

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

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CHAPTER ONE: THE SPEAKING CHRIST

When the apostle John, by the Spirit, used the title ‘Word’ (Greek: Logos) he was using a term familiar to the Greek mind of his day. The Greeks used it to express the principle, or rationale, which they understood to be behind the creation of the universe. What came as a revelation from God through John’s writing was the identification of this abstract creation principle with a person, God the Son. That this is a title of the Lord Jesus is quite clear from verse 14 of John chapter 1: ‘The Word became flesh’. God the Son became flesh in order to reveal the eternal God to us.

With that in mind, we might still ask ourselves: ‘Why this particular title?’ We think of how we ourselves use words in order to communicate with each other. We reveal what’s in our mind by our words. The eternal God has expressed his mind in the one who is the Word. In Jesus, the Word, God has fully revealed his character and perfectly declared his will. What can we learn about God’s Son from the opening verses of John’s Gospel, where he’s introduced to us as the Word? What sort of person is he? Seven points have been noted (by J.I. Packer).

1. He was ‘in the beginning’ (v.1). This reminds us of the opening words of the Bible, which take us back to the time of the creation. In other words, the first thing we learn here about the Word is his pre-existence. He didn’t ‘become’, nor was he ‘made’, as is said of other things in the following verses. What this shows is his eternity, and

it's confirmed by so many other Bible texts. 'He is before all (created) things', according to Colossians 1:17. This echoes the prophecy of Micah that the one who was to be born in Bethlehem - the Word become flesh - would be one whose 'goings forth are from of old, from everlasting' (Micah 5:2). Yes, the Word is the eternal Word.

2. He was 'with God' (v.1, literally 'towards God'). The word (Greek: *pros*) translated here as 'with' conveys the idea of communion between distinct persons. It indicates personal companionship and the enjoyment of fellowship together. This teaches us about the personality of the Word, as someone capable of complete fellowship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Word is the personal Word.

3. He 'was God' (v.1). That's really plain, but this statement has been made the centre of controversy by false teachers. We may be absolutely clear that to insert the indefinite article (an 'a' - as in 'he was a god') is completely wrong grammatically. There's no question on which side the qualified experts are, as witness the rules of Greek grammar that even a novice can read - and find this very example discussed. Therefore, as it stands, it gives crystal clear testimony to the deity of the Word. In any case, this truth is very clear from many other Bible texts; two from Matthew will serve as our examples. In Matthew 3:1-6, we see how John the Baptist fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 - which talked about preparing the way for the Lord, and the Baptist relates that to his very own work preparing the way for the Lord Jesus, which means Jesus is the very one whom Isaiah called God. Matthew then takes up another of Isaiah's great prophecies in describing the birth of the Lord Jesus in terms of Isaiah's predicting of the virgin-born Immanuel (Isaiah 1:22-23), whose name means 'God with us.'

Many among the cults profess difficulty with the truth of the Trinity. And while it's absolutely true that the term 'trinity' isn't found in the Bible, its truth certainly is. As Luke records the announcement to Mary by Gabriel concerning the birth of the Lord, we've clear reference made to the deity of the one who is to be born, and to the fact of the trinity. In the first chapter of Luke, the child to be born is declared to be 'the Son of the Most High' or the 'Son of God'. It's prophesied that the conception would be a work of the 'Holy Spirit' (v.35) and that the 'Lord God' would give the child the throne of David (v.32).

There are references to three distinct persons there at one moment in time as we view it, and all with the same nature, existing as one God. In the first chapter of John's Gospel, John the Baptist publicly witnesses to the Lord Jesus as being the Lamb of God (v.29) and the Son of God (v.34); so the Lord is presented in that first chapter as the Word, the Lamb, and the Son. This Word is without doubt the divine Word.

4. 'All things were made by Him' (v.3). Here we find the Word creating. Paul begins his letter to the Colossians with the same truth: 'For in Him were all things created...all things have been created through Him, and unto Him' (Colossians 1:16). Nothing could be clearer than this, and it must be our final answer to the atheistic evolutionist.

5. 'In Him was life' (v.4). And now we find the Word animating. He's the source of all life, whether natural or spiritual. Paul's words to the Athenians (Acts 17:25,28) certainly apply to him: 'He Himself gives to all life,' and 'in Him we live'. Whereas, regarding spiritual life: 'this life is in His Son' (1 John 5:11).

6. 'And the life was the light of men' (v.4). That is, here's the Word now revealing and enlightening. He's the true light that lights everyone (v.9). All, without excuse, should have a certain consciousness of God.

7. 'And the Word became flesh' (v.14). This is the truth of the incarnation, of how this eternal, personal, divine Word, the Creator, Animator and Revealer of all, came into his creation.

In Philippians, Paul writes of the Lord emptying himself and 'being made in the likeness of men' (Philippians 2:7). We read with wonder from Genesis 1:26 how God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness'; yet here we have the infinitely greater miracle of one who is God but now in man's likeness. In eternity, as the Son of God, he emptied himself; in time, as the Son of Man, he humbled himself. The giving of himself was something that began in eternity, before he even came to earth to be born.

There are two points that we need to be clear about. First, that it wasn't of his deity that the Lord emptied himself in becoming flesh. We've already made reference to the fact that he was 'God with us', and the Bible repeatedly declares that the one whom the Father sent into the world was 'the Son' (e.g. 1 John 4:14). He was 'the Son' before, and after, his birth at Bethlehem. Secondly, we must affirm that he became truly human. The Gospels faithfully record for us the reality of his humanity in describing his tiredness and thirst. Only as someone who was truly man could he suffer and bleed and die in our place as the sacrifice for our sins. These twin truths of his deity and of his humanity are both to be found in John 1:14: 'And the Word 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.' Thus,

the tiny infant form that was upheld in the arms of Mary his mother, was at the same time the Mighty God simultaneously ‘upholding all things by the word of His power’ (Hebrews 1:3). Well might we say in the words of the Bible: ‘Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness; He who was manifested in the flesh!’ (1 Timothy 3:16).

As well as John 1, there are two other places in the New Testament where the Lord is presented as the Word. They are: 1 John 1, and then also in Revelation 19:11-16 which views the Word as the Judge. How different his return to earth will be from his first Advent! For he will come at the head of the armies of heaven to wage the fearful campaign of Armageddon and to judge the nations still alive at that time.

The letter to the Hebrews opens by informing us that God has spoken in his Son (the Word whom we’ve been tracing). This not only means through the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth but also and especially through his person and his actions, for in these the glory of God was seen.

In Hebrews 1:2-4, he’s given the highest imaginable descriptive titles both in relation to the universe – for he’s called Creator, Upholder, Heir - and also in relation to God himself – when he’s also called the radiance, the image, and the Son. This glorious and unique person is presented as the grand finale, or last word, of God’s self-disclosure. With Peter, who was an eyewitness of his majesty on the mountain of Transfiguration, we might also say ‘such a voice’ (2 Peter 1:17)! And yet the Word was never more awesome than when he answered nothing to his accusers. The Silent Logos (or Word)! The silence of the Word then expressed as perfectly as ever the glory of the eternal God.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HUMBLE CHRIST

There were a number of reasons for Paul writing his letter to the Church of God at Philippi. It was first and foremost an acknowledgement of some recent financial support he'd received from them (Philippians 1:5-7; 4:14-19). It also seems that he felt the need to emphasise the themes of 'joy' and 'rejoicing' to these Christian disciples. And another thing that evidently concerned Paul was a failure on the part of some of the members to pull together as harmoniously as could be desired (Philippians 1:14-17, 27; 2:2ff.; 4:2,3). He urges them to reach agreement with one another and work together in joyful teamwork.

Paul's diagnosis was that if each put the interests of others before his or her own interests - if there was a greater willingness to make concessions - then all would be well. He begins chapter 2 by saying: "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:1-4).

And it was to reinforce this that Paul quoted some now famous Bible lines which celebrate the humiliation to which Christ voluntarily

submitted himself in becoming man and dying on the cross. I say he 'quotes' them, for it's been widely agreed that in Philippians 2:6-11 we find an early Christian hymn fragment or poetic composition - whether Paul's own work or someone else's. Paul quotes it here to give his call to unity the greatest possible support. He continues by saying:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:5-11).

In itself, this passage is a recital of the saving work of God in Christ - in his incarnation, passion and exaltation. But there's a major difference here. What is it, you ask? It's the context in which this is quoted. That's what brings fresh significance to the actions of Christ as they are rehearsed here. Remember, Paul's target here is some measure of disharmony among the Christian believers at Philippi. He'd already confronted disunity at Corinth and dealt with it in the very first chapter of his first Bible letter to them. When doing that, he'd also taken them directly to the cross (Philippians 1:10-2:16, before

bringing before them to such other truths as the sovereignty of God; the judgement-seat of Christ; the Body of Christ; the love of God; and the unity in diversity of spiritual gifts). Again, here, Paul's Spirit-directed instinct is to go to the cross to ground his appeal in the most heartfelt terms. But there's a difference here. Paul introduces this poetic summary by saying: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus ..."

In other words, the attitude shown by Christ is recommended as an example for his followers. Paul was appealing (according to C.F.D. Moule), 'Adopt towards one another, in your mutual relations, the same attitude which was found in Christ Jesus.' Jesus' attitude is presented as an example of what the Philippians' attitude should be, and they are being encouraged 'to become like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10). This is what Paul meant earlier when asking them to 'decide what is best' (Philippians 1:10 NIV). This is the best mindset to adopt. So here, in Philippians chapter 2, it's not so much the actions of Christ, but the attitude behind them which is the focus. And by God's help we – as well as they – are to try to copy it. Attitude has always been as important - if not more important to God - than any actions a person may do. Remember how the Lord criticised the religious leaders of Israel: "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me'" (Matthew 15:7-8).

Things had got so bad that by the end of the Old Testament, through the last Bible prophet, Malachi, God said to his people:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the LORD of hosts to you, O

priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Your name?' 'You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, 'How have we defiled You?' In that you say, 'The table of the LORD is to be despised.' 'But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?' says the LORD of hosts.

