

Lord of All

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning to everybody. We are living in a time that many would describe a time of deconstruction. This is a time in our society when many ideas and institutions are being challenged.
- They are being redefined. In some cases, they're being altogether dismantled and done away with. And that's happening throughout our culture right now as it tends to from time to time throughout history.
- Societies go through periods like this. And not surprisingly, there are many Christians who are consequently going through their own period of deconstruction.
- And by deconstruction, I mean going through a time of taking apart and reexamining all of the pieces of their faith.
- And trying to figure out, what do I actually believe and why? So asking really hard questions, trying to push in to figure out, especially those who grew up as Christians, what they actually believe.
- [1 : 1 1] I heard somebody describe it kind of like Legos. If you've ever been building something that's complicated out of Legos and you're going along and you're putting the pieces together. And then at some point, you start to realize that the pieces just aren't holding together.
- That the part that's supposed to go here just isn't fitting. And you realize that at some point along the way, you made a mistake. And that you left a piece out or the pieces didn't get put together in the proper order.
- And so the only thing that you can do is to start taking it apart until you get down and find the place where you made the mistake. And then you can begin to rebuild it and it will all hold together.
- And so I heard somebody describe it that way in terms of their faith. I'm taking it apart and trying to figure out kind of where things went wrong. And I want to say this.
- Deconstruction, I don't think, is a bad thing in and of itself. In fact, I think if you're especially the kind of person who maybe grew up in a very strict environment, strict church, where you weren't really allowed to ask questions, where that was seen as evidence of a weak faith or something else, then I think going through a time of really asking hard questions is absolutely necessary.
- [2 : 2 0] This can be a vital step in the process of maturing in your faith. Having doubts and really wrestling with those doubts, that's vital for growing in our faith.
- But there are ways that this can kind of, you might say, go off the rails. There are ways that this approach to deconstruction can actually do more harm than good.
- And, you know, as I listen to, you know, part of what I do is I listen to a lot of podcasts and audio content. I read a lot of books. I'm constantly trying to stay tuned in to the major conversations that are happening in our culture as much as I can.

And more and more I find myself listening to certain podcasts or reading certain popular authors or hearing people speak. And underneath a lot of the messages out there is this sentiment.

That the Christian faith that we inherited from previous generations is somehow primitive or deficient. And it needs to evolve.

[3 : 28] It needs to be revised. It needs to be updated to fit the current cultural moment. If it's going to survive and stay relevant and all of those things.

And that's a kind of undercurrent that I'm hearing more and more and reading more and more and more. And so that's what I want to focus on this morning. Because if you know anything about church history, that's not a new idea.

In fact, almost every generation has said the same thing. Going all the way back literally 2,000 years to the very first generation of believers.

And this is exactly what you see in Colossae. This is the conversation that was happening among the very first generation of Christians in Colossae. You had a man who was sent by Paul to this area.

And he first preached the gospel, Epaphras. And a lot of Colossians received Christ and became Christ followers. And it really began to transform the area. And then other teachers came in.

[4 : 27] And they said, well, that's nice. You've got the basics. You've got the kind of primitive form of this faith. But then they began to offer some new ideas, some exciting ideas. And they began to sort of suggest, take the primitive faith that you learned from Epaphras.

And then we're going to go through an evolution. And there's some new ideas that we want you to incorporate. And they're very exciting. And they're going to make your life better. And a lot of these young Christians who hadn't really been disciplined for very long were very taken in by these ideas.

And so Paul gets word of this. And this is why he writes the letter to the Colossians that he does. That's the entire backdrop. And what's so interesting about Paul's response to this situation, as we're going to see in beginning in chapter 1, verses 15 to 20, he essentially says this to all of these Christians who are wondering, is the faith that I've inherited, is it still strong enough to face the complexity of the world that I live in now?

Are these new teachers on to something? And Paul essentially says this, if you want to build a faith that will stand the test of time, if you want to build a faith that is unshakable, whether you're a Christian doubting your faith, or somebody who's never heard the gospel and trying to consider the faith for the first time, if you want to build an unshakable, timeless faith, you have to start with this truth, that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

That is the foundation. So what we're going to do this morning is we're going to break that out. A faith built on this truth, Jesus Christ is Lord of all. We're going to see three ways that plays out. Let's pray.

[6 : 04] Lord, we thank you. And we thank you for, there's so many blessings that we take for granted. But Lord, even as I'm reminded that we were coming here this morning, questioning whether or not we would have running water, questioning whether or not the water main would be fixed in time for us to be here, Lord.

