

Threads

The Sufficiency of Christ
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THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST **1 John 3:5; 1 Peter 2:24; Revelation 1:18**

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to 1 John 3. And let me also invite you to pull out the notes in your Worship Guide, as well as one of these "Threads" booklets. We have referenced these each week and made them available for you when you come in, just in case you have forgotten yours from the previous week or if you have not been here on previous weeks. So if you didn't get one of these when you came in, let me invite you simply to raise your hand where you are, and our ushers will be coming through the aisles, and they would be glad to give you one. This is intended not so much as a booklet to give away to someone who may not know Christ, though I suppose you could certainly do that, but it's purpose is to be a resource for you as a follower of Christ when it comes to intentionally weaving threads of the gospel into your everyday conversations.

During this series, we are intentionally encouraging one another to be a gospel-speaking, gospel-sharing people on a moment-by-moment, day-by-day basis, speaking about the character of God, the sinfulness of man, the sufficiency of Christ, the necessity of faith, and the urgency of eternity in the context of natural, daily conversations. This gospel is too good to keep to ourselves. If it is true, this is especially important for you to hear if you are not a Christian today. So if you are not a follower of Christ at this moment, we don't want to hide from the fact that we want you to know who God is and what God has done in Christ to restore us to Himself.

If we didn't share the gospel -- and this word "gospel" means "good news"; it is the good news of what God has done in Christ. If we didn't share the gospel with you, speak the gospel around you, we would basically be saying, either, one, we don't actually believe the gospel. We're just playing a religious game every Sunday in this culture, which is a pretty tempting game to play. Or two, if we didn't share this with you, we'd be saying that we believe the gospel, but we don't love you enough to tell you about it, to tell you about how you can be restored to God through Jesus. So we hope that even this morning, as we talk about how to share the gospel, that you will see and hear and sense God's love for you in Jesus, even today, and that you might put your faith in Him to restore you to God.

This I fully realize might lead you to ask the follow-up question: "Well, why do I have to put my faith in Jesus in order to be restored to God? And for that matter, why do I even need to be restored to God in the first place?" And those are good questions that lead us right into what we're talking about today.

The Divine (and Human) Dilemma ...

Our goal over the last couple of weeks -- and this will catch you up to speed if you've not been here the last couple of weeks. And if you have been here, this will summarize where we've been as sort of a recap. Our goal has been to establish what I've put at the top of

your notes there as the Divine (and human) dilemma. This means this is the ultimate dilemma for all mankind from the perspective of God.

The ultimate question ...

The ultimate question in all the world -- and I know that's a big statement, but follow with me -- the ultimate question in all the world is: How can a holy God save rebellious sinners who are due His judgment? And this question flows from everything we've talked about the last couple of weeks.

I would draw your attention to the back of this "Threads Booklet." So, number one, God is holy. Our Creator God is perfectly pure and infinitely good. He is, as Isaiah 43:15 says, "the Lord, the Holy One, our Creator." Yet we, number two, have rebelled against God. Romans 3:12 says we have all (every single one of us) turned aside from God to ourselves. For some, that's manifested in self-indulgence, and for others that's manifested in self-righteousness, but we have all turned away from God. And as a result, number three, we are separated from God. We have, according to Romans 3:23, fallen short of the glory of God. One sin against an infinitely holy God leads to infinite separation from God.

And some might say, "Well, why doesn't God just forgive us? After all, He's loving, right?" Well, yes, He is, He's infinitely loving, which we'll get to in a moment, but, number four, God is just. And as a just Judge, as a good Judge, God by His very nature must say to the innocent, "You are innocent," and He says to the guilty, "You are guilty". Proverbs 17:15, "*God justifies the innocent and condemns the guilty*" because He is a good judge.

So we all stand guilty before God (every single one of us), deserving of the payment for sin, which is, number five, death. Romans 6:23 says the payment for sin is death -- eventual physical death that ultimately leads to eternal spiritual death -- an eternity separated from God. That is eternally bad news for all of us in this room. But, number six, God is gracious. Titus 2:11, "*The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...*" And He desires to show free and unmerited favor to the guilty.

And so all of these truths together set up this dilemma, this ultimate question: How can a holy God save and show love to rebellious sinners who are due His judgment? We deserve His judgment in our sin. He is just, and by His very character, He must pour out His judgment upon our sin.