'But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?' says the LORD of hosts. 'Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you,' says the LORD of hosts, 'nor will I accept an offering from you'" (Malachi 1:6-10).

What a strength of feeling comes across in those words! The heart of God is expressing itself. They were kindling fire on God's altar, but it was useless because the attitude of the worshipers despised God, rather than exalting him. And God recorded in the Bible books of Chronicles, those kings which did the right things; and those kings who not only did the right things but did them with the right attitude or with their 'whole heart' (e.g. Amaziah in 2 Chronicles 25:2). So, it's right for us to praise God that Christ is as supreme in his attitude as he is supreme in his actions. In glorious, infinite contrast to God's commentary on Israel's performance, the Father opened the heavens and declared that he was 'well-pleased' with his son, Jesus Christ who did always the things which were pleasing to the Father.

Well, coming back to Philippians chapter 2, the quoted hymn or poem begins by asserting that Christ, existing already in the form of God, did not put a false estimation on equality with God. Instead he chose to display the form of God in the form of a slave. One commentator (J.B. Lightfoot) paraphrases the opening in this way: 'He, though existing before the worlds in the form of God, did not treat His equality with God as a prize, [as] a treasure to be greedily clutched and ostentatiously displayed: on the contrary He resigned the glories of heaven' - and he adds that 'this is the common and indeed almost universal interpretation of the Greek fathers, who would have the most lively sense of the requirements of the language'.

I think we need to pause there and absorb the words 'equality with God.' How utterly foolish and deceived are the cults who deny the equality of Jesus, the Son, with God the Father! But – and this is where it gets breath-taking – despite having equality with the Father as his eternal right, the Son of God, revealed to us as Jesus, did not regard equality with God as a vantage-point for achieving his personal ambitions. Precisely the opposite, in fact! He actually treated his equality with God as an occasion for renouncing every advantage or privilege to which he was entitled. He regarded his equality with God as an opportunity not for self-enrichment but for self-improvement and unreserved self-sacrifice. This is so amazing that it has confused some – as we've just been thinking – into rejecting his equality with God. How tragic! For this should be the very pinnacle of our praise!

This is not the only place where Paul points to Christ's self-denial as being an example for his people. 2 Corinthians 8:9, is another place, for example, where Paul encourages generous giving to the Jerusalem relief fund, by supplying as an incentive 'the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that through his poverty you might become rich.' There, he uses his own language, but here, in Philippians 2:6-11, he appears to have used a readily available form of words.

In a Roman colonial city that resounded to the cry 'Caesar is Lord' at all civic events, the Philippian Christians marched to a different drumbeat: one that said 'Christ is Lord!' By 'emptying himself', by plumbing the depths of humiliation, Christ has now been honoured by God with the name high over all - the designation 'Lord', in its highest sense. The God who in the Old Testament declares, 'I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other' (Isaiah 42:8), swears by himself, 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' (Isaiah 45:23). But now, says Paul, by God's own decree every knee is to bow in Jesus' name and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord - and in so doing they will enhance, not diminish, the glory of God.

CHAPTER THREE: THE COSMIC CHRIST

There was a time when non-conformist Jews took it upon themselves to try to emulate the rapturous experience of the Bible prophet Ezekiel. To achieve this, they engaged in religious exercises designed to recreate the vision which the prophet had of a heavenly chariot with God visibly enthroned above it (Ezekiel 1:15-28). To arrive at such a mystic experience, they believed that detailed observance of the Law was necessary, as well as a prolonged period of denying themselves all sorts of things. When they thought they were ready, they depended on help which they saw as coming from angelic beings in order to assist their upward passage. The biblically quoted book of Enoch references all this in some detail.

No wonder people tried to reproduce it, for Ezekiel's vision must have been awesome. To be standing by the Chebar river and to see the heavens opened, and in the middle of a bright storm cloud, there was some kind of mobile throne or throne on a chariot. And on the throne located above the 'wheels within wheels' and those strange 'living creatures,' was 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD ... a figure with the appearance of a man' (Ezekiel 1:23,26). Nothing clearer than that was discernible in this fiery spectacle which seemed to pretty much defy words. This was the vision of the glory of God which was permitted to Ezekiel, as the heavens were opened to the exiled prophet on the riverbank.

It was rather different in the case of a young Jewish rabbi who lived much later in time. He had a fanatical belief which fuelled a hatred of what he and many of his contemporaries viewed as a perverse sect within Judaism – the cult of the Nazarene, who was known as Jesus Christ. With all his heart, young Saul of Tarsus longed to exterminate this delusion. Not just a longing in fact, he was on his way to Damascus to make even more violent arrests, when he himself became the one struck down by the brilliance of a light which outshone the sun, and which left him grovelling on the dust of the highway. A voice addressed him out of what the Apostle Paul later referred to as ‘the heavenly vision.’

This was the vision of the glory of God as permitted to Paul. To his total shock, it would turn out to be none other than the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ who was speaking to him, and later he would describe to others ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Notice how Paul has sharpened up the vision of the glory of God. Whereas Ezekiel had seen the semblance of the likeness of a man; Paul saw ‘the glory of God in the face of Christ.’ Not even ‘one like unto a son of man’ as Daniel saw, but this is now pin-sharp.

The light Paul saw that day put out every other light in his life. Whatever he’d previously prized about the light of the Hebrews or the knowledge of the Greeks or the glory of the Romans, it was now nothing at all compared to the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. That alone directed his life-long ambition to magnify Christ.

And this is what we find him doing as he begins to write to the Colossians. Unlike other letters where he begins by denouncing

heresy, after greeting the Colossians, Paul launches straight into what is perhaps the greatest detailed presentation of the person of Christ in all the Bible. The fact that he does it in rhythmical prose with some repetition of terms suggests that he may have been borrowing from - or more likely extending - an existing early Christian hymn.

Teaching that was about the person of Christ was the major truth being attacked by the false teachers at Colossae, and so Paul brings the correct teaching about Christ which he presents to his readers before dealing with the false versions. Beginning in verse 15, he says: "He who is the image of the invisible God, Firstborn before all creation, because in Him all things were created — things in heaven and things on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers — they have all been created through Him and for Him" (F.F. Bruce translation).

The first verse of this ancient hymn celebrates the role of Christ in creation, introducing him to us as 'the image of the invisible God' (see 2 Corinthians 4:4 in a context which again appears to recall Paul's conversion experience). Did Paul's sense of Jesus Christ as being the image of God date all the way back to his Damascus Road experience, we wonder?

To call Christ 'the image of God' is to say that in him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested – indeed the invisible has become visible. In another of his letters, Paul declares that since the creation of the world the 'everlasting power and divinity' of the unseen Creator may be 'clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (Romans 1:20). But in Christ there's an all-surpassing disclosure of the invisible God's 'power and divinity.'

‘The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ’ has shone into believing hearts through the same creative Word that first called on light to shine out of darkness (2 Corinthians 4:4-6; Genesis 1:3). The idea of Christ as the goal of all creation resonates powerfully with us from this first verse as we now proceed further: “He indeed is before all things, and they all cohere in Him; He is also the head of the body, the church.” (F.F. Bruce's translation).

This is a kind of link piece or bridge before we arrive at verse two, and it serves to re-affirm the pre-existence and cosmic significance of Christ which we've already learnt from verse one. But notice it also introduces Christ as the head of the body which is his church. This is Paul's distinctive contribution to our understanding of the person of Christ. Was this seed also sown in his mind when the risen Lord addressed him on the Damascus Road, crying out from heaven about the injuries being inflicted on his body on earth? Other Bible writers – such as the apostle John and the writer to the Hebrews – inform us equally of Christ's cosmic significance and pre-existence, but God granted it to Paul to break the news of the metaphor of the church being the body of which Christ is head. The risen Christ is head of the body, which is the church. In his earlier letters of Corinthians and Romans, Paul has developed the idea of the body; it's here – and in Ephesians – that he now subsequently develops the idea of Christ as the head of the body – in all things he must have the supremacy. But let's now get into the second verse – with its mention of further reasons for Christ's supremacy:

“He is the beginning, Firstborn from the dead, that He might be preeminent in all things, because in Him it was decreed that all the fullness should take up residence and that through Him, [God] should reconcile all things to

Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross - [through Him], whether those on earth or those in heaven” (F.F. Bruce’s translation).

Just as the first verse celebrates Christ’s role in the old creation, the second verse celebrates his role in the new creation. In reconciliation as in creation, the work of Christ has a cosmic significance. ‘All things’ in heaven and on earth were created through him, but ‘all things’ equally have been estranged from their creator. Paul had elsewhere argued that the whole created order had been subjected to futility - here he implies hostility. Creation itself will one day be liberated, he tells us, from its present enslavement to decay. As with the freedom experienced by the children of God, this too is underwritten by Christ’s redemptive work at the cross (Romans 8:20-21). The peace available through the death of Christ may be freely accepted, or it may be imposed. The reconciliation of ‘all things’ spoken of here would seemingly include pacification, as distinct from salvation. All will bow the knee, and in that sense be reconciled to the truth of who Jesus is, even when it’s too late to save them.

The words ‘firstborn,’ and ‘beginning,’ as well as ‘all things’ are common to both verses of this hymn fragment in Colossians 1. For example, both in relation to the old creation and the new, Christ holds the rank of ‘firstborn’ – in other words, he’s supreme. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell bodily in Christ. The terminology takes us back to the mystic vision error we began with. False teachers were saying God’s substance was smeared across a range of demi-gods, angelic beings who gave access to higher realms of mystical experiences. How wrong! Jesus Christ is fully God. No created being shares that status.

I once heard of the famed conductor Toscanini as he was conducting the Philadelphia Philharmonic. They had just completed a performance of one of Beethoven's symphonies and the audience was in raptures. It had been one of those nights when everyone had performed seemingly flawlessly and the result had sounded like perfection. The audience acclaimed the conductor and his orchestra. They had to take many bows. Toscanini was a man famous for his criticisms by which he attempted to secure further improvement from his orchestra. That night, after many bows, he turned to his orchestra and said in a low voice 'you are nothing.' They didn't flinch: that was normal treatment from their conductor. But he then went on to say something which truly did shock them, he said 'and I am nothing.' Then quickly he added, 'but Beethoven is everything!' We could capture Paul's message here and say 'you are nothing,' and 'I am nothing,' but 'Christ is all and in all' (Colossians 3:11).

