

FULLNES OF LIFE THROUGH CHRISTMAS—Part Two
Colossians 1:15-23a

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For everything was created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is also the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, ²⁰ and through Him to reconcile everything to Himself by making peace through the blood of His cross—whether things on earth or things in heaven. ²¹ Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds because of your evil actions. ²² But now He has reconciled you by His physical body through His death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before Him— ²³ if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard."

INTRODUCTION

Matt Redman, age 42, is an English Christian worship leader, singer, songwriter and author. *Blessed Be Your Name: You Give and Take Away, My Heart Will Choose to Say*, (#26 in our hymnals) was co-written by Matt and his wife, Beth, in part as a response to the tragedies of September 11, 2001. They were in California shortly after the attacks. Contemporary Christian hymns lacked adequate words to grapple with the level of grief American were experiencing. The Redmans write, "Where were the musical poets and prophets to help the people of God find a voice in worship at this tragic time? The truth was, . . . when it came to expressions of pain and lament, we had very little vocabulary to give voice to our heart cries." Matt Redman knew nothing about Christianity as a child but knew a lot about pain and grief. His father suffered from depression and committed suicide when Matt was just seven. His mother remarried, and his stepfather inflicted such abuse on him and his family that he was jailed.

Matt attended a service by Argentine evangelist Luis Palau and opened his aching heart to **Jesus Christ** as his Lord and Savior. A youth leader encouraged this talented guitarist to lead church worship at age 15. In his passion for **Jesus**, Matt helped found Soul Survivor, a global spiritual youth movement featuring summer concerts. Despite the popularity of his praise band, their pastor confronted them one day. He said they could be justifiably proud of the quality of their musical performance, but they were neglecting true worship of their Savior. Insulted by this charge, every member of the praise band left the church—all except Redman. After prayer and reflection, he allowed the Holy Spirit to convict and humble him. Matt then wrote *The Heart of Worship* (hymnal #127) which includes this prayer to **Jesus**: "When the music fades, all is swept away and I simply come; longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless Your heart. I'll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself is not what You have required. You search much deeper within, through the way things appear; You're looking into my heart. I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it, when it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus." Matt's impact for our Savior and song chart success have soared to greater heights ever since his ministry became focused upon the person and character of **Christ!**

How easy is it for us even as professed followers of **Jesus** to get caught up in activities, ambitions, or attitudes unworthy of our name as Christians or that wound our Savior's heart? Aren't we often controlled by worldly standards of right and wrong, of what's godly or ungodly? Are we often more self-serving than God-serving even in our prayers? Little Johnnie desperately wanted a bright red wagon for Christmas. His friends were writing letters to Santa Claus, but he had a better idea. "Dear Jesus," he wrote. "If I get a red wagon for Christmas, I won't fight with my brother Hank for a year." Then Johnnie thought, "Oh, no, Hank is such a brat I could never, ever keep that promise." So Johnnie threw away the letter and started again. "Dear Jesus, if I get a red wagon for Christmas, I will eat all my vegetables for a year." Then he thought, "Yuck! That means spinach, broccoli and asparagus. I could never keep that promise." Suddenly Johnnie

had an idea. He went downstairs to the living room. From the nativity set above the fireplace, he grabbed the figurine of the virgin Mary. Taking her figurine to the kitchen, he wrapped it in newspapers and stuffed it into a grocery bag. He took the bag upstairs to his room, opened the closet and placed the package in the farthest, darkest corner. He then closed the closet door, took a new sheet of paper and wrote, "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother...."

We take a second look today at our theme, Fullness of Life through Christmas, to help us escape selfish temptations that mislead and ruin us by maintaining our passion for the Christ of Christmas. In **John 10: 8-10** (GNT), **Jesus** sharply contrasts the destructive impact of being misled by society's false prophets or the devil's crowd with the quality of life He offers to any who humbly embrace Him as Savior and King. "All others who came before Me are thieves and robbers, . . . ¹⁰ The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness." To experience the fullness of life the Son of God made available to us by coming to earth that first Christmas, first of all we must,