The underlying tension ...

So feel the underlying tension here. How can God express His holy justice without condemning us in our sin, when His holy justice warrants? If we are not condemned before God as guilty for our sin, then God would be neither holy nor just. He would not be a good Judge, and He would certainly not be a just judge. Don't miss this: When we understand the character of God and the sinfulness of man, we no longer ask why God finds it difficult to forgive our sins; we start asking how God finds it possible to forgive our sins.

And the tension goes on: How can God express His holy justice without condemning us in our sin, and at the same time, how can God express His holy love without condoning us in our sin? God is love; just as God is infinitely just, He is infinitely loving. So how can God love us when His just character necessitates condemning us? Do you feel the tension? This is the fundamental problem of the universe!

Now it's not the problem most people normally identify. Think about it: How many people in our culture are worried today about how God can be just and loving to sinners at the same time? How many people today are losing sleep at night over how God can love us? Not

many. On the contrary, most people are pointing the finger at God and ask, "How can you punish sinners? How can you let good people go to hell?" But the question of the Bible is exactly the opposite: "God, how can you save sinners? How can you be just and let the guilty into heaven?" We don't realize the greatness of the One whom we have sinned against, and we don't realize that if He were to overlook sin, His holiness and justice would be completely compromised, and He would no longer be God.

The Sufficiency of Christ ***Knowing this Gospel Thread ...***

This tension, this question, this dilemma sets the stage for the sufficiency of Jesus. We live in a day where many religions exist all around the world, and many people believe that all of them lead to the same place in the end, that none is superior or inferior to the others. And the very idea that Jesus alone is the only way to restoration with God is perceived as preposterous, antiquated, arrogant, close-minded, narrow-minded, and many would even say unjust. People say, "Certainly there's not just one right way." But my aim this morning is to show you that, once we understand who God is -- the holy, just, and gracious Creator of all things -- and once we understand who we are -- men and women created by God but corrupted by sin, having rebelled against Him, separated from Him, and dead without Him - - then we will realize that Jesus alone, over and above every single person and every single philosophy and every single religion, is able to remove our sin and restore us to God.

Jesus alone is able to remove our sin and restore us to God.

So let's think about that thread. Jesus alone is able to remove our sin and restore us to God. And that word "alone" is key. It's the question that's on the front of that booklet is, "Is Jesus unique? In a world full of a multiplicity of religious beliefs, is Jesus really unique? And the gospel answers with a resounding, "Yes."

He alone is able to remove our sin and restore us to God for two reasons. One, because of who He is. Behold the mystery of who Jesus is. On one hand, see Jesus' humanity: See His humble character. Almost all people in the world who know anything about Jesus, even secular scholars, would say that Jesus was a good man in religious history. People identify with Jesus, a man didn't live a sheltered life, but a man who was familiar with sorrow, struggle, and suffering.

And people not only identify with him; they admire him. Twenty-first century people find much to admire in the Jesus of the first century. He was loving and kind. He championed the cause of the poor and the needy. He made friends with the neglected band the weak and the downtrodden. He hung out with the despised and the rejected. He loved his enemies, and He taught others to do the same. Even when He was fiercely and unfairly attacked, He never retaliated. In all these ways, we see His humble character.

But, in the middle of such humility, at the same time, any honest look at Jesus also reveals a corresponding egocentricity; Jesus was always talking about Himself. "I am...I am...I am...", He would say. "Follow me...Come to me," He would say, promising that if people would only come to Him, all of their burdens would be lifted. Don't miss this: Amidst Jesus' example to and for humanity, He was at the very same time drawing attention to His deity: Hear His extravagant claims. This humble man made extravagant claims about Himself. John Stott describes this best. He says:

One of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his teaching (and he did it so unobtrusively that many people read the Gospels without even noticing it) was to set himself apart from everybody else. For example, by claiming to be the good shepherd who went out into the desert to seek his lost sheep, he was implying that the world was lost, that he wasn't, and that he could seek and save it. In other words, he put himself in a moral category in which he was alone. Everybody else was in darkness; he was the light of the world. Everybody else was hungry; he was the bread of life. Everybody else was thirsty; he could quench their thirst. Everybody else was sinful; he could forgive their sins. Indeed, on two separate occasions he did so, and both times observers were scandalized. They asked, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:5-7; Luke 7:48-49). [And] If Jesus claimed authority to forgive the penitent, he also claimed authority to judge the impenitent. Several of his parables implied that he expected to return at the end of history. On that day, he said, he would sit on his glorious throne. All nations would stand before him, and he would separate them from one another as a shepherd separates his sheep from his goats. In other words, he would settle their eternal destiny. Thus he made himself the central figure on the day of judgment.