CHAPTER FOUR: THE INCARNATE CHRIST

Let's begin our look at Christ's supremacy in this chapter with a reading from the Bible book of Hebrews:

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world ... is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation [or imprint] of His nature [Greek: *hupostasis*, hoop-os'-tasis, substance], and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

That last verse we just read tells us that Jesus Christ is the exact imprint of the divine substance. But historically some have stumbled over the Bible's teaching here – the very teaching which underscores the supremacy of the Son which is our topic. In the early fourth century A.D., a man called Arius proclaimed that the Son was brought into being by God's will and so was not self-existing as God is. Arius claimed, wrongly, that God the Father always existed, but the Son of God had a finite beginning. At the same time, it must be pointed out that the Arian Christ is not, by his essential nature, truly human any more than he is truly God. His nature and being is that of a creature like our own in that sense but elevated far above ours in degree.

Arius never denied his godlike pre-existence. The Christ whom Arius preached is not God become man – but someone less than God who became more than man. This shows how careful we need to be with the Bible language at this point in Hebrews 1:3. When it speaks of the exact imprint of the divine substance, it's asking us to picture the distinct, but totally equivalent, imprint made by a seal in hot wax. The imprint made answers perfectly to the seal that made it. Therefore, the teaching here is that everything that's in the Father is in the Son. They share the very same substance. Now let's complete the third verse of that first chapter of Hebrews. It tells us that Jesus:

“When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘you are my son, today I have begotten you?’ and again, ‘I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me?’” (Hebrews 1:3-5).

This really is showing to us the supremacy of Christ! And here we're given two specific reasons why. They're stated either side of the claim that Christ is better than the angels – and stated in order to support the fact of the Lord's supremacy over the angels. Did you notice them? Actually, both relate to the Lord being both God and man, but we'll come to that later.

The first reason is that he's the exalted purifier of our sins – no angel could ever be that. And the second reason was the one about the Lord belonging to the line of David – again something that could never be true of any angel. Perhaps, you don't think our quoted verse (Hebrews 1:5) is talking about how Jesus was a son of king David?

You may have thought it was talking directly about Jesus being God's son? After all, isn't that how he's shown to be better than the angels – because he's God's son?

Well, wait a moment, Hebrews 1:5 is built from two Old Testament quotations: one from the book of Psalms and the other from the first book of Samuel. To appreciate what it's saying we need to research those Old Testament quotations. The first quote in Hebrews 1:5 comes from Psalm 2:7 where the speaker, historically, was the then newly installed king in Jerusalem. His position was under some threat, but he confidently says: "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'"

So we need to explain in context the royal significance which the term 'my son' has in that particular verse. I agree that, as we read that now, with the great gap in history standing between, our thoughts immediately turn to Jesus; not least because we know those words are certainly applied by New Testament writers to Jesus (for example, by the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 13). But the place to start in all Bible exposition is by researching what the original hearers were meant to understand by it in the first place. So let's do that. Psalm 2 appears to have been a coronation psalm – or at least it was used to recall and reaffirm the enthronement of the king in Jerusalem at some point in history when surrounding nations were flexing their muscles and wanting to rebel from being under Judean sovereignty. Before Solomon's coronation, you remember, God had promised to David concerning his son:

"I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me;
when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod

of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ‘Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever’” (2 Samuel 7:14-16).

This is, in fact, the other Old Testament text quoted in our Hebrews verse, and makes it very clear, specifically in the case of Solomon, that each king belonging to David’s dynasty was viewed as God’s adopted son. This was true in a functional sense – meaning that the earthly king was viewed as the one charged with the same duty as God – which was administering rule over God’s people. This wasn’t limited to Solomon, because there’s talk of David’s throne being established for ever. Other successive descendants of David, down to the Messiah himself, would be used to fulfil this. So, we see that in general, the great king in heavenly Zion and the king of David’s line in Jerusalem were viewed in such scriptures as existing in a father-son relationship.

So, going back to Psalm 2, we shouldn’t overload it with mysticism. The ‘today’ it mentions is most likely the historical coronation day of a new king in David’s dynasty. Someone had recently ascended to the throne in Jerusalem, and the surrounding vassal states were taking the opportunity to signal that they were unhappy with imperialist Judean rule in his hands. Of course, the greatest application of this text is, indeed, in its application to the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. The first church of God in Jerusalem could see that its message was very meaningful in terms of what had taken place at the cross (Acts 4).

And now, returning to Hebrews 1:3-5, we’ve shown how these Old Testament texts are combined in appealing to the fact that the Lord

Jesus was born as a royal son of David's line. And in that - as in the fact that he went to the cross and established the basis for all purification of sins - we have the two stated reasons why he's better than any angel - and why he's supreme! And each of these two reasons involve the wonder of his becoming flesh.

Of course, for the writer to the Hebrews, Jesus is also the Son of God 'through whom also he made the worlds' (Hebrews 1:2) and is addressed (by the application of Old Testament scripture) not only as 'Lord' (Hebrews 1:10) but actually as 'God' (Hebrews 1:8). But there's no New Testament writer who more emphatically underlines the necessity of Jesus' humanity if there was to be any hope for humanity - none more so than the writer to the Hebrews - who tells us: "Since ... the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death' he might 'deliver' them (Hebrews 2:14). "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect' if he was to be their effective high priest, we read: 'it is not of angels that he takes hold; [but] he takes hold of the descendants of Abraham'" (Hebrews 2:16).

He sympathizes with the weaknesses of his fellow-men and knows how best to help them, for "he himself has suffered and been tempted' - tempted indeed 'in every respect ... as we are, yet without sinning" (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). There's everything warmly and appealingly human in the picture of one who poured out his soul in "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death", and "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7) - who blazed the trail of faith and persevered to the end, enduring the cross and despising the shame, putting up with sinners' hostility so that his people, profiting by his example, need not "grow weary or fainthearted" (Hebrews 12:2).

The reality of Christ's humanity is shown here. Another ancient misunderstanding was called Docetism, from a Greek word meaning 'to seem.' This early heresy questioned Jesus' humanity – saying he only seemed to be human. This is equally in error but has tended to be more tolerated – as when some say that from conception to birth our Lord passed through the body of his mother 'like water through a pipe,' deriving no part of his humanity from her. To defend against such a view, how wonderfully precise the inspired writing of the Apostle Paul is when he says: "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3). Our Lord did not come in the mere likeness of flesh; far less in sinful flesh; but "in the likeness of sinful flesh" – fully human as we are (which, as our kinsman-redeemer, was required of him), but without sin and incapable of it.

It's in our Lord's humanity, as well as his deity, that we appreciate his supremacy. In Hebrews 2:7, we read 'You have crowned him with glory and honour'. Verse 9 expands on this and tells us: "Jesus was made for a little while lower than the angels ... because of the suffering of death - [and, it goes on to tell us, he was] - crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone."

When the verse is read like that – and I believe it's the correct emphasis – we see that this crowning with glory and honour relates to the Lord's life on earth. You may well ask: 'How was this glory and honour seen in the Lord's earthly life?' To answer, we only need to state the facts. He was with the wild beasts in the desert (Mark 1:13); he made water into wine (John 2); he calmed the wind and waves (Luke 8:24); he walked on the sea, putting it under his feet (John

6:19); he compelled a fish to bring him a coin (Matthew 17:23); he multiplied fish and bread to feed a crowd (John 6); he withered a barren fig tree with a word (Mark 11:13); he healed leprosy, paralysis, blindness and deafness; he commanded demons and they obeyed him; he raised the dead; when he was born a star appeared, when he died the sun disappeared. As one commentator has summed it all up: 'Only by the life of One so crowned with glory and honour could the dominion be restored to man' (J.M. Flanigan, WTBT-Hebrews, Ritchie) – he was referring, of course, to the original God-given dominion over creation which was frustrated by the fall in the garden of Eden. What a Saviour!

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CREATOR CHRIST

The concluding book of the New Testament begins in this way: “The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants” (1:1a). One of the intriguing questions discussed by scholars is the phrase that’s found there, and which says ‘of Jesus Christ’ - as in the expression ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ’. An interesting question is: ‘Is this possessive or is it descriptive?’ In other words, is it the revelation **belonging to** Christ and conveyed by him? Or is it a revelation **about** Christ? Or could it even be both?

In his book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Professor Daniel Wallace suggests that this combined sense is most likely here. For, clearly, the messages of this inspired book come **from** our Lord (Revelation 22:16); and yet it’s also true that the content is ‘supremely and ultimately **about** Christ’ (1996, 120-121; emphasis added). The title ‘revelation’ is from an original word meaning ‘unveiling’ – and it’s not so much the unveiling of the future that we find here but rather the unveiling of the glory of Jesus Christ as he stands related to all that’s going to come about in God’s future purposes for this world – and in the world to come. As early as verse 13 of the first chapter, the Apostle John describes for us the Christ he saw in his vision:

“I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were

like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength” (Revelation 1:13-16).

That very much sets the scene for what follows. It’s centred on Christ. In this book we’re developing some of the thrilling truths about our Lord Jesus Christ – including those we encounter in the text of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. The Apostle John tells us in verse 19 that the Lord told him to: “... write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things” (Revelation 1:19).

It’s probably worth being clear about that. There are three parts to that statement: first, the things John had seen; second, the present state of things; and third, the things which were still to happen. First of all, the thing John had seen was the vision of Jesus. Then in the second place, those things which were then a present reality refer to the state of the seven churches that we’re introduced to in the seven messages of chapters 2 and 3. By the way, this clarifies that these were actual local churches existing at the close of the first century in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. Then, finally, the third part of the statement in verse 19 mentions the things to come, as they are detailed from the sixth chapter onwards – being the overall shape of future events. There’s not the space here to defend the futuristic interpretation of the book of Revelation, but I do want to strongly commend it to you as the only viable way of looking at the book if we are to avoid taking great liberties with the text.