I. AFFIRM JESUS AS LORD OF CREATION (Colossians 1:15-17)

We noted last week that based upon **Colossians 1:15-17** alone, it's overwhelmingly obvious **Jesus Christ** has every right to first place over all of His creation, including us [reread]. As God's Son in human flesh, **Jesus** is the self-miniaturization "of the invisible God," the one who best reveals what our Heavenly Father is like. He's also "the firstborn over all creation." "Firstborn" speaks of a person's status within a family, not the sequence of one's birth. **Jesus Christ** is the Father's primary heir and the only one entitled to exercise a "firstborn's" privileges over all of creation as the Son of God. "Everything was" also "created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the 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 by Him all things hold together." **Jesus Christ** is clearly both the reason and the purpose for which everything exists, including us. If we believe we have no higher purpose for living than to please ourselves, to do whatever we want and whenever we want, we sacrifice experiencing the fullness of life promised to us by Christmas.

Now we will look at the second step required of us to experience the fullness of life the Son of God made available to us by coming to earth that first Christmas: We must,

II. AFFIRM JESUS AS LORD OF THE CHURCH (Colossians 1:18-23a)

Jesus Christ has first place not only over all creation, but also over all His new creation, the Christian Church, the body of believers that He is in the process of changing forever into His likeness [reread **1:18**]. By stating, "He is also the head of the body, the church," this means Christ is the source of the new life He grants His followers, our re-creator, so that we can escape the death and destructive power of sin that ravages all of creation around us. As **II Corinthians 5:17** magnificently proclaims, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come." Headship also refers to leadership; Christ is the ultimate authority in all matters pertaining to His people.

Colossians 1:18 goes on to say, "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything." **Jesus Christ** in His human body was the first to experience resurrection unto eternal life, and He alone can guarantee us a resurrection into Heavenly bliss beyond the grave. As He declared in **John 11:25-26** (NASB), "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die."

The rest of today's text explains in more detail **Jesus'** motivation for coming to earth that first Christmas, which involves a whole lot more than just giving us a "get out of Hell free" card [reread **1:19-23**]. Suppose that when you first came under the frightening conviction that in the eyes of a God of perfect love and goodness you were doomed to Hell for your selfishly unloving and unkind actions, and you repented, asked for God's forgiveness, put your faith in God accepting Christ's death on the Cross to be the death

penalty you deserved, committed your heart to **Jesus** as your personal Lord and Savior, and made public your profession of faith in and loyalty to Christ by Christian baptism. Then, if you walked out the rear door of the church, suppose you were told you could stand at a special spot and be transported forever instantly to Heaven upon two conditions: 1) You would lose out on the privilege of serving **Jesus** on earth and forfeit making a difference in anyone else's life for Christ; 2) Your heart would still be tainted by "evil actions," unChristlike attitudes and passions pulling you away from the Lord, which would remain with you forever even in Heaven. Would you still have wanted to go immediately to Heaven? If we are true Christians, we don't have the false assurance of the pushy atheist who confronted a preacher one day. "Do you believe in eternal life?" he asked. Giving the preacher no time to reply, he shouted, "Well it's a load of rubbish! I believe in science, evolution, survival of the fittest. When we die, that's it! No eternal life, no great judgment, and no God!" He continued his mean-spirited assault against Christianity, not letting the preacher get in a word edgewise. "Eternal life! Eternal life! Ha! It's all pie in the sky when you die. When I die that's it, the end, no eternal life, no nothing. I will be buried six feet under when I die and that's it! Nothing! Caput! When I die I am utterly convinced that that will be the end of me!" The badgered preacher replied, "Well, thank God for that!" But believers know death will not be the end of us. How long would Heaven remain Heavenly if we carried our raw sinful impulses with us into our eternal home? How much of **Jesus** would the saints of the ages in Heaven, and legions of Heavenly angels, see in you?

C. S. Lewis, of *Narnia* fame, shared these thoughts in his thought-provoking classic, *Mere Christianity* (1952): "I think that many of us, when Christ has enabled us to overcome one or two sins that were an obvious nuisance, are inclined to feel (though we do not put it into words) that we are now good enough. He has done all we wanted him to do, and we should be obliged if he would leave us alone. But the question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what he intended us to be when he made us. . . . Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself."

