

## 4. The Way, the Truth, and the Life

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Years ago my wife and I were on vacation and we met Jack. He was the handyman at the place we were staying. We soon learned that Jack spent his time sailing around the world until he ran out of money. Then he would find a hotel or a resort where he could work as a handyman until he saved up enough money to set sail again. The first day we met, Jack asked me what I did and I told him that I taught at a Bible College. He immediately started peppering me with questions about the Bible and about Christianity. He was at best a skeptic. I did my best to patiently answer his questions.

On our last night I went to Jack's boat and rang the bell attached to the side and requested permission to come aboard. Standing with him on the bow, I handed him a Gospel of John. I said you've had all sorts of questions, but I

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think there is one question that you need to ask yourself. You need to read this Gospel of John and, as you do, ask yourself this question: Who is Jesus? 'Jack,' I told him, 'that is the most important question you can ask and finding the right answer is the most important thing you can do.'

There are any number of places in John that bring the question of who Jesus is front and center. One of those places is John 14:6. John chapter 13 ends with Jesus telling the disciples that He will be leaving them. This leaves them rather anxious and troubled. We know that's how they're feeling because in John 14:1, Jesus says to them, 'Let not your hearts be troubled.' Jesus proceeds to tell them that He is going to prepare a place for them and adds, 'and you know the way to where I am going' (John 14:4). That prompts a frantic question from Thomas, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' (John 14:5).

Thomas did not fully realize what Jesus was talking about and did not even fully realize what he was asking. Thomas thought he was asking Jesus about a place like the places Jesus and the disciples went, places like Galilee or Jerusalem or the towns dotting the

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map of Israel. What Jesus was talking about was the way to heaven, the ultimate and final destination. Jesus was talking about the way to the Father and the way to eternal life with the Triune God.

So Jesus declares to him in very plain language:

*'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

If you're familiar with these verses, you may miss how shocking they are. *That is the most radical truth statement ever claimed by any person who walked the earth.* It leaves no room for compromise, no room for options. It is utterly exclusive. It is not one, but three radical absolute truth claims, followed by a claim to absolute exclusivity. This is a heavy little verse.

Before we go any further exploring John 14:6, let's take a step back and look at the person who said it. What can we know about Jesus as an historical figure? Who is Jesus?

#### **THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS IN HISTORY**

There is an abundance of historical references to Jesus of Nazareth. In addition to the written testimony of the Gospels, all dating to the first century, there is also early witness to

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Christ by Roman historians. Cornelius Tacitus wrote his *Annals*, chronicling the reigns of the Caesars, from 115–117. In writing of the fire that destroyed Rome under the reign of Nero, Tacitus speaks of the violent persecution of Christians and mentions Christ. He writes:

*Therefore, to scotch the rumor [that Nero started the fire], Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus.<sup>1</sup>*

Suetonius, another Roman historian, refers to Christ and His followers in his *Lives of the Caesars*, published around 120. There are also references to Christ in the writings of the early church fathers. These include the writings of Clement (80s-90s), Ignatius (100s), Irenaeus (late 100s), and Tertullian (circa 200).

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1. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, in *Tacitus V: Annals Books 13–16*, translated by John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 283.

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There is also the first-century witness of the empty tomb, the witnesses to the resurrection as pointed out by Luke (Acts 1:3) and Paul (1 Cor. 15:6), in addition to the accounts in the four Gospels. There is the reference to Pontius Pilate and Herod, both historical figures. As we mentioned in the last chapter, the Bible takes place in space and time. This is especially true of the life and ministry of Jesus. These are real cities and towns He visited.

**THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS AND HIS MESSAGE**

The first thing we need to notice is that Jesus claims equality with God the Father and the biblical authors present Christ as divine. These deity claims run throughout the Gospel of John. It starts on John 1:1 and pulses through the Gospel. In John 8:58, Christ claimed eternity by saying, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' This is only one of the 'I am' sayings of John. When Jesus said this one, the audience knew immediately who He was claiming to be. As soon as He said it the crowd picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy (John 8:59). His claims of His own person, as the God-man, are unique. We call this the hypostatic union. Jesus is two

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natures, truly God and truly man, united in one person.

As C.S. Lewis famously quipped, Christ is either Lord, liar, or lunatic. One thing you cannot say about Christ is that He is merely a good man or a good prophet. He claimed much, much more. So, He was either deceiving people or He was delusional. Or, He was and is who He claimed to be: He is Lord.

Jesus' message was also unique. At one point He tells us to take on His burden or yoke, 'For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:30). Jesus is contrasting His way of salvation with the religion of the day that demanded obedience to the law and obedience to a whole burdensome system of works.

So many religions require works. They have lists and lists of what must be done. In some cases, even doing everything perfectly still doesn't guarantee salvation. Jesus offers an entirely different message of salvation. His message is one of mercy for sinners and grace for the repentant.

As we think about what we learn of Jesus from history and from the Bible, we realize that there is no other figure as worthy of our attention. We must consider Him and what He

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has to say. This leads us back to that weighty but simple series of declarations in John 14:6.

**I AM THE WAY**

We need to see that each of these claims has the definite article. They have 'the' and not 'a.' Secondly, we need to see that each of these is in the singular:

- way not ways
- truth not truths
- life not lives or options.

Jesus is the way. The way to what?

Tom Douglas is a country songwriter whose first number one hit came in 1994 with the song 'Little Rock,' recorded by Colin Raye. That launched a career of hit songs. But Tom often says that all his songs go back to that guy in Little Rock trying to make his way back, to find his way home, to find redemption.