Stott concludes: "These are breathtaking claims. Jesus was by trade a carpenter. Nazareth was an obscure village on the edge of the Roman Empire. Nobody outside Palestine would even have heard of Nazareth. Yet here [Jesus of Nazareth] was, claiming to be the savior and the judge of all humankind." There is no doubt that Jesus believed He was unique!

This leads us all to a very simple conclusion, and this is the classic argument made by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. Either these claims of Jesus are true, or they are false. Now follow with me. If they're false, if these extraordinary claims of Christ were false, and He knew they were false, then Jesus was an outright liar. Or, if these claims were false, but Jesus thought they were true, then Jesus was a lunatic -- a raving narcissist who actually believed He was the Savior of the world. Either these claims are false and Jesus is an outright liar or an outrageous lunatic, or these claims are true, and Jesus is indeed Lord of all. Lewis writes:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept [Him] as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

There is no one like Jesus. And the thought that Jesus is God in the flesh, beyond being a mystery that outstretches our minds, is an offense to many. To multitudes of people in this world, particularly Muslims, this is the most outlandish of all claims.

I've told you before about a group of Muslim men in the Middle East who told me one night as we sat at a restaurant, "God would never debase himself by becoming a man." I had just

shared how God has come to us in the person of Jesus, and one of the men, Raahil, stopped me and said, "That is not true. God would never do that. His character is too great." I replied, "I agree that God's character is great, and that is precisely why he came to earth as a man." Raahil said, "I don't understand." And I said, "Let me tell you a story and then ask you a question." Raahil said okay, and I said, "The story is about me and a girl. I loved this girl, and I wanted to marry her. So when it came time for me to tell her how much I loved her and to ask her to marry me, do you think that I sent one of my friends to relay that message for me?" Raahil said, "No, of course not. You need to be the one to tell her that you love her and to ask her to marry you." I said, "Exactly. I needed to go to her and tell her myself, because in matters of love, one must go himself, right?" Raahil said, "Yes, that is right."

Then I said, "This is how God shows the greatness of his character toward us. He has not ultimately sent this person or that prophet, this message or that messenger to communicate His love for us. Instead, He has come Himself, because in matters of love, one must go himself." Raahil sat back and smiled, and I couldn't help but think that for the first time his heart was opening to the idea that God displays the greatness of his love not by staying distant from us, but by coming directly to us. This is the gospel, ladies and gentlemen. In love, God has come to us to do what we could never do for ourselves.

This leads to the second part of Jesus' uniqueness. He is unique because of who He is, and Jesus is unique because of what He has done.

Jesus lived the life we could not live.

And that leads into the three main facets of this thread. What has Jesus done that makes Him unique? Here's what He's done: One, Jesus lived the life we could not live. 1 John 3:5 says, "*You know that he [Jesus] appeared in order to take away sins, and...*" Follow this very important phrase -- "*...in him there is no sin.*" Jesus is a man, but He is set apart from other every other man and every other woman in all of history on this point. He had no sin. He, unlike us, never rebelled against God.

Though Jesus was tempted to sin -- and this is key -- He was fully tempted by sin. Hebrews 4:15 says that we have a Savior, Christ, who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Matthew 4, a passage we've studied before, gives us a glimpse into how Jesus faced the full throttle of temptation's force. And so He is like us in that way. He identified with us in our temptations, and this is why Jesus didn't die for us when He was just a young child.

And it's why He didn't just come from heaven at whatever age and go straight to the cross. No, He was born a man, and as a man, He was fully tempted by sin, but unlike any other man or woman, He fully triumphed over sin. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God the Father.

