

November 10, 2019

Title: Jesus is Greater

Text: John 1:1-9, Hebrews 1:1-2, John 1:14, 1:18, Hebrews 1:3

Teacher: Rob Jacobson

It's hard to believe that the 2020 Summer Olympics to be held in Tokyo Japan are less than one year away. The last time they were held in Tokyo was 1964, and also one year before those olympics, it looked as though USA pole-vaulter, Brian Sternberg, would be unbeatable for the gold medal. At 6 feet, 3 inches, Brian was covered in rippling muscle. Teammates described him as well loved and competitors called him a poised champion...he won every competition he entered.

In fact, he had just been voted the *greatest athlete in North America*, after breaking the world record in the pole vault, not once, or twice but 3 times! Check out this short video of one of those vaults.

VIDEO

Four weeks later, on May 25 in Modesto, California, he cleared 16 feet and 7 inches, and then 3 weeks later he shattered it again with a jump of 16 feet 8 inches!

Great pole vaulters must have great control of their bodies, so many start as gymnasts. Brian also excelled at gymnastics and as well as regularly training on the trampoline.

The U.S. track and field team was preparing for a tour of Russia, so Brian drove over to the training facilities at the University of Washington on July 2nd, 1963 for some trampoline training.

He describes what happened next in his book, "If ever there is a frightening moment in trampolining, it is just as you leave the trampoline bed, on your way up. At that moment, even the most experienced gymnast sometimes gets a sensation of panic, for no good reason... It hit me as I took off. I got lost in midair and though I was going to land on my hands and feet, as I had done several times before when panic came. Instead I landed on my head.

I heard a crack in my neck, then everything was gone. My arms and legs were bounding in front of my eyes, but I couldn't feel them moving. I was yelling, "I'm paralyzed!" But I had no lung power. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't move...

Anguish punched me repeatedly while we waited for the doctor... I was thinking only about the future. I had not begun to think about the possibility of never walking again."

The Jewish religion year, like our seasons is cyclical. The Jewish year starts with Passover, because Passover was the event that freed them from slavery in Egypt. Less than two months later, they celebrate Pentecost and in the fall they celebrate the

what's called trumpets, the Day of Atonement and then the Feast of Tabernacles. Later Hanukkah and Purim were added.

But the Christian faith says, even though we experience seasons and cycles, time is not cyclical...our history, our faith, and our future is moving towards a destination.

Most of us are not going to have such life-altering circumstances as Brian Sternberg did, but we will all face situations and circumstances where our history and our religion will fall short—where we need something greater in our lives.

- Today, I invite you to consider why Jesus is greater, like the books of John and Hebrews claim He is, and why that matters for your life and mine.

Brian reminds me of the paralytic Jesus sees near the temple in John's story of Jesus. John mentions it is near a Jewish festival, likely passover, but we are not told; we are told inside the city, near a certain gate, was a certain pool of water, the one with five covered porches, called the *House of Mercy*—Bethesda.

John 5:3-7 NLT

Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, “Would you like to get well?”⁷ “I can't, sir,” the sick man said, “for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

In the earlier days of his paralysis, Brian would try mentally to get his body to move but could not, he would fall back exhausted and say things like, “I've had it. I don't know what I'm going to do. Nothing is happening; I can't stand it lying tied up like this. I'm exhausted. I've tried too long to move, and I just can't...” Then his voice would fade into tears and sobs. Brian longed to be healed.

John 5:8-10 NLT

⁸ Jesus told him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!”

⁹ Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath,¹⁰ so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, “You can't work on the Sabbath! The law doesn't allow you to carry that sleeping mat!”

This inability to rejoice goes back to an initially respectable attempt by the religious people to protect the Sabbath, to make sure they obey this rule.

Sabbath wasn't just a rule for them, Sabbath is where everything started. When God told the people about the religious holy days, he started, not with Passover, but with Sabbath. Sabbath is the day of stopping, of receiving peace and rest and worship and celebration, and releasing work, control, and stress.

Eventually religious people began to "protect" the Sabbath by adding their own rules to God's commands, eventually resulting in thirty-nine series of laws. For example, looking in a mirror was forbidden. The rationale was that if you looked into the mirror on the Sabbath day and you saw a gray hair, you might be tempted to pull it out and thus perform work on the Sabbath.