God made us for Himself. Augustine put it this way, 'You made us for yourself and we are restless until we find our rest in you.' We're like sharks, head turning side-to-side, never stopping till we get that next meal, and the next, and the next. The reason is that we are not at rest. We are not at peace.

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While God made us for Himself, we chose disobedience. We chose sin and we lost our home, condemned to wander 'East of Eden.' Jesus is the way back home.

Pluralism, which is the belief that there are many ways to salvation, is very popular today. Actually, it was very popular in the first century Greco-Roman world during the writing of the New Testament. Pluralism teaches that there is not one exclusive way but all religions are valid. Religions just use different words and names to teach the same thing. The problem is that's not true.

The world's religions are not complementary but contradictory. Islam insists that Jesus is not God. Christianity is not Christianity without the belief that Christ is the God-man. Buddhism doesn't even have a concept of salvation. Instead, the idea is liberation not from the material world, but liberation from even the distinction between the material world and immaterial world, or getting past the distinction between being and non-being. Not even a surface treatment of the world's religions shows unity among the claims and beliefs of the world's religions. Pluralism holds that contradictory views are all true. That is illogical.



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The law of noncontradiction means a thing cannot be 'A' and 'Non-A' at the same time. The law of contradiction is basic to all meaningful and sensible communication and our understanding of the world. God cannot be the Triune God of the Bible and the Allah of Islam at the same time. Jesus cannot be the God-man and merely a prophet at the same time. Pluralism may seem like a way for people of different religions to all get together. But it simply doesn't work.

Christ offers Himself as the exclusive way to God. To the pluralist, Jesus says, 'I am the way.' To the one who is lost, wandering away from home, Jesus says, 'I am the way.'

**I AM THE TRUTH**

One saying of today that is as grating as fingernails slowly running across a chalkboard or as annoying as the barking of your neighbor's dog when you're trying to sleep, is 'my truth.' You need to find your truth and I have my truth. This is the conclusion of the worldview known as relativism.

There was a time when there was an actual conception of truth. Truth was objective (independent of the subject/not subjective) and absolute (not relative). Objective and absolute

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truth was exchanged for the idea of only having 'truths' for certain contexts and communities. The emergence of 'my truth' and 'your truth' has now entered the Twilight Zone of absurdity, as if there are as many universes as individual people.

When I fly, I'm always thankful that the plane's pilot does not have his truth. I very much appreciate the idea that he follows the truths of gravity, physics and aerodynamics as he takes off, flies, and lands. It is detrimental to life if we were to push this notion of 'my truth' to its conclusion. It is detrimental to eternal life as well.

Jesus said He was the Son of God. That was His testimony. Then He performed miracles, as recorded in the Bible, that was the evidence of His testimony. Jesus said He was the Messiah. Then He showed from the Old Testament that He was the Messiah, again offering evidence for His testimony. The final evidence for who Jesus said He was and for the work He accomplished is the empty tomb, the resurrection, and the post-resurrection appearances. That is the ultimate evidence for His testimony. Jesus did not make 'bald' claims without anything supporting them.

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When Jesus said He is the truth, He was also speaking to the cynical and skeptical. It's easy to be cynical after a generation or two of living in the advertising age. We've all seen the burger on the billboard and the burger that gets handed to us at the drive-thru window. One does not look like the other. Many young people today are cynical. They've seen bad people misuse and abuse religion and religious positions. They don't trust institutions. They know they're not going to get a carefully, perfectly constructed burger. But there stands Christ, saying to the cynic and to the skeptic, 'I am the truth.'

**I AM THE LIFE**

There has always been a sense of teenage angst. But given the events of the last several years with a global pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, social upheaval, and economic turmoil, there is for many an intensified sense of desperation and anxiety. Your friends, and perhaps even you, feel desperate and hopeless. Some show this by turning to New Age ritual practices, desperate political activism, or simply just posting dark-humored memes on Instagram. Some simply close up in themselves and shut out their family and friends.

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There is a philosophical view behind this called Nihilism, the belief in nothing. It is also reflected in the post-World War II philosophy of existentialism, captured in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Nihilist and existentialist ideas haunt movies, pop-culture, pop-music.

The author of Ecclesiastes would agree with some of the ideas here. He says, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' That is, life apart from God is meaningless and nothingness. Nihilism and existentialism and their cultural manifestations may be right in acknowledging the pain and absurdity in the world, but they are wrong to stop there. They are wrong to say the end of the world, indeed the end of life, is simply a sign that shouts 'Dead End.'

John has two powerful images running through his Gospel and epistles. The image of light over darkness and the image of life over death.

Jesus brings a message of life amidst death, light amidst darkness, hope amidst despair. We live in an age of abundance. Common people today live better than kings of the past. Yet, the world is full of despair. It is because we are not looking to the right place. Or to the

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right person. As you study the Gospels you see Jesus again and again healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, caring for those in need. He brought hope to hopeless people. He was a physician for the sick. He came to bring lost people home.

Jesus is the answer to the pluralist, the skeptic, the cynic, the hopeless and the desperate. And that is because He alone is the way to God the Father. Knowing God and being at peace with God is the answer to all of these flawed worldviews. That is all packed in John 14:6. In the next chapter we'll take a deeper look at the gospel and this central message of the Bible.

**MAIN POINT**

*Jesus is unique in all of human history in both the claims He made of His own person and of His work.*

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Can you think of other biblical texts beyond those mentioned in this chapter that teach the two natures of the true humanity and true deity of Christ?

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- How important is getting the person of Christ right (what Jesus is) in order to get the work of Christ right (what Jesus did)?
- Can you think of friends you know that fit the category/categories of pluralism, skepticism, or despair/hopelessness? How might you share John 14:6 with them?