and love. *We already have everything we need to know. Jesus has revealed everything, and through the Spirit we can understand and test everything we need. This is good enough.*

I'm afraid that many Christian academics are scared to admit this, especially today. Be honest: if you're a Christian academic, you may have just read that above and thought, 'if I let myself say that out loud, people might think I'm a fundamentalist—or worse, I might even become one!' And that's the rub: we don't want to let go of what others may think of us, and even less do we want to let go of what we could become. In either case, we no longer have control over ourselves. The hard truth is that all those 'hard' academic questions are, often, easy attempts to avoid listening, so we can keep being in control. As Kierkegaard put it, we Christians can be a bunch of "scheming swindlers." We act as if we don't know, can't understand. But we do know that once we let it out that we do understand well enough, we must decide to obey. And the truth is, often, we don't want to obey. Sometimes we prefer the darkness over the light. But still, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it."⁵ We can try to deny the light, but deep down we know it's there. We can't ignore the true things for long.

And really, all the things I told you are very simple, after all. You didn't need a scholarly preacher quoting Kierkegaard to tell them to you. A simple fellow Christian gifted with the Spirit

⁵ John 1:15.

of love could have told you much the same. The hard part is that, though all these things are simple, they must be done, lived out and lived in. And the good things are hard—“*khalepà tà kalá,*” as some ancient, very smart people once recognized.

We should not be surprised at that. For the fullness of Christ—the God particle itself, the great big secret of everything, the great big answer to every question, the great mystery revealed to be holding every single thing together, from the littlest atom to the greatest nebula and from the poorest peasant to the richest ruler, right now as I speak, that great promise for our Future and the whole universe’s Future—that fullness was revealed through Jesus of Nazareth’s death on the cross. “For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, reconciling to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross.” It is a difficult thing to say, and it is difficult to believe. But it must have been infinitely more difficult for Jesus to undergo. But just so, it is true, and it is good, and it is beautiful.

Now, back to those very smart people whom I think are very fun and who are still searching for the great answer to everything. The best of them claim there must be some triune I-know-not-what that is so true, good, and beautiful, as to be worthy of the name The True, The Good, and The Beautiful Itself. And I just concluded that this Jesus of Nazareth is worthy of that Name, that Paul is saying *I-know-what* this I-know-not-what *exactly is*. Perhaps you are one of those very smart people who is still questioning. I answer you: Jesus Christ is the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Perhaps you are a very smart person who once thought you liked that answer but now yearn for something more. I remind you: Jesus Christ is True *enough*, Good *enough*, and Beautiful *enough*.

Or so I say, at least. It’s up to you to believe me. It seems you’re now a part of those jokes I started with. And I’m just that strange man with the cross tattooed on his forehead walking up

to you on the street and telling you that what I say is the Absolute Truth about your life and everything. So, why would you believe me? Well, it could be because you're on your rooftop in a flood, and I'm your neighbor in the rowboat. Granted, I don't have a helicopter. So, will you believe?

Let us pray.