So, let's come to the last example of the seven messages given to John to communicate to the then seven local churches of God in Turkey. It's the letter to the Church of God in Laodicea, whose existence in history is confirmed by the mention it receives in Paul's Bible letter to Colossae. So now let's hear this last letter:

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot.’ So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ‘Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:14-22).

If we had read through every one of the seven messages, by this stage, we'd have come to recognise a certain structure which repeats itself each time. Each message begins with the Lord referring to himself in a brief way which each time recalls something of the vision John had of Christ in Revelation chapter 1. Then the Lord declares 'I know ...' and proceeds to some notable feature of the church in question, usually positive. Then the Lord says: 'But I have this against you ...' and proceeds to a negative review of the church. He then recommends a remedy; and promises a reward to those who respond victoriously.

Here, in the message that was directed to Laodicea, Jesus identified himself as the "faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God" (Revelation 3:14; cf. Revelation 22:13). Several important expressions strike us. First, there's the Lord's affirmation of his integrity. He's faithful in character and true in his testimony. Second, Christ didn't offer any support to the theory that the universe is eternal or, as is found more commonly today, that it's the result of a self-caused accident – on the contrary, Jesus declares it to be a creation in time. Third, he affirmed his personal, active role in the creation process.

When Jesus describes himself as 'the beginning of the creation of God,' the term 'beginning' comes from a word that's found fifty-five times in the New Testament and which is used in a variety of senses. In studying the Bible, we must be prepared to look at the entire range of possible meanings of an original word, but equally, we must select the one meaning which is best suited to the way the word is being used in the text in question. In this context, it describes the **cause** or source by which something was begun (Thayer 1958, p.77; Balz and Scheider 1990, p.162). It's mischievous in the extreme that anyone should have misappropriated this text to suggest that Christ

did not exist eternally, but was created by God as the first of his creations. The same author, the Apostle John, wrote in the opening of his Gospel: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3).

The most superficial comparison with any number of other totally lucid Bible texts such as Colossians 1:15, 18 or 1 Corinthians 8:6 or Hebrews 1:2 would show that this word - as applied to Christ - cannot mean that he was the first created thing, but rather that he himself is the first cause or originator of all created things. Even liberal scholars (such as William Barclay) have flatly denied that there can be any other legitimate meaning here by saying that this signifies that Jesus 'was the moving cause of all creation.' He was the one who 'began the process of creation and who initiated the work of creation' (1960, p.177).

Therefore, when we read in Genesis chapter one those famous opening words of the Bible, they fully account for the fact that God was, in Christ, creating the heavens and the earth. Jesus Christ is the beginning, and in the beginning God created this magnificent universe. With this first of our featured titles of Christ selected from the book of Revelation, the words of Colossians chapter one agree:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, 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 is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the

firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Colossians 1:15-18).

Clearly this final book of the New Testament is very much **about** Christ, as well as being conveyed **by** him.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ETERNAL CHRIST

Very soon - almost immediately after the resurrection - we have the clearest expression of how Jesus' followers viewed him, when standing before him in the secure room: "Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Sadly, the waters would soon be muddied by false teachers like Arius who introduced the novelty of claiming Jesus was an inferior being to the Father. Although these false novelties were effectively countered, various forms of them have persisted right down to the present day. From the United Kingdom to The Philippines, in nominally Christian sub-cultures, the teaching of Arius still surfaces in pseudo-Christian cults. Of course, the entire New Testament testifies to the eternal deity of the Son of God, known to us in humanity as Jesus Christ. In particular, the divine nature of Christ is well-documented in Revelation, which is our chosen text for the latter part of this book.

In the Bible's final chapter, Jesus says: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:12-13). Yes, Jesus promises here that he is coming back again. Let me say that reminds me of how one day a professor gave his students a harsh assignment: They each had to preach one sermon in the upcoming month - without any notes!

The professor promised his anxious students, that if they ever lost their train of thought (which they all did!), they only had to repeat their last uttered sentence over and over again with more and more dynamism. The promise? They would remember the sermon they had written. Guaranteed! To poor Johnny, that promise was never realized. Although he was preaching in an ideal situation - a small church comprised of older people - as soon as the words "I am coming" were out of his mouth, all of the rest of his sermon fled.

He started to panic. All eyes in the audience were on him and he couldn't remember a word of what he was supposed to say! He stared at them for a minute, sweat dripping from his face. He wanted to scream "Help!", but that wouldn't look too good on his résumé. With relief he remembered his professor's promise, and with a bit more energy, he again uttered: "I am coming!" When his mind was still blank, he did it again. And again. In desperation he took a firm hold of the old pulpit and screamed out with all of his might: "I am coming!" He was shaking so much by this time that the ancient wood of the pulpit gave way under his weight, and he fell off the platform in front of an older lady on the front row, with the top of the pulpit still tightly gripped in his fists. Embarrassed, he apologized. The old lady reassuringly replied: "That's all right, young man! After all, you did warn me you were coming!" Hmm, that's not at all what he was intending when attempting to preach about Christ's second coming!

Back to what we were saying: In the Bible's final chapter, Jesus says: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:12-13). These words – this self-description – of himself as

the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, and the beginning and the end, repeats identically the description of the 'Lord God,' the 'Almighty' in chapter one where we find the following statement:

"John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood - and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father - to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:4-8).

So the title 'Alpha and Omega' is equally applied to Jesus Christ as it is to the Father. It's a title, of course, which brings together the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. It indicates, therefore, one who is both the beginning and the end of all things. All things having been created by him and for him (see Colossians 1). Without question, this is an affirmation of deity as applied to Jesus Christ here in Revelation and expressed in **eternal** terms.

I have a friend who was delivered from the error of a pseudo-Christian cult quite a few years ago. The pivotal point, naturally, was the Bible's clear teaching about the person of the Lord Jesus. The two Bible texts which the Holy Spirit used to crystallise his thinking were

the ones we've just used. Similarly, he was also startled when he first read the words of Thomas in John 20 who confessed in breathless worship to the risen Jesus: you are 'my Lord and my God!' Now, it so happened – but, of course, it was no coincidence - that my friend had also been reading in the Bible's last chapter from which we've quoted. He'd been reading these words: "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. But he said to me, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:8-9).

It was as if a shaft of brilliant light hit him, dispelling the darkness of error. He'd been conditioned to think of Jesus as a created being, as are the angels. But now he could see the difference. The angel told John not to worship him; but Jesus received worship from Thomas and the other disciples. The difference was clear. Then his eyes fell on the later words 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' and he laid them alongside Revelation 1:8 to observe that what is true of Jesus is true of Almighty God. He now uses this combination of verses to confound former colleagues, even using their own corrupted Bible version to do so.

Of course, as we said earlier, the testimony of the Book of The Revelation to the eternal deity of Christ is fully consistent with teaching throughout the New Testament. We will content ourselves in closing this chapter just to take two selected quotes from the letter to the Hebrews which emphasise very explicitly the 'for ever' character of our Lord. There in the first chapter, we read the words of God the Father addressing his Son and saying: But of the Son He says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the

scepter of his kingdom” (Hebrews 1:8). And again, from the last chapter, we have “... Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

From the first chapter of Hebrews to the thirteenth and last, as with the Book of Revelation (from chapter one to chapter twenty-two), Jesus Christ is shown to be the one who is ‘the first and the last’!

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE PURE CHRIST

One of the most bizarre books written in recent years must surely be *The Da Vinci Code* by US author Dan Brown. Its fabrications have been the subject of lawsuits and scathing historical reviews. As a means of bringing its author fame and money it was brilliantly conceived, but in terms of scholarship it left much to be desired. It has been described as 'a gasp of human scepticism'. It's to be hoped that it's a last gasp! The Bible has been attacked on intellectual and scientific grounds, and we can measure the failure of these means to dent its credibility by the fact that this last gasp effort - the recycled fabrications of the *Da Vinci Code* - has now been put forward in an attempt to attack the moral purity of the Bible's central character: Jesus Christ. The Bible has confounded its critics, so now the attack is personal against the one the Bible claims to be the Son of God come as man.

Those of his contemporaries who were not 'on the side of truth' (John 18:37) were not bashful in the slurs they heaped upon the historical Jesus whom they despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3). They twisted his words, sneered at his parentage, branded him demon-possessed, ridiculed him and thought him mad. But, apparently, it never entered their minds to attack the purity of his lifestyle. The Bible records faithfully the time he spent in the company of women who were among his followers and the beneficiaries of his ministry. No one - not even one of his fiercest enemies at the time - spoke against his behaviour with women; except that he surprised everyone

by talking with women on subjects of significance, thereby breaking the existing taboos of that culture.

When Jesus turned to the crowds and said: "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46), there was no-one who could rightly condemn him - on any matter. Repeatedly, at his mock trial, Pilate said, "I find no fault with this man" (John 18:38). Different Bible writers who lived most closely to Christ testify that 'he did no sin' (1 Peter 2:22); and that he 'knew no sin' (2 Corinthians 5:21); and it was John, the closest of them all, who said that there was 'no sin in him' (1 John 3:5). After three years of really close friendship, John recalls his most striking impression of the life of Christ.

Usually, when we become closer to someone we respect, we're disappointed to find that they, too, have serious faults. But the closer John became, the more he could say of Jesus: 'in Him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). This is crucial testimony. It points to what was distinctive about the life and person of Jesus Christ, whom the Bible presents as embodying the quality all Old Testament animal sacrifices shared: they were expressly commanded to be 'without defect' or blemish. This is why the lies contained within The Da Vinci Code and its predecessors are so damaging - should they be in any way believed by gullible persons. If it were possible for opponents of Christianity, or those who unthinkingly do their work for them, to succeed in pointing to a single moral blemish in the life and person of Jesus Christ, then the whole of Christianity would be in ruins. But that can never be. In all the world's religions, the claims made for the sinless moral purity of Christ find no parallel - not by a million miles. This thought about the incomparable Christ reminds me of an incident recorded in Matthew's Gospel ...