- You could not carry a handkerchief on the Sabbath, but you could wear one. That meant if you were upstairs and wanted to take a handkerchief downstairs, you would have to tie it around your neck, walk downstairs, and untie it.
- The Jews even debated about a man with a wooden leg. Namely, if his home caught on fire, could he carry his wooden leg out of the house on the Sabbath?

The religious enthusiasts had missed the whole point of the Sabbath. The first time Sabbath appears is in the first part of the first book, which says that God created the earth in six days, but on the seventh he rested.

Even though the sabbath is the seventh day, God offered the first humans Sabbath=rest and peace, on their first day in the garden.

Also, the Bible says about the first six days, "And there was evening, and there was morning, and it was the first day," and so on. But there is no talk of evening and morning on the seventh day. God entered into his Sabbath-rest, and he is still in that rest, even while he is upholding the earth by his power and thus his work. Therefore He is always working and he always remains in his Sabbath-rest.

When the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules,

John 5:17-18 NLT

But Jesus replied, "My Father is always working, and so am I." So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God.

The Sabbath's purpose was to help people elevate God in their lives: to stop and see and worship and celebrate who God is and what he has done—not only in the world, but in our lives, and in rescuing his people.

- John wants us to see in his story of Jesus, that Jesus is greater than their religion.

The book of Hebrews also shows that Jesus is equal with God and the ultimate fulfillment of God's love and God's mercy. It says:

Hebrews 1:3a NLT

The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.

- Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's nature. If God is like the Sun of our solar system, then Jesus is like the Sun's rays shining from it.

The writer of Hebrews starts by telling us that **God's Son** and his message is greater than the angels, and all of God's previous messages through them.

And the warning: pay attention to God's greatest messenger, Jesus.

The writer then tells us that Jesus is greater than Moses and the promised rest of the promised land.

And he gives another warning: If Jesus is greater than Moses, then Jesus offers an even greater rest and peace—let us not rebel against it. But those people did rebel against God and against the rituals and festivals that were meant to point to the truth of who God is and bring them closer into relationship with God and each other.

I think we rebel against God when we make our religion or our story greater than Jesus.

- Jesus is greater is greater than our story.

What do I mean?

All throughout the first half of John story, he's showing that Jesus is greater than their religion.

Jesus performs a miracle or healing, then debates with religious people or leaders about its significance. The healings and miracles are 'signs' signifying who Jesus is and they are intended to provoke faith.

Yet one can see a sign and still not believe.

- Jesus first does this at a religious wedding—Jesus' wine is better than all the wine that came before.
- Jesus does this at a sacred well, the water he gives is better than the water from their ancestor's well.
 - After the healing on the sabbath,
- Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5000 and later the 4000 and having leftovers is greater than when God gave his people the bread of heaven in the wilderness.
- Almost in the middle of John's story, Jesus is seen greater than the Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated God's provision and protection for Israel during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus came to be with them like God was with the Israelites through their wilderness wanderings.
 - Jesus is the life-saving water like the water in the desert wilderness and he is the illuminating light of the world, just like God was the pillar of light by night and the cloud of presence by day.

- Lastly, Jesus is greater than Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication. Just like Judas Maccabees cleared the temple and set it apart again as holy, Jesus is the one who is truly set apart as holy and will clear what's unholy from their temple.

We also resist God or rebel against him when we make our story, or history, or past greater than Jesus.

Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus is greater than the priests, even Aaron and his family of priests.

The priests were a bridge between the people and God. The priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, which could temporarily cover and take away their sins.

But they were imperfect and only held a temporary position. But Jesus was a priest in the line of Melchizedek, the mysterious priest in Abraham's story. Like Melchizedek, Jesus' priesthood was a promise, not a position. To reject Jesus is to reject God's greater priest/king.

And lastly, Hebrews says. Jesus is greater than the all the sacrifices and sacred promises that came before him.