But praise you that we don't have to question whether or not there will be living water here. That we know as we open your word that streams of living water can flow out of our own hearts because of your spirit.

That you are here to nourish us, to feed us, to sate our thirst, to change us, Lord. That we might leave here full of your spirit and ready to do your work in the world, Lord.

So we thank you and praise you for that. We praise you also for the waters of baptism that we will witness in a moment. And Lord, we ask now that you would bless this time as we open your word together.

In your son's name, amen. So Jesus Christ is Lord of all. That's the first thing that Paul wants to get across to these Colossians. And if we read the opening verses of our passage, beginning in verse 16, he says, For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.

[7 : 21] Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things. And in him all things hold together.

So this is probably the most fundamental question of life. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there something rather than nothing?

You know, we're all familiar with Big Bang cosmology. Approximately 13.8 billion years ago, there was no space or time or matter or energy.

Only a single infinitesimal point. An unimaginably small point. And then this point spontaneously exploded, flinging matter and energy at roughly the speed of light outward.

And this explosion resulted in the creation of billions and billions of galaxies. Right?

[8 : 26] If you think about our planet in one solar system, billions of solar systems in our galaxy, billions of galaxies in the universe. Quite a big place. Now we know something like this happened, but we have no scientific explanation for what caused it.

And as we look around the world and make the observations that we can make, we realize something that is very consistent. And that is that everything that exists is contingent.

Meaning everything that exists, exists because it was caused by something that came before it. Everything is causally, causally in existence.

It has a cause. Right? And so philosophically, if you begin to go back further and further and further, well, what caused this? What caused this? What caused this? You eventually reach a point where there has to be a first cause.

There has to be something that caused all of the other somethings. And that something has to be causeless. It also has to be powerful enough to result in something like this Big Bang expansion event that we believe happened so long ago.

[9 : 35] So when Paul is saying Jesus is before all things, this is the claim that Paul is making. He is essentially saying Jesus is the first cause.

Right? Capital F, capital C. Jesus is the first cause who caused everything else. And then he also goes on to say that in Christ all things hold together.

So not only is there this massive question of why is there something rather than nothing, but then you have to ask what are the odds of having not only a universe, but of having a universe like ours that can sustain life.

Right? In the past 40 or so years, physicists have discovered more and more and more what we might call fundamental constants and quantities that govern the universe.

Things like the gravitational constant or the expansion rate of the universe or the mass density of the universe. There are dozens of these constants.

[10 : 46] And the interesting thing about them is any of these constants and quantities, if you were to vary them even by a fraction in either direction, just a fraction more or a fraction less, we would have no planets, we would have no stars, we would lack many of the elements that exist, and certainly we would have no life.

And so this is what many of you are familiar with is called the fine-tuning of the universe. And it's something that physicists have had to wrestle with up to the present day. It's one of the last things that Stephen Hawking was talking about before he passed away.

This mystery of a finely tuned universe. You know, again, let's come back to Legos. I love Lego, as you can tell. My sons and I have a lot of fun with it.

And we spent weeks one time putting together the Lego Millennium Falcon. This is a major undertaking. It's one of the great accomplishments of my life, was putting that thing together. And then we were so afraid that once we had gotten this thing together, we were so afraid that the kids, you know how kids are, would break it.

And so I was going to move it to a safe place where, you see where this is going, where it wasn't going to get broken. And so I picked this thing up and I'm carrying it, and then I stepped on a Lego.

[12 : 01] And I don't know if you've ever stepped on a Lego, but I think it's on par with childbirth, personally. It's the closest thing. Just kidding, it's not. It's the closest I'll ever get. It's the closest I'll ever get, okay?

You know, but I step on a Lego and I drop the Millennium Falcon and very predictably this highly ordered creation smashes into utter chaos all over the floor.

We've never really repaired the Millennium Falcon or my relationship with my kids as a result of that, right? But here's the point. When you drop something like the Lego Millennium Falcon, that's what you expect to happen.

It hits the ground, smashes it into a million pieces. Now what if I told you the opposite happened? What if I told you I took a box of Lego pieces and I dumped them on the floor, and they just happened to land as a perfectly assembled Lego Millennium Falcon?

You probably wouldn't believe me because the odds of that happening are astronomically low. That's kind of like what we're talking about when we talk about the odds of a finely tuned universe just springing into existence.

[13 : 01] If you calculate odds, it would be like the odds of taking a die, rolling dice, and rolling it 70 times in a row and rolling a six every single time.