“And after six days, Jesus took Peter and James, and his brother John, and brought them up into a high mountain privately. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothing became white as the light and, behold! Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. And answering, Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You desire, let us make three tents here, one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he was yet speaking, behold, a radiant cloud overshadowed them. And, behold, a voice out of the cloud saying, ‘This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have been delighting; hear Him’ ... And lifting up their eyes, they did not see anyone except Jesus alone” (Matthew 17:1-8).

Peter made the same mistake here on the Mount of Transfiguration that religious cults make even to this day. For when Peter said to the Lord, “It is good for us to be here. If You desire, let us make three tents here, one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” he was, in effect, bringing the Lord down to the same level as Moses and Elijah. The Father’s voice from heaven corrected this mistake, restoring to Jesus the unique place he occupies in human history. In all the world, he is without peer.

From the past to the present day, religious devotees have tolerated chronic moral weaknesses in their so-called gods. These are gods made in the image of fallen men and women, and in what’s written of them we find a cesspool of temper, jealousy, lust and shameful acts. It’s been said that the Greek gods didn’t give up on the Greeks, but that the pagan Greeks gave up on their gods. Some of their own writers, it seems, lost patience with the depravity of their gods.

I distinctly remember hearing at first hand of the shocked reaction of trainee teachers during a demonstration session on comparative religions. They were shocked at the immoral behaviour some religions tolerated in their gods. It was apparent from the strength of the trainees' reaction that they judged the alleged behaviour of the gods to be unworthy of humans. Yes, voyeurism, incest and rape are among the things found when one reads the writings of major world religions in which they describe the behaviour and character of their own gods.

By contrast our subject is purity - the purity seen in the life of Jesus Christ. What do we mean by purity? It's actually quite hard to think of a definition for 'purity'. We tend to define it as the absence of something, don't we? We might regard someone as pure if they don't do certain things or don't go to certain places. It's a bit like trying to define the word 'nothing'. Basically, it means 'no thing', so you just have to define it as the absence of something. Purity, for us, is the absence of impurity.

But the difference with Jesus is that purity was a positive thing with him: he was declared to be the Son of God by the spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4). It's as if we can define purity as the presence of something in his case - not merely as the absence of things as it may be in our case. For example, there are those who profess to hate sin, but they don't seem to love righteousness. They are strong in denouncing evil, but not equally strong in applauding right. Jesus Christ, by contrast, loved righteousness and hated iniquity.

The purity of Jesus Christ manifested itself in actions and in speech; negatively, by never doing sin or speaking falsehood - for he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth (1 Peter 2:22);

but also positively, since he always did what was pleasing to God and was always speaking the things which pleased God. God confirmed this directly in Matthew 17:5 where we read that: "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Now, that's positive purity! Purity that's defined as much by the positive as by the negative - as much by what is said as by what's not said. One of the major descriptions of God in the Old Testament is that he is the holy God. Take Deuteronomy 23:14, which says: "For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you."

Holy means being free from defilement of any type. It's a holiness that expresses itself in moral purity. To say that Christ is absolutely holy, is to say that he's absolutely pure. One way of seeing this is in the many terms the Bible uses to describe Christ's purity. In Hebrews 7:26, Jesus is called a high priest - one who is "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens." And, in Hebrews 9:14, we're told that: "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse[s] our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

And more than that, the Bible multiplies expressions and figures in order to fully describe the absolute holiness or moral purity of Christ. There's nothing in nature with which to compare it except light. For as the apostle John says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Victor Hugo said: 'Pythagoras, Epicu-

rus, Socrates, Plato, these are the torches of the world; Christ is the light of day'. A dazzling white light glorified the face and garments of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Remember we read: "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29). That dazzling white light was the outshining of the moral purity within.

That brilliant holiness of Jesus was seen in his constant, never-failing victory over temptation. It wasn't merely the negative innocence that results from being shielded from contact with evil, but also the positive holiness that meets evil and overcomes it. Hebrews 4:15 says: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin." The wonder of it all is that Christ died to separate men and women whom he loves from the sin which he hates.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE CHARITABLE CHRIST

At the 1994 Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington, Mother Teresa gave a talk in which she touched on the sensitive theme of abortion. When a reporter afterwards asked President Bill Clinton what he thought of her remarks, he simply said, "It's very hard to argue against a life so well-lived!" This world has seen some great men and women. Some have performed heroic deeds; others have conceived of brilliant inventions and discoveries; some have inspired the masses by their statesmanship, magnificent writing or strength of moral character. But one figure in history stands unique. Incomparable. No other religious or moral figure comes even remotely close to Jesus Christ.

Lecky, the historian of European morals, wrote: "Christ has exerted so deep an influence that it may be truly said that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the ... philosophers and ... moralists." From very different standpoints across the centuries and cultures, commentators agree on this: the life of Christ stands supreme and impeccable. Even atheist Bertrand Russell admitted that it was debatable whether the method adopted by Mahatma Gandhi when calling for Indian independence from British rule would have succeeded, except for the fact that it appealed to the conscience of a nation that had been influenced by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, in the city of Ahmedabad in central India, Bertrand Russell's quotation greets each visitor. How remarkable is that! This means that in a predomi-

nantly Hindu nation, a quote by an atheist testifies to the impact of Jesus Christ upon both East and West in the world today!

Such has been the impact of ‘a life so well lived’ that it’s felt around the world, in all of its various cultures, two thousand years on. If, in the previous chapter, when considering the purity of Jesus’ life we were in some way looking at his heart, I’d like us now to look at his hands and to think about the kindest actions the world has ever seen. Children in Sunday school sometimes sing:

“Jesus hands were kind hands,

Doing good to all

Healing pain and sickness,

Blessing children small

Washing tired feet,

And helping those who fall;

Jesus hands were kind hands,

Doing good to all.”

Joseph Damian was a Christian missionary to lepers. One day he happened to spill boiling water on his feet. It took him some seconds to realize he should have been feeling pain, but wasn’t. When he next addressed the leper colony to which he was attached as a missionary, he looked out on their hands and feet minus the digits and didn’t begin with his usual greeting of ‘fellow believers’, but instead he addressed them as ‘fellow lepers’. Then he broke down and wept, in the

full realization that his body was crawling with that hideous disease which was now also destroying him. His compassion had cost him his own health and well-being. Matthew, in his Gospel, applies Isaiah's words to Jesus, when he writes, "He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases" (Isaiah 8:17).

This came directly after: "Jesus came into Peter's home ... saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever ... [and] touched her hand ... [and] the fever left her." Later that same day, we're told that Jesus "... healed all who were ill" (Matthew 8:14-16). In Jesus' time, a rabbi wouldn't come within a hundred feet of a leper on a windy day, but kept a margin of thirty metres or so. To this day, there are small enclosed rooms in synagogues so that people can throw money at lepers while avoiding contact. But Jesus touched them. Again in Matthew chapter 8, we read: "When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.' Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.'" And immediately his leprosy was cleansed ..."

His words had captivated the crowds, for he had just preached the greatest sermon ever. But coming down the mountain he reached out to the leper and touched him with his infinite compassion. As humans, we're often more impressed by actions than words. Actions speak louder, we would say.

We mentioned Mother Teresa in opening this chapter. She's a figure many people relate to when they think of amazing kindness. It was, of course, the life of Christ that inspired her. At one graduation ceremony at Harvard University, Mother Teresa was the guest of honour

and the keynote speaker. But actions would speak louder than words that day. She stood up as best she could with her small bent frame in front of row upon row of brilliant Harvard graduates. She probably seemed out of place before all that fresh-faced youth - her own face crazed with wrinkles. If they were smiling patronizingly before she began to speak, they certainly must have been smirking after she'd started. For she chose to speak on the subject of 'virginity'. I don't know how many of these graduates were still virgins, but most likely it was an uncomfortable subject. After squirming with embarrassment, I'm sure they were soon wishing the speech would end. What kind of polite, muted response would they give her? University protocol would surely guarantee a respectful applause for such an iconic guest speaker.

But events took an unexpected turn. A group of Indian children in the Boston area had begged their parents to take them to see Mother Teresa. She, and the ministry she'd begun, had been responsible for saving them from a doubtful future in India. Nearing the close of her speech, those children just could not wait any longer. They burst through the doors and rushed up to where she was at the front. Recognition lit up her face, as she swept them into her arms. A joyful reunion followed with those little charges whom she had rescued from the gutter. Suddenly, the whole auditorium burst out into spontaneous, thunderous applause. The Harvard graduates had forgotten their smirking reaction to her words, because they had seen her hands. They were responding to the kindness of her actions. Have you seen the hands of Jesus? Read the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and you'll see why the chorus says, "Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all".

Jesus Christ reached out to the destitute 2,000 years ago, and he still reaches out to us all. Within the scope of just two chapters, Matthew 8 and 9, we're seeing Jesus' hands. He stretched out and touched the leper; and before that he had touched the fevered hand of Simon Peter's mother-in-law while raising her up to full health again. But now I want to finish by letting you see more of Jesus' hands - from Matthew chapter 9:

“While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.” Jesus got up and began to follow him, and so did His disciples... When Jesus came into the official's house ... [He] ... saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder ... when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up ... As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” When He entered the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” Then He touched their eyes, saying, “It shall be done to you according to your faith.” And their eyes were opened” (Matthew 9:18-30).

The thing that's repeated again and again in all our readings is the fact that Jesus touched people. Have you felt the touch of Jesus in your life? His hands are the kindest ever. No one ever cared for you like Jesus. He's as incomparable in charity, as he is in purity and dignity and he never turns anyone away. Will you come to him?

CHAPTER NINE: THE DIGNIFIED CHRIST

Lots of subjects that were once considered unmentionable are now openly discussed - even joked about. Perhaps only death remains as a final taboo subject, one not to be talked about in polite company at the dinner table. But if we now swap Luke's account of the Mount of Transfiguration for Matthew's which we've been using until now in this book, then we'll see that death was, in fact, the topic of that glorious conversation. Let's hear what Luke says about it:

“Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were taking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”, not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying,

“This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone” (Luke 9:28-36).