In the Old Testament era, God Almighty sought a holy Temple where He could specially meet with His sacrificially pure people. The coming of the Son of God to earth that first Christmas changed all that. Now God Almighty seeks sacrificially pure people to be His holy Temple. J. B. Phillips translates **Ephesians 1:22-23** in this startling fashion: "God has placed everything under the power of Christ and has set Him up as head of everything for the Church. For the Church is His body, and in that body lives fully the One who fills the whole wide universe." This is why Christ is not content just to have a part of your life. **Jesus** is Lord over His Church by right. He has the right to be Lord over every believer. We who were once at enmity with God can now be His friends because Christ shed His blood to save us from the consequences of our sin and from our sinful selves. But we must cooperate with **Jesus** by allowing Him to fill us with His transforming presence. "Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds because of your evil actions.²² But now He has reconciled you by His physical body through His death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before Him—²³ if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard."

This Christmas day, what is "the hope of the gospel" to you, as heralded by an angel to the shepherds the night Christ was born: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (**Luke 2:10-11**, NKJV)? Is the hope of Christmas merely God's promise we can be *with Jesus* by trusting Him as our Savior, or is your hope also you can be *like Jesus* as you allow Him more fully to live in you?

CONCLUSION

Jenny Lind (1820-87), "the Swedish Nightingale," took our country by storm on her grand tour of the United States in 1850. What is less known about Jenny Lind is that God used a trial in her life to transform someone godly into someone who may have been one of the godliest ladies to ever walk this earth.

Born to a shiftless, absent father and a loveless, cruel mother embittered by her hard life, Jenny grew up in dingy poverty. But she lived near a church for a time and spent countless hours listening to the organist practicing daily. This helped to inspire in her a love for music and for the Lord. After she was overheard singing to a cat at age nine, by the maid of a star of the Swedish stage, God providentially arranged for her to receive training from Sweden's best voice teacher. Yet, after she'd been acclaimed as a singing prodigy of the opera and stage, the high notes and silver tones of her remarkable voice vanished around age 13. Years spent in hard work and training failed to revive her voice. When she was 17, a producer recalled what she'd once been and asked her to prepare for an opera part with a short solo. She believed it was pointless but learned her part diligently. On the evening the opera premiered, Jenny's voice returned quite mysteriously; more luxuriant in tone and quality than ever. But more than her voice had been transformed.

Jenny had such plain looks that her favorite fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen, who met Jenny in 1840 and fell madly in love with her, was *The Ugly Duckling*. After her voice returned at age 17 and for the rest of her career, her face became so radiantly joyful as she sang that she seemed to gain the striking beauty of an angel! Handel's *Messiah*, often sung at Christmas, includes the solo, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." Jenny Lind treasured hearing or singing it. A Boston Professor of Sacred Music, upon hearing her perform this solo in 1850, exclaimed, "the divinely-sent Jenny Lind preached us the most faithful sermon . . . we ever yet heard . . . because she *meant* what she sang: because her evident and conscious *mission* to proclaim these great truths, shone earnestly and touchingly through all the music" (*Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind*, Nathaniel Park Willis, 1850, 53). Yet, as powerfully uplifting as her singing became throughout the English speaking world of the 19th century, her Christian character and generous acts of charity became as renowned as her singing.

Sometimes God's Spirit confronts us by the advice of others about changes God wants to make in our attitudes and actions. This happened when Matt Redman's pastor confronted him about his praise band neglecting true worship of our Savior. Sometimes God gets our attention by more emphatic measures, in the form of a crisis of some kind. What transpired in Jenny Lind's heart during the nearly four years when she lost her singing voice is known only to God. We would have to experience a crisis along the lines of a career-ending job loss, the collapse of our health by a drastic illness, a looming divorce, or the pending death of a dear loved one, to begin to relate to the depths of the crisis she experienced. But whatever struggles Jenny suffered with her faith, her attitude toward God, or blows to her pride, she must have yielded herself wonderfully in trust to the Lord in the end. **Jesus** must have become her Lord, not just her Savior, when she cooperated with Him despite this tragic and frustrating trial to conform her character more into the likeness of the Christ she longed to glorify with her voice. As a result, **Jesus** transformed Jenny from a good singer to God's singer; from one who sang to God's glory to one who sang with God's glory, and the number of those God touched through her Christlike heart is incalculable. Jenny Lind lived in the fullness of Christmas!