And if you know anything about probability, if you want to calculate that up, right, like six to the 70th power and divide one by that number, it's a very, very, very, very small chance, akin to impossible, right?

So this is something that everybody has to make sense of in one way or another. So the question is, why is there something rather than nothing, and why is that something, a cosmos, rather than pure chaos?

Jesus Christ would be the answer that Paul would give us, Jesus Christ. So what Paul's saying is, a solid faith starts with the most fundamental question, why did all of this come into existence?

Where did it come from? And there's an implication there that if you want to know or I want to know why I'm here, if we want to know what life is all about, if we want to know what our purpose is, the only way we're going to ever know that is to go to the source, is to go to the one who made it all and ask Him.

[14 : 11] And the good news of Christianity is that that Creator, that first cause has come to us, Jesus Christ, in the flesh, because He wants to be known.

The one who made all of this wants us to know Him. And here's the thing. As you're going through a time of questioning and deconstructing and all of that that you may be going through, you can totally dismiss the idea of the virgin birth of Jesus and say that's absolutely ridiculous.

You're free to do that. But then you still have to make sense of the virgin birth of the galaxy in one way or another. So Jesus Christ is the Lord of creation.

He made it, He sustains it, and only He can tell us what it's all for. That's the first thing that I want us to see here. He's the Lord of creation. But then Paul goes a step further and he says Jesus Christ is also the Lord of the church.

That He's established a body on earth, a way to be in communion with Him and other people called the church. It says in verse 18, He's the head of the body, the church, right?

[15 : 17] And the church, as we understand it, is the beginning of the new creation of the world. So if He's Lord of creation, it makes sense that He's the Lord of the church, which is the foretaste of new creation.

Now when He says the head of the church, He means origin, He means source, and He means authority. And in this case, it means all of these things.

So Jesus is the origin of the church. The entire reason there is a church, capital C, universal church, the only reason there is a church is because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And that's why Paul says in Romans 10 verse 9, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Paul is saying, do you want to know the essence of what it means to be a Christian? You confess that Jesus is Lord, public confession of faith, and then inward you believe in your heart that the resurrection happened.

[16 : 14] The resurrection is the foundation. He's not just a good teacher. He's not just a social reformer. He is the Lord who rose from death.

That's what makes someone a Christian. And then we also see that Jesus is the source of all of the life and the strength in the church. Jesus Himself teaches this not long before He's taken away.

In John chapter 15 verse 5, Jesus says to His followers, I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For apart from Me you can do nothing. Now some of the things that Jesus says from time to time are unclear. They're hard to understand. In my opinion, it's not this verse.

I think that's fairly clear. If you want to do stuff and be fruitful, you have to abide in Me. If you want to die on the vine, then you disconnect yourself from Me. I'm the vine, you're the branches.

[17 : 12] So He's the source of all the life and the strength in the church. And then related to that, He's the authority who guides and directs the church. By His Word. So we ask, well how do I abide in Jesus?

And Jesus demystifies that. What does it mean to abide in Jesus? You go a couple of verses down in that same chapter in John. He says, if you abide in Me, it means My words abide in you.

Right? So if you want to abide in Me, that means that you take whatever message is necessary to see that My words are abiding in you. That you internalize them.

That you, like the collect, the prayer that we prayed last week, that you read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest My words so that you are breathing them out unconsciously.

Scripture is shaping every aspect of your life. And so if you're going through a time of deconstructing your faith and trying to figure out what do I believe about this and that, what do I believe about Scripture, we as Christians don't believe in Jesus because we believe in the Bible.

[18 : 19] The Bible isn't the foundation of our faith. We believe in the Bible because we believe in Jesus. Right? So when we see the way Jesus treats Scripture, the way on almost every page of the Gospels Jesus is quoting Scripture, the way Jesus is continually assuming that the written Scriptures are the very Word of God and treating them with that kind of authority.

And then when Jesus begins to say the same thing about His words and about the words and the teaching of His apostles, right? When we see all of those connections, we begin to realize, when we see Peter in the end of one of his letters referring to Paul's letter as Scripture in the same way he would talk about the Old Testament Scriptures, when we begin to make all of these connections, we realize we believe in the authority of Scripture because of the fact that Jesus did.

I mean, Jesus had a higher view of Scripture than anybody. So this is how we understand Jesus' lordship being the foundation of our faith. And you know, I think it matters for lots of reasons when we say that Jesus is the Lord of the church.

Here's one of the reasons I think it matters. I think it matters because when we look out in the world, there are lots of different kinds of churches out there. There are lots of different denominations, lots of different styles and traditions, right?