- Jesus was perfect so his sacrifice was perfect. Jesus was the final sacrifice. The giant curtain was torn in two. There is no religious separation between God and people.
- Jesus' new covenant COMPLETELY REPLACED the old covenant.
 - Warning: Jesus is the ultimate (and final) sacrifice, don't refuse to receive this sacrifice.

Jesus did for us what no religion could.

GALLUP, the great research corporation: discovered

- in 1950s-60s, 70% of Americans said religion was very important in my everyday life, and attending their worship services weekly was important. It's not just a box we check, it's part of us. I pray about the decisions, I make. I spend time with God daily. I look beyond myself and what I need to do.
- in 2007, 56% of Americans said religion was important in my lives and attending worship services monthly was important.
- in 2018, only 37% of Americans said religion is an important part my lives and attending worship services regularly is part of that.
 - 38% checked the box NONE. No religious affiliation. Yet spirituality remains high.

Religion makes me feel guilty. Religion shows me the giant curtain emphasizing the barrier between me and God. I already know I'm not holy; I'm no where near perfect. I don't need to be reminded of this.

Religion either makes us depressed, despondent, and full of SHAME.

Or just a dangerous, religion becomes a set of rules I must do, or hoops I must jump through. And if I can somehow obey the rules and jump through the hoops I feel better about myself and look down on those who don't or can't. That kind of religion makes you arrogant. I'm better than you; it's full of self-righteousness and SUPERIORITY.

Both are Dangerous. Either I'm full of SHAME or full of SUPERIORITY.

Religion will never save you! Reading the Bible can teach us how to walk with God, how to live in the spirit, and how to grow in your relationship, but it can't give you relationship with God.

The Bible can help you understand who God is and what he is like, it can't make you spend time with God or fall in love with God. Only Jesus can do that.

Jesus is greater than religion and he is greater than our story, our past.

Five years after Brian's accident, almost a thousand people were gathered in an auditorium. The lights darkened and a movie screen flickered showing a six foot three inch ripped vaulter breaking the world record. The room filled with rapturous applause. Then the curtains were pulled back and a spotlight shone on an empty chair. A massive football lineman limbered from the left of the stage to centre stage, carrying Brian in his arms. The former pole vaulter looked like a rag doll with arms and legs dangling limp, head swaying from side to side. The lineman propped him up with pillows to make sure he didn't fall over and then put a microphone close to his mouth.

Brian began to tell an impressive story of his athletic achievements. Over his short time as an athlete he had accomplished more than the average athlete in a lifetime. He told showed pictures of his past treasures. Trophies, plaques, and medals fill a whole wall at his home. There are dozens of letters and photographs from fellow athletes, even a very special get well wish from President John F. Kennedy just before he was assassinated.

However, it was when Brian got to the central point of his talk that a hush fell on his audience. He said, "I never felt like a winner until I put God in the centre of my life."

Brian shared the story of how he came to know Jesus Christ. He shared about the pain of a vibrant young athlete becoming a quadriplegic, his career being cut short, and the horror of being trapped inside his own immovable body.

He then shared about the myriad of visitors that would come to the hospital to wish him well and **one young woman** who had a **different outlook**. She had known Brain

since they were at elementary school and she asked him about his faith. Brian lashed out, “I have none!” But she persevered, visiting him every day, she would ask him why she had never seen him smile and challenged him about putting God first in his life. It was a huge challenge, but Brian had plenty of time to think.

She stopped coming for several weeks, but when she returned Brian was smiling. He had decided to put God first and he wanted to tell people about his new faith.

Despite all that had happened, Brian said that putting Christ first was the best thing that ever happened to him! Brian lost a lifetime of fame, wealth, and adoration, but he gained something far greater. His identity was no longer tied to his accomplishments nor trapped by his past.

His greatest treasure was the gift of forgiveness and life eternal that he received from God just a few months after the most devastating tragedy an athlete can suffer. Then he closed his eyes and said a prayer from deep within his heart.

Is your religion getting in the way of your faith in Jesus? Is your religion causing you shame or superiority?

What are you letting control you from your past? Some of you today aren't not paralyzed like Brian but you are living a type of paralysis...the story you are telling yourself has you trapped, unable to move and change and live as the person God has created you to be.

Jesus is enough!