Notice they were speaking about Jesus’ departure or death which was soon to take place at Jerusalem. It might seem strange that the topic of death - even Jesus’ death - should be back-lit over against such glory as was glimpsed on the mountain, but now we’ll be exploring something of the grandeur and majesty of Christ’s death for us in the plan of almighty God. Jesus was shortly to die a death that would be seen by many as being shameful or foolish. But this scene on the mountain anticipates Jesus’ death in an altogether different light. It’s the most breathtaking of all God’s purposes and something which will bring him eternal glory. The end of Moses and Elijah’s time on earth was remarkable in each case, but Jesus’ death was infinitely more wonderful and glorious in God’s purpose. Again, it shows the uniqueness of Christ.

But, as we’ve noted earlier, Peter made the same mistake on the Mount of Transfiguration that religious cults make still. The Father’s voice from heaven corrected his mistake, restoring to Jesus the unique place he occupies in human history. He is without equal. Having thought about how Jesus is without equal in purity and in charity, I’d now like us to think about how Jesus is also without equal in dignity. To read the Bible with understanding is to become aware that Jesus Christ had come to die sacrificially for the forgiveness of all who put their faith in him.

One of the ways the Bible prepares us for this insight is by introducing the idea of an actual scapegoat. In the Old Testament, there was a goat that was really known as the scapegoat, and it was one of what

may be described as 'shadows of Jesus'. If you meet someone on a sunny day, and the sun is behind them, you meet their shadow first before you actually meet the person. In the same way, the coming of Jesus cast shadows before it. One of those shadows was the scapegoat. On a particular day each year, the Jews were instructed to send a male goat into a remote, solitary place. It was led away there after having had the nation's sins all ritually transferred upon its head. That was a picture of how we can come by faith to see our sins removed by Jesus our sin-bearer, as he receded into the darkness of his experience on the cross away from the presence of God while bearing our penalty for us. But our emphasis now is on the way in which he did this. Proverbs chapter 30 impresses upon us the stateliness of the male goat - such as was used for the scapegoat:

“There are three things which are stately in their march, even four which are stately when they walk: The lion which is mighty among beasts And does not retreat before any, the strutting rooster, the male goat also, and a king when his army is with him” (Proverbs 30:29-31).

There it is: among those things which the writer in his wisdom singles out as being particularly stately in their march is the male goat - an animal often associated with the altar of sacrifice in Israel. The sacrificial victim moved with grace and dignity. Now, I want us to see the stateliness - the dignity - of Jesus Christ which couldn't be hidden even in the extreme conditions of him heading out to die as the sacrifice for sin. You can read the account in the Gospels, but I'd like to quote to you from an old and anonymous sermon in which the preacher used his imagination to set the scene for us as though it were the reflection of Pontius Pilate sometime afterwards. It's called

'What Pilate said to Gaius one day'. Remember, what follows are imagined to be the words and thoughts of Pontius Pilate.

"It suddenly closed in on me, Gaius, the impact of how trapped I was. The proud arm of Rome with all its boast of justice was to be but a dirty dagger in the pudgy hands of the priests. I was waiting in the room ... I use for court, officially enthroned with cloak and guard, when they let this Jesus in. Well, Gaius, don't smile at this as you value your jaw, but I've had no peace since the day he walked into my judgement hall.

"It's been years, Gaius, but those scenes I read from the back of my eyelids every night. You've seen Caesar, haven't you? When he was young, inspecting the legion, his arrogant manner was child-like compared to the manner of the Nazarene. He didn't have to strut, you see. He walked towards my throne, arms bound, with a strident mastery - this Jesus did - and a kind of a control that by its very audacity silenced the room for an instant, and left me trembling with an insane desire to stand up and salute.

"The clerk began reading the absurd list of charges, the priestly delegations punctuating these with the palm rubbings, the beard strokings, the eye rollings, and the pious gutturals - by now which I had learned to ignore, but I more felt it, Gaius, than heard it. I questioned him mechanically and he answered very little. But what He said and the way he said it - it was as if his level gaze had pulled up my naked soul right up into my eyes and was probing me there and a voice kept saying in my ears 'Why! You're on trial Pilate!' And the man was not listening to the charges, you would have sworn he'd just come in out of friendly interest to see what was going to happen to me and the very pressure of his standing there had grown unbearable,

when a slave rushed in, all a-tremble, interrupting court, bringing a message from Claudia. She'd stabbed at the stylus in that childish way she does when she's distraught. "Don't judge this amazing Man, Pilate", she wrote. I was haunted in dreams by him this night. Gaius, I tried to free him...

"I declared him out of my jurisdiction being a Galilean, but the native King Herod discovered he was born in Judea and sent him right back to me. I appealed to the crowd, hoping that they would be his sympathisers, but Caiaphas had stationed agitators to whip up the beasts that cry for blood. And you know how in this town here any citizen loves the blood of another person just after breakfast and screams for another's blood.

"I had him beaten, Gaius, a thorough barracks-room beating. I'm still not sure why. To appease the crowd I guess. But do we Romans really need any reason for beatings? Isn't that the code for anything we don't understand? Well, it didn't work, Gaius. The crowd roared like some slaving beast when I brought him back. If only you could have watched Him - they had thrown some rags of mock purple over his...bleeding shoulders. They'd jammed a chapter of thorns down on his forehead and it fitted. It all fitted, Gaius. He stood there watching them from my balcony, swaying from weakness by now, but royal, I tell you, not just pain, but pity shining from his eyes and I kept thinking somehow this is monstrous - this is upside-down. That purple is real. That crown is real and somehow these animal noises the crowd is shrieking should be praise - and then Caiaphas played his masterstroke on me - he announced there in public that this Jesus claimed a crown and that was treason to Caesar.

“And the guards began to glance at one another quickly and that mob of spineless fools began to shout ‘Hail Caesar, Hail Caesar’ and, Gaius, I knew I was beaten - I gave the order. I couldn’t look at him. Then I did a childish thing. I called for water and there on the balcony I washed my hands of that whole affair. But as they led him away, Gaius, I did look up and he turned and looked at me. No smile, no pity, just glanced at my hands and I feel the weight of his eyes on them from now on.”

Yes, something of the stateliness of the male goat comes through from that imagined recollection of when Christ was led out to die. Remember, the male goat was merely a picture, a shadow. Jesus Christ is the substance; the only true sacrifice which can put away sins. And surely there’s reality behind what we imagined Pilate saying: “He didn’t have to strut, you see. He walked towards my throne, arms bound, with a strident mastery - this Jesus did - and a kind of a control that by its very audacity silenced the room for an instant, and left me trembling with an insane desire to stand up and salute.” Yes, even in such a death, the dignity of Christ couldn’t be hidden.

In life and in death, in purity, Jesus Christ is the incomparable, supreme Christ. The one in whom God, his Father, is still delighting. “Hear him”, he says. To those who are weary and burdened, his own word of invitation is, “Come to Me, and I will give you rest.”

CHAPTER TEN: THE SACRIFICED CHRIST

In Revelation 5, there's a moving description of Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb. The description tells us that the Lamb had been 'slain,' but the amazing and wonderful thing in John's vision is that it was also 'standing' (v. 6). Let's read the Bible text we're talking about:

"I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals." And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne" (Revelation 5:1-7).

This is very precious in the original sense of the word. In the Old Testament we sometimes read of the Word of God being very 'precious'

or rare in those days. Compare how we talk about precious metals or precious stones. Why are they precious? It's because they are rare! If they were common or easy to find, they would lose their value. They are precious precisely because they are rare. The Old Testament talked about God's Word being precious at times when it was rare – when, as it says, there was no frequent revelation from the Lord through his prophets to his people.

The Apostle Peter wrote about 'the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:19). This is about rarity in the extreme: for we're talking about someone who's unique, without peer. This is what's communicated in the heavenly scene John was privileged to witness in his vision of heaven. The question resounded in the vault of heaven, 'Who is worthy?' The response was a deafening silence. No-one moved. A pregnant pause, during which time John was moved to tears. He was then ordered to stop crying, and his attention was drawn to someone initially described as a Lion, but who appeared as a Lamb. The majesty and triumph of the Man of Calvary, Jesus Christ, is presented in this dramatic way. The one who died the shameful death of the cross has now entered into his glory.

The Apostle Paul spoke about his sufferings for Christ's sake. He said he bore branded in his body the marks of Christ. Those marks in Paul's body will heal: his new body will display no trace of them. By contrast, the marks of the nails and spear and thorns will never be erased from Christ's body: the slain one who's now standing. Their continuing existence, the scars of a divine sacrificial love, will melt our hearts in worship in his presence for ever.

And so we return to the description which tells us that the Lamb had been 'slain,' but which wonderfully also proclaimed that it was

‘standing’ (v.6). Both verbs are in what’s known as ‘the perfect tense’ in the original language of the New Testament. This grammatical feature tends to emphasize the continuing effect of these actions. In other words, the results and benefits of Jesus’ death are lasting. They are permanent, never needing to be repeated (cf. Hebrews 9:28). When we carefully observe detail like this - as found in the Bible text - we see at once the error of any false teaching which might attempt or want to enact repeatedly the sacrifice of Christ. That’s as utterly foolish as it is utterly unnecessary.

What’s more, the permanent standing aspect of the second verb indicates that following his resurrection Jesus never died again (cf. Romans 6:9). The Bible again and again resounds to the note of triumph that he ‘ever lives’ to intercede for us, to save us to the uttermost, and to represent us before his God and Father. No Christian service would be worth a thing without the truth of this glorious fact. The same wonder is expressed vividly by Paul in his verbal ‘shift of gears’ in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Christ ‘died’ (aorist tense) he says - meaning a one-time act - was ‘buried’ (aorist) – again meaning a one-time act - but ‘has been raised’ (perfect) - meaning he was raised and **remained** raised!

When the Lord first appeared to the Apostle John as recorded in the first chapter of the book of Revelation, he’s described as the ‘first-born of the dead’ (Revelation 1:5) and then later it is said that he’s alive ‘forever more’ (Revelation 1:18). Praise God for the Lamb that was slain but is standing! Because if Christ has not been raised, our Christian faith is an empty, useless thing. Everything stands or falls based on whether or not he is standing. But John reports from his insight into heaven that he stands!