Some are more traditional, some are more contemporary, right? We have churches that kind of skew on the liberal end and we have more conservative churches. And so in all of these ways, there are lots of different kinds of churches.

[19 : 43] And so it's easy for us from our perspective to think that because of this, there are lots of different kinds of Christian. You know, I can be this kind of Christian or this kind of Christian or this kind of Christian or this kind of Christian.

There's almost an ever-expanding array of ways to be Christian. So some people say, well, I'm a Christian, but I only read Jesus. I hate Paul, right?

Now, I mean, sometimes I can sympathize with that view, right? Paul can be very frustrating at times. But I only read Jesus, only if the letters are read, right? Other people say, well, you know, I'm a Christian, but I'm also a Buddhist.

You know, because I think there's a lot of similarity there, right? Which, by the way, it's interesting. If you compare the final words, right? Buddha said, you know, strive unceasingly.

Jesus said, it is finished. I'm not sure that's compatible, right? And then some people say, you know, the former dean of the National Cathedral right here in D.C., he was interviewed by the Washington Post, and he described himself as a non-theistic Christian.

[20 : 51] Meaning, I'm a Christian, but I don't actually believe that there's a God. Right? So, lots of different ways to be Christian from our perspective. Now, I will say, and all due respect, there are lots of different people here with lots of different beliefs, and I'm not going to assume anything about what you believe, just because you're here.

But I will say this. People are free to believe whatever they want. That's one of the great things about our country. Free to believe whatever you want. But if Christ really is the head of the church in the ways that we've just described, what that means is there are really only two kinds of churches, and two kinds of Christians.

Right? There are spiritually alive churches and Christians where the lordship of Christ is central, where it is the defining feature of the community, and the lordship of Christ is held high.

And then there are spiritually dying churches or dead churches, spiritually dying Christians or dead Christians, where other beliefs and priorities have displaced Jesus as the head, where the head has effectively been cut off.

Now, the confusing thing is that those churches can have great music and great programs and great energy. Those Christians can be very active and doing lots of amazing things and very compelling.

[22 : 15] But at the end of the day, the question that a discerning person needs to ask is, are they recognizing Jesus as the vine? Are they abiding in Jesus and recognizing that they are merely a branch?

Because a church without Christ as the head is not a body. It's a corpse. And that can be very confusing because appearances sometimes don't line up with that reality.

But the reason this matters is if you're somebody who is trying to figure out whether you want to be a Christian or you're somebody who's going through a period of deconstruction in your faith, I simply want you to understand that that is not a purely intellectual exercise.

It is a spiritual struggle. It is a spiritual struggle. And if you've cut yourself off from the source of spiritual vitality and you think that you're going to come out of this unscathed, you don't have to go to Church of the Advent, although I'm biased.

I think that it would be great if you did. But you don't have to. But the thing that matters is that you are involving yourself in a community where the branches abide in the vine, where there is access to spiritual life and vitality, where you're not going to starve to death.

[23 : 38] Praise Jesus, this city is filled with churches like that. So I hope that that's where you work these things out. So when we say that Jesus is Lord, we're talking about the fact that Jesus is the Lord of creation.

We're also talking about the fact that Jesus is the Lord of His church. He's the head. He's the vine. But by far, I think the most compelling reason to build your faith on the Lordship of Jesus Christ is this, is that when we look at Jesus Christ, He's the Lord on the cross.

He's the only Lord you'll see who goes to the cross. It says in verse 19, For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

Right? When Paul in verse 15 says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and then when he says in verse 19 that in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, he's saying, if you want to know what God is like, this unknowable, unsearchable God who made the cosmos, this unimaginably complex, expansive being within whom all things hold together, if you want to know that God, if you want to know the heart of that God, look at Jesus.

You'll see the heart of God on display in Jesus Christ. And that is so important because listen, there are many, many, many hard questions that drive people into times of deep deconstruction and doubt.

[25 : 15] Many real hard questions that we need to wrestle with. Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? There is no great answer to that question.

There are good answers, and there are better answers than other answers, but there are no great answers. There are certainly no perfect answers. It's a mystery. And anybody who doesn't acknowledge that, I don't think, is really being honest.

That's a hard question. How do we understand and make sense of holy war? That's a hard question. I don't have any great answers to that question. Right? What about people of other religions and belief systems?

When I travel around the world and I see so many people who are so incredibly faithful in their traditions that they grew up in, how do I make sense of that? When I look at Scripture clearly saying that Jesus is the only way to know and be saved by God.