And as a result, as perfect man, He alone is able to substitute for human sin. Think about it: What man (or woman) can pay the price for sins if he (or she) has sinned? A guilty person cannot pay the price for guilty people, because that person is guilty himself or herself. So as perfect man, Jesus was fit to do what no one else -- no other religious teacher, no other philosopher, no other man or woman in the history of the world -- has been fit to do. He was able to stand in the gap to be a substitute for men and women in their sin.

And, at the same time, as perfect God, He alone is able to satisfy divine judgment. We have already established that our sin before an infinite God is worthy of infinite separation,

infinite condemnation. So only infinite God in the flesh (as a person) is able to pay the infinite price due people in their sin.

Jesus died the death we deserve to die.

This leads us, then, to the next thing Jesus did that makes Him unique: Jesus died the death we deserve to die. So turn with me over to 1 Peter 2:24. Now this is particularly unique because of the emphasis that Jesus Himself, as well as His followers, put on His death. For other religious leaders in the world, their death was the tragic end of their story. The focus in other religions is on their leaders' lives and teachings and example, whoever it may be. Whether it's Muhammad dying at 62, Confucius dying at 72, the Buddha dying at 80, Moses dying at 120-years-old, these leaders' deaths marked the end of their mission. With Jesus, though, it's completely the opposite. He was constantly talking about His death, anticipating His death. The Gospel accounts of Jesus place a disproportionate emphasis on the days leading up to His death, in such a way that the central symbol of Christianity for the last 2000 years has been the cross! The central symbol in the church's worship is a piece of bread and a cup, commemorating Jesus' body and blood shed in His death.

So what was so significant about Jesus' death? 1 Peter 2:24 says, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."* He bore our sins, He took the payment of our sins on His body on the tree, on the cross. We saw last week that the payment for sin is death; we die because we sin. Jesus had no sin, so why did Jesus die? And the gospel tells us – the good news tells us – that Jesus died in our place for our sins.

Think about it: The essence of sin: Man substitutes himself for God. That's the essence of sin. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. We say, "I am in charge, not you. My ways, not your ways. I am at the center; not you at the center. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be.

So then, it follows: The essence of salvation: God substitutes Himself for man. The essence of salvation is that God sacrifices Himself for man and puts Himself where only man deserves to be. People ask, or at least wonder, "What is so significant about the cross of Jesus Christ? What happened there that is so unique, that sets His death apart from every other religious leaders' death, or any other persons' death, even any other martyrs' death, of which there have been many in Christian history and other history for other causes? What made Jesus' death on the cross so significant?"

See it: In light of all that we've considered – the divine dilemma – how can God save rebellious sinners who are due His judgment? He can do this by taking the judgment due sinners upon Himself. See it: At the cross, God expresses His judgment upon sin. God's holy judgment is poured out upon man, and at the same time, God endures His judgment against sin. This is God Himself in the flesh, as a man, taking the infinite judgment due sin upon Himself, and in the process, God enables salvation for sinners. In holy justice, God does not overlook sin; He fully pours out justice on sin. And in holy love, God does not overlook sinners; He pays the price for sin in their place. Is God just toward sin? Yes, look at the cross. Is God loving toward sinners? Yes, look at the cross. Jesus died the death we deserve to die.

Jesus conquered the enemy we cannot conquer.

But even that is not the end of the story. That's where all other religious leaders and teachers end their story, but that is not where Jesus' story ends. He lived the life we could not live, He died the death we deserve to die, and Jesus conquered the enemy we cannot conquer. Turn to Revelation 1:18. Now, I want to be careful not to imply here that Jesus'

death was a temporary defeat, and the victory didn't come until the resurrection; that's not the way the gospel tells this story. Jesus' death, in and of itself, was victory. Colossians 2:14-15 says God nailed *"the record of debt that stood against us...to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."* Jesus obeyed the Father all the way to the cross; He died in perfect obedience unto death with the devil never gaining a foothold on Him, so the cross, in a very real sense, was the victory won, and it set the stage for that victory to be vindicated and declared three days later when Jesus rose from the dead. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus says, *"I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."*

Ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that even amidst all that we have talked about, this is where Christianity stands or falls: The resurrection of Jesus. And the Bible even says this. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, *"If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christians are to be pitied among men."* Non-Christian, feel sorry for us if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, because this whole thing is meaningless. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then this has huge implications for every single one of our lives.