Death could not keep its prey. The gates of Hades could not prevail against him to keep him in its domain, the domain of the dead. As a result, he's building his Church today, one new believer at a time. Have you bowed at the feet of Calvary's Lamb – so that you can stand in the grace of God and walk in newness of life?

Just a word about the term, 'lamb.' It's a common symbol in Revelation. Twenty-eight times Jesus is pictured as a lamb. In Revelation 5:6, the Saviour is described as a slain Lamb, which involved the shedding of his blood on the cross some two thousand years ago outside the city wall of Jerusalem. In addition to the blood of the Lamb, it's inspiring to read of:

- The wrath of the Lamb (6:16);
- The book of life of the Lamb (13:8);
- The presence of the Lamb (14:10);
- The song of the Lamb (15:3);
- The marriage of the Lamb (19:7);
- The marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9);
- The wife of the Lamb (21:9);
- The twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14), and
- The throne of ... the Lamb (22:3).

What a story these all tell! And what a remarkable expression: 'the wrath of the Lamb!' which we find at the head of that list which is in the order in which we find them employed in the book of the Revelation. As I write this, I'm in an eastern country celebrating 'the year of the sheep.' An emphasis is being placed on the gentle character of a sheep, which some are hoping will be an antidote to aggression within society. Whereas, in the west, some have mocked a lack of aggression in others by sneeringly saying that confrontation with them

was like being savaged by a sheep. But there's no mockery here. The strangeness of the expression makes it all the more ominous. For we remember the Lamb is the Lion. The same one who subjected himself to the cross is the one who has all authority now in heaven and earth. The time is approaching when he'll take up that authority and reign on this earth.

Those who trust in the blood of the Lamb, whose only hope is the acknowledgement that he died for them, have had their names written in **the Book of Life of the Lamb**. That's the ultimate cause for rejoicing, Jesus informed his disciples on earth (Luke 10:20). The fact that the name of the believer is written there is our title to be there, our passport to those realms of bliss – the essence of which is captured by the words: **the presence of the Lamb**. It'll be glory just to be with him, to hear among the anthems of eternal days **the song of the Lamb** which will be given to some future overcomers to sing.

The idea of **the wife of the Lamb** and **the marriage supper of the Lamb** is a reminder that human marriage is used in the New Testament as a metaphor for the union of all Christian believers of this Church age with Christ himself. That's why it's wrong - even blasphemous - to meddle with its definition. And so, in celebrated union with him, we share eternal glory with the occupant of **the throne of the Lamb**. What amazing grace! The last book of the Bible draws back the curtain to unveil this much of a glimpse of the entrancing destiny of blood-bought believers on Jesus Christ – they will reign with Christ - the slain Lamb who's 'standing' (alive) for ever!

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE WORSHIPPED CHRIST

Because of the Lord's divine nature, and because of his becoming also man to complete his redemptive mission at Calvary, Jesus is supremely worthy of the worshipful adoration of both angels and men. Historically, and down to the present day throughout the world's cults and false religions, there have been, and continue to be, people who refuse to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is God – despite the clearest Bible statements which this book has already been considering. When we come to the songs recorded in the fifth chapter of Revelation (Revelation 5:9-10, 12, 13b), we again discover that Christ is worthy of worship – and that's only appropriate to someone who's divine. Verse 9 says:

“And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth. Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.”

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Revelation 5:9-13).

I’m afraid I think that many modern worship songs are shallow and at times concentrate too much on our freedom and our happiness. By contrast, this song in Revelation chapter 5 has a depth that’s immense. I’d like you to notice with me the following facts about this hymn of praise which gives us many reasons to praise the Lord:

The first reason: Christ is presented as having been the one qualified to take the prophetic scroll that foretold events to come. Remember: “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book” (Revelation 5:9).

He literally holds the future in his hands. In the upper room – even as he bent down to wash the disciples’ feet – it was in the full realisation, even then, that the Father had entrusted everything into his hands (John 13:3). He’s the sovereign Lord of history. In resurrection, he’s been exalted to the supreme place. He’s been given the highest name or title – that of sovereign Lord - even as Isaiah had glimpsed him on the throne of heaven long before. Why would we not praise him? In fact, that’s the title of a hymn our churches in the Philippines love to sing. It’s called ‘Walay rason’ – or ‘No reason.’ It’s asking what we’ve just said: what reason could there be not to praise the Lord?

As well as being the one qualified to take the book, another reason, the second reason to worship Christ: is based on Jesus’ worthiness to

orchestrate the future. “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book **and to break its seals**” (Revelation 5:9). I’m intending to emphasize those last words: ‘and to break its seals’ – declaring things to come: the theme which occupies the book of Revelation, and gives it its content. For we take a futurist view of the book of Revelation. But Jesus’ sovereignty over the future is, in turn, based on the fact that he shaped the past. The Lord of history entered history and, by his own shameful death on the cross, secured a glorious destiny for all who put their sole trust and hope in him.

“for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Now, coming to the third reason for Jesus’ worthiness to be praised, we’re reminded that his work at the cross was not only to deliver us from sin – it was not only to grant us forgiveness - but also to satisfy that which the heart of God had been searching for. In John 4, Jesus defined his mission. Let’s look at that – these are among the words Jesus spoke to a woman from Samaria as recorded in John chapter 4 and verses 23 and 24. He said: “... salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

What a mission statement: ‘the Father seeks ... worshippers!’ It’s worth realising that our mission statement in evangelism should be nothing short of that. Mission is a means to an end. The chief end of all things is the glory of God. And so the goal of Jesus’ death was to provide his God and Father with worshippers. Nothing short of the cross could achieve this. And nothing less than this is an appropriate assessment of its value. That’s why the praise of heaven is: “You

were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Revelation 5:9-10). Yes, the destiny of once-lost sinners is to be a kingdom and to be priests for God the Father. We’re to worship God for Christ.

And fourth, the one who succeeded in bringing about such a staggering transformation is associated with power, riches, wisdom, might, honour, glory, and blessing. All these are ascribed to him – and they are his by right: “... saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing”” (Revelation 5:12).

And finally, we observe from this song that the worship addressed to him is identical to the worship offered to the Father: “And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever”” (Revelation 5:13).

This reflects the fact that deity of God the Son is an undiminished deity. There’s absolutely nothing inferior about his divine nature, as compared with the Father, as we’ve commented on before in this book about Jesus’ supremacy. And so, the worship of heaven was directed to ‘him who sits on the throne’ – the Father – and ‘to the Lamb’ - the Son. This is in full agreement with the fact that the letter to the Hebrews opens by informing us that when Jesus again comes into our world the angels will worship him. “And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, “and let all the angels of God worship him” (Hebrews 1:6).

In addition, we read in the Gospels of recorded times when Christ received human worship, beginning with the well-known incident shortly after his birth when the so-called wise men:

“after hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-11).

It was no different for those whom he'd later call to be his followers. Once when...

“... in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea ... the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.’ And He said, ‘Come!’

And Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the

wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son!'" (Matthew 14:25-33).

It was the same story with the blind man whom Jesus healed and who had been persecuted for his testimony to Jesus' power. John chapter 9 tells us:

"Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?' Jesus said to him, 'You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.' And he said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshiped Him" (John 9:35-38).

Could any more conclusive evidence be given that Jesus is fully God and deserving of full divine honours? And yet, while serving in capacity as our human high priest, he too is a worshipper and brings all those gathered as God's obedient people before God as a spiritual priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices of praise to "His God and Father" – through him (Revelation 1:6). Who can compare with him?

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE PROPHESED CHRIST

As we near the end of this book, we're continuing our look at some of the rewarding truths about our Lord Jesus that are set before us in the last book of the Bible, the book of The Revelation. We now want to consider him as the prophesied Christ. John describes the Lord as 'the Lion that is of the tribe of **Judah**, the Root of **David**' (Revelation 5:5). Let's consider for a moment those references to Judah and David. Taking Judah first, Jacob prophetically declared: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come. And unto him shall the gathering of the peoples be" (Genesis 49:10).

Additionally, in relation to David, the prophets of the Old Testament indicated that the Messiah would descend from David. Nathan informed Israel's king: "When your days are fulfilled, and you will sleep with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, that shall proceed from your body, and I will establish his kingdom" (2 Samuel 7:12). This is confirmed by the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 1:5) as having ultimate reference to Christ.

In fact, throughout the three sections of the Jewish Old Testament, Jesus was prophesied. The Bible tells us that when humanity corrupted itself at the very beginning, God gave a promise of a time when another human (someone described as the 'seed of the woman') would make deliverance possible: deliverance from the results of hu-

man disobedience which had begun to trouble life in this world. The actual words are these:

“Then the LORD God said to the woman, [he was addressing Eve after she’d eaten the forbidden fruit] “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:13-15 NIV).

And so, at the very beginning, God promised that a human descendent of Eve would crush our enemy, the Devil. The promised human descendent was described as the offspring, or seed, of the woman. Here we find, in these words, the Bible’s first prophecy of the deliverer, or messiah, who was coming. The answer to what we now experience as the human condition, with all its difficulty and trouble, had been worked out by God in advance. The solution was obviously going to be costly. That much was clear from the mention of the hostility between descendants of Eve who would try to give allegiance to God on the one hand, and on the other hand, those who would end up fulfilling the evil desires of the Devil.

The Old Testament is divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. All three predict Jesus, and now, we’ll look at the Old Testament Prophets. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to try to see it from the perspective of an outsider looking in.

I'm thinking of someone who fits that category whose story is told in the Bible itself:

“... there was an Ethiopian ... and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the [Old Testament, Bible] prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: “He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.” And the [man] answered Philip and said, “Please tell me of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:27-35).

Maybe we can identify in some ways with this traveller. Although he was from another culture, with possibly a very different religious background, he did, however, want to know more about the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Bible. He'd even travelled all the way to Jerusalem to worship God there as best he knew how. He might have been worshipping out of considerable ignorance, but he was genuinely seeking to find the truth. God helped him in a won-

derful way, and he'll help you, too, if you're also a true searcher after truth. Our Ethiopian friend in the story was on a spiritual journey as well as travelling through the desert.