Right? How do I make sense? These are hard questions, and they don't have easy answers, and I'm challenged by all of these questions as well. But here's the thing, and we said this last week, but I think it bears repeating. If we spend all of our time and energy simply trying to understand God's motives, we will always be frustrated.

[26 : 26] We will always be frustrated. Scripture clearly says His ways are higher than our ways, which simply means you will never understand all of God's motives.

It will never make sense to your brain. But the Bible actually says that that is a kind of a fruitless path to walk down. But as we said last week for those who are here, faith in God is not ultimately about understanding God's motives.

It's about understanding God's character. It's about trusting His character in the face of unanswerable questions. So I don't know why there is so much evil and suffering in the world.

I don't understand why. But I know that on the cross, God suffered more than we can possibly imagine in order to bring an end to suffering and evil. And I don't know why holy war was ever a part of salvation history.

But I know that on the cross, Jesus fought the ultimate holy war against sin and death. And I know that He won. And I don't know or understand, I can't possibly fathom the ultimate future of people who have different belief systems.

[27 : 39] That's something that nobody should assume that we know the state of somebody's heart at any point. Only God knows the outcome for all of those people. But I do know this, that on the cross, God's response to people who rejected Him and denied Him and spit on Him and mocked Him and hated Him was to love them by dying for them so that He could make peace with them.

And I don't know how that plays out, but I know that if I try to understand God's motives, it's going to be confusing and frustrating, but there's no question about His character. There's no question about His intentions.

There's no question about His heart. Now, maybe all of this just kind of sounds like an OK Boomer sermon, you know, kind of a stuffy old conservative, right?

But I think that this brings us to the biggest reason why we should never give in to the idea that the Christian gospel needs to evolve or be updated.

And that reason is this. I don't know if you saw in the New York Times the piece by, it was an opinion piece by Maureen Dowd, and she was writing about how younger generations, she was essentially saying younger generations need to be very careful what they post and put online because that may very well come back to haunt you later in your career when you're a professional.

[29 : 06] So she's saying, be careful. And here's what she says that I think that I wanted to repeat. She says this, the shiny tools of modernity will always fall prey to the ancient flaws of humanity.

And she says, while society can be reshaped, human nature is immutable. So here's what she's saying, society evolves, human nature does not.

Right? Societies rise and fall, governments and regimes come to power and they fade away. There are great civilizations, great civilizations that span the known world, the most powerful rulers in existence.

We don't even know their names, their dust. The world changes, society evolves, human nature, always the same at every time in history.

Sin has always been and will always be the core of everything that is wrong in this world. Racism is not the original sin of our country.

[30 : 12] Sin is. Racism is the result. It's horrible. But it's because of sin. Right? Injustice seems massive.

The immigration crisis seems unresolvable. Systemic corruption and injustice, not only in our government, but around the world seems like the thing that we should be most focused on. And all of those things require all of our time and energy.

Christians need to be pouring ourselves into trying to rid the world of these evils. But we cannot forget that under all of it, there is the unchanging reality of human sin. The problem of sin.

And in the same way that you would never revise a sign that you found in the desert that points to an oasis, if you come to a sign like that in the desert, you wouldn't touch it.

You would protect it. You would surround it with a wall and make sure that nobody can alter that sign because it's pointing the way to an oasis. In that same way, we should never, ever revise the Christian gospel.

[31 : 19] It's our only hope against sin. Jesus Christ is the only answer there is to the problem of sin. He was in the first century. He is in the 21st century.

He will always be the only sufficient answer to the problem of sin. Everything else is a band-aid. So in every age, nations will rise and fall.

Societies will pass through times of deconstruction and reconstruction. Following this time in our culture, there will be rebuilding. There will be reconstruction. There will be new institutions. There will be new ideas.

There may even be a new country where our country once stood. But in all generations, Jesus Christ is Lord. And that is the hope of humanity.

He's the Lord of creation. He's the Lord of the church. And He's the Lord who died on the cross because He loves the world that He made. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word.

[32 : 17] And sometimes it's painful to acknowledge that You're Lord because sometimes, many times for me, it means admitting that I'm not. And it means following You, even if I don't fully always understand You.

But I pray that as we gather around Your cross and as we look at the waters of baptism and as we share in this Eucharistic feast, that in all of these ways, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, You would remind us of Your character, Your heart, Your love that is on display for the world to see.

And Lord, we pray this for our good and for Your glory. In Your Son's name. Amen.