But he'd not found the answers he was looking for in Jerusalem. He'd come away, still unclear about many things. But at least he was looking in the right place. By that I mean that he was reading his Bible – reading from the Prophets – as he travelled homewards again. Parts of the Bible are definitely not easy to understand, and he was struggling with the Prophets – especially the part in the writings of the prophet, Isaiah, where the prophet wrote about someone about to be slaughtered, just like the way people slaughter sheep.

Why should he have been reading that section? I don't know, but perhaps they'd been reading it at Jerusalem while he'd been there. Maybe he'd asked Jews at Jerusalem about what this meant – this part about a man being led to the slaughter. No wonder he was confused! Most Jews in Jerusalem wouldn't have been able to answer his question: whether the Bible prophet was speaking about himself or, if not, who else? I suggest that the Jews at Jerusalem didn't know the answer either, because if they had known it, they would never have crucified Jesus Christ. In fact, as the Ethiopian was about to find out, Jesus Christ was the very person whose violent death or 'slaughter' Isaiah had been predicting hundreds of years earlier!

This Ethiopian was soon to receive more enlightenment than many Jews at that time – or even since. How could that be possible? How could the Jews themselves have missed the meaning of God's message which had been directed to them in the first instance? Yet, how often we, too, hear only what we want to hear, and see only what we want to see. Jews had been conditioned to understand that the Bible pre-

dicted the coming of a great deliverer or ‘messiah’; not so much a spiritual deliverer, but a heroic political and military figure. They missed completely Isaiah’s distinctive picture of the messiah.

Peter said about Jesus: “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats...He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray” (1 Peter 2:22-25 NIV).

I have no doubt that this matches very closely what Philip must have said to the Ethiopian, because Peter too was using the same Bible text in Isaiah chapter 53 as his starting point. Peter tells us that we’ve all wandered away from God; irrespective of who and where we are, we’ve gone astray like sheep. Choosing to go our own way, and not God’s way, has made us to be like wandering sheep as far as God in heaven is concerned. That’s Peter explaining what he means by ‘our sins’. That’s why Israel’s long-awaited messiah, Jesus, God’s very own Son, had to be sacrificed. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, for his was a perfect life: “he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”. It was all in God’s plan that our terrible disease of sin might be healed by his wounds. What a wonderfully loving God! He’s offering each of us a free pardon which was paid for by his own Son. So what do we need to do? Let’s refer again to Peter: “everyone who believes [in Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43).

I’ll have to leave you to research the Writings for yourself – but I suggest you begin with Psalm 22 which is an amazing poetic description of the cross which we’ve arrived at in our consideration of Philip’s preaching. And so, the Law, the Prophets, and also the Writings (the

three parts of the Old Testament as the Jews regarded it) prophesied Jesus.

As we've been exploring our current theme of Jesus as the prophesied Jesus – as triggered by those references to Judah and David in the titles given to him in the book of Revelation, we might conclude by observing that Jesus also describes himself as the 'root and the offspring of David' (Revelation 22:16b). This is a very significant description. Obviously, the root is the source from which a plant springs. The term is used metaphorically for the fact that Jesus was the 'origin and strength of the Messianic line' (Hiebert 1975, p.172). On the other hand, Jesus' lineage from David is established both **legally** in Matthew (Matthew 1:1ff) and **biologically** in Luke (Luke 3:23ff) by means of their New Testament genealogical records. Bringing both of these facts together, we might say: in his **divine** capacity, Christ was David's 'root'; and in his **human** role, he was David's 'offspring' (McClintock and Strong 1970, 124; cf. Matthew 22:43). This was the Christ who was prophesied: David's Lord and David's Son that he might become our saviour.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE VICTORIOUS CHRIST

One of the concluding visions of the Apocalypse pictures Jesus as the victorious ‘King of kings, and Lord of Lords.’ We glimpse him – by means of the vision given to John - as riding triumphantly on a white horse (Revelation 19:11-16):

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in mid-heaven, “Come, assemble for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of com-

manders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.”

As we begin to comment on those words we’ve just read from Revelation chapter 19, the most obvious thing to say is: this is war! Now that immediately brings to mind the smear campaign with which atheists gleefully like to taunt Christians. You know what I mean – they like to claim that more blood has been spilled in the name of religion than for any other cause. I doubt it. In fact, I’d venture that, historically, that’s a lie. Try telling that to the countless victims of the gas ovens of Auschwitz and the killing fields of Kampuchea, not to mention the gulag of the Soviets and the prisons of China.

President Obama’s 2015 US National Prayer Breakfast speech was more than a little skewed as it tried to bring a counter-perspective to Islamic atrocities today. There’s a difference between killings which are a logical result of one’s beliefs and killings which are an illogical result of them. That’s not to say that it can be argued biblically that all bloodshed is wrong. Did God sanction war at times in the Old Testament? Yes, he did – indisputably. And as we’ve seen, he will

do so again in the future. It's at this point that UK celebrity personalities like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Fry weigh in and rage against God describing him as a blood-thirsty monster. Have they got it wrong? Absolutely.

A more measured view in the west tries to defend the concept of a so-called 'just war.' The end has to justify the means. The means have to be proportionate. And so on. Now we return to the vision in our text from the nineteenth chapter of the book of Revelation. Jesus is pictured at the head of the armies of heaven. This is the victorious Jesus.

How is the victorious Jesus presented? He's described as faithful and true. Why is that title inserted here to further describe Jesus as he returns to this sad earth to conquer his enemies and all who've rebelled against him? Is it not so we can be sure that it's totally in keeping with his holy character that he'll 'judge' and 'make war'? It's this that silences our doubts – or should do. For this is discriminate judging: judging, that is, which discriminates between the godly and the ungodly. And the war described here – which some may refer to as the battle of Armageddon – this war signifies the punishment which is due to be inflicted upon those who are rebellious. If ever there was a just war, this is it!

It's certainly just, but it's also fearful. Jesus' garment is pictured as red with the blood of his enemies. This imagery is borrowed from one of the Old Testament predictions of Jesus – which we should now turn to and read, from:

“Who is this who comes from Edom, with garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, this One who is majestic in

His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength? “It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save.” Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like the one who treads in the wine press? “I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath; and their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments, and I stained all My raiment” (Isaiah 63:1-3).

Some of Isaiah’s book is difficult to place. It’s sometimes hard to draw the line between what’s happened already in history to God’s ancient people Israel; and what’s yet to happen to them and to their enemies. But it seems we can clearly place this passage in Isaiah 63 alongside our earlier reading from Revelation chapter 19, as ultimately applying to that future time of our Lord’s return to this earth to liberate faithful Israelites surrounded on all sides in a Middle East which grows ever more turbulent as we head towards the end-times that the Bible predicts in both Old and New Testaments.

Those who focus exclusively on the idea of ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ are left unprepared for the bloodbath described here in terms of the picture of the treading down of grapes in a winepress. We conveniently forget the Jesus whose eyes blazed with fire as he overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Jerusalem temple, not to mention his numerous graphic warnings of gehenna, the place of future torment.

It’s interesting that Jesus is again referred to here by his title of the Word of God. It’s the Apostle John who is the Bible writer who consistently writes of our Lord as the Word – whether as God the creator (John 1:1), or as God incarnate (John 1:14) or as God the judge

(Revelation 19). Earlier in this book, we've considered him as both creator and incarnate, and it remains now in this final instalment to consider him as judge. He'll come at the head of the armies of heaven to judge and make war in the cause of truth. Earth's chequered history, laden with tragedy, only makes sense in the light of the fact that ultimate justice for all is coming. The opportunity to escape the justice we deserve according to our sins is now. All who repent today and acknowledge Jesus as their personal saviour will never have to face him as judge. Those who have served faithfully under his leadership are pictured in Revelation 19 as being on white horses and clothed in white garments, probably symbolising either their purity or victory or both. One thing is sure: it's only in Jesus that they've been made pure and been given the victory.

The victorious Jesus smites the rebel nations and breaks them with his rod of iron. Again this apocalyptic scene was foreseen in the Old Testament psalm. The second psalm describes a scene typical of human rebellion against God's rule which will reach its climax in rebel humanity's last stand before Christ imposes his rightful rule over the nations of this earth – he whose right it is to reign – his previous life on earth showed that. Psalm 2:1-9 says:

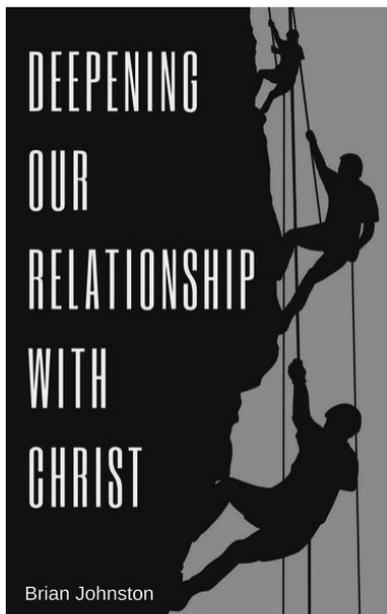
“Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” He who sits in the heavens laughs, The Lord scoffs at them. Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying, “But as for Me, I have installed my King upon Zion, my holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of

the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.'"

Some see the book of Revelation as nothing more than a figurative impression of the battle between good and evil. It's much more precise than that, as events are currently demonstrating. But one thing from that over-simplification is true: good will triumph! His enemies will feel the fierceness of his wrath and find no relief ever after (cf. Revelation 14:9-11).

It's been my privilege to share with you the most exalted theme that can engage our minds in any Bible study. Our minds have focused on Jesus, from John's Gospel, from Philippians, from Colossians, from Hebrews, and from Revelation. We now conclude this final section in our series of studies by saying again that clearly this final book of the New Testament is very much **about** Christ, as well as being conveyed **by** him. I trust we've enjoyed seeing him in its pages as creator Jesus, eternal Jesus, sacrificed Jesus, worshiped Jesus, prophesied Jesus, and finally as victorious Jesus.

Did you love *The Supremacy of Christ*? Then you should read *Deepening Our Relationship With Christ* by Brian Johnston!



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About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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