Think about it: If Jesus rose from the dead -- I'm not talking resuscitation; I'm not talking reincarnation; I'm not talking that Jesus went unconscious and got a vision of heaven or hell and came back to write a best-selling account of it. I'm talking killed by crucifixion on a cross, wrapped up, put in a tomb, and after three days in that tomb, one morning the stone is rolled away, and He's walking around alive. If this is true, then Jesus is Lord over life and death. Who determines when they live? Who in here -- when you are dead, when your heart flatlines for a few days -- who in here has the power to say, "I'm going to come back to life." If Jesus rose from the dead, then He is Lord over life and death.

If He rose from the dead, then He is Lord over sin and Satan. Death is the payment for sin, and Jesus has conquered it. 1 Corinthians 15:55 says, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Hebrews 2:14 says that through death, Jesus destroyed *"the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*

If Jesus rose from the dead, then He is Lord over live and death, He is Lord over sin and Satan, and He is Lord over you and me. This is the fundamental Christian confession of the New Testament. Romans 10:9-10 says, *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* The resurrection shouts loud and clear that Jesus reigns over us supremely, and He loves us deeply. He came to live the life we could not live, to die the death we deserve to die, and to conquer the enemy we cannot conquer, and He did all of this to save you and me from our sins. There is no one like Him. No one. This is the sufficiency of Christ.

Weaving this Gospel Thread ...

Intentionally talk about Jesus.

So Christian, how do we weave this gospel thread into the fabric of our everyday conversations? Surely if we believe this is true, if we believe Jesus is who He says He is and did what the gospel says He did, then we will not stay silent about this! So how do we talk daily about the sufficiency of Christ? And I want to encourage you in these ways. First, and this is the most simple encouragement today, and it will seem so obvious that it may not even seem helpful, but it's central: Intentionally talk about Jesus. Outside of Sunday,

Christians talk so tragically little about Jesus, hardly ever even mentioning His name. We're okay, every once in a while, to go out on a limb and talk about God, but for many, as soon as you mention Jesus in a conversation at the office or over lunch or coffee, things feel like they go to a whole new level of awkwardness.

I so appreciate one of the stories that you shared this week. A mom riding in a cab with her 2-year-old son, and this mom knew that she had an opportunity to share the gospel with the cab driver, but she was sitting there silent, trying to think of how to start sharing the gospel, and frankly afraid to do so. Then all of the sudden her 2-year-old son starts singing loudly in the car, "Jesus Loves Me," which then leads into a conversation with the cab driver. This mom said, "It was such a humbling moment for me, as I was sitting there relying on myself trying to come up with something profound to say, and my 2-year-old who's still developing his vocabulary starts singing about Jesus." So I want to encourage you today to go beyond even talking about God, to talking intentionally about Jesus -- about His life, His death, and His resurrection.

Talking about Jesus' life ...

In talking about Jesus' life, look for opportunities to highlight Jesus' example for us. Now I want to be careful here, because as we've talked about, a lot of people believe that Jesus was just a good moral person, but they don't believe in Him as Savior and Lord. And I'm obviously not saying we need to talk about Jesus like He was just a good moral person. But at the same time, we would be wise to look for situations and circumstances where we have the opportunity to talk about examples from His life as a man.

When I'm talking with people about hardships they're facing, I love to tell them stories about Jesus calming the wind and the waves, about Jesus stopping in his tracks when a woman who was hurting simply touched him amidst a crowd of people. When someone is going through relational struggles, tell them about the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. When someone feels ostracized for something they've done, tell them the story about Jesus and the woman who was about to be stoned. The more we talk about who Jesus is and what Jesus did, the more His beauty and wonder becomes evident to people around us.

So look for opportunities you have to highlight Jesus' example for us, and look for opportunities to acknowledge Jesus' work in us. This goes back a little to what we talked about two weeks ago, but credit Jesus for anything (and everything) good in you. I was with a family not long ago where a husband was standing over his wife's bed as she was literally dying right in front of him, and I encouraged him for the strength I saw in him. And he said, "Anything that is strong in me is because Christ is in me." That's gospel; that's good news of Christ's life in us!

And then, look for opportunities to point out Jesus' identification with us. The beauty of Jesus' humanity is Jesus' identification with us. He is familiar with our temptations, familiar with trials; He is familiar with sadness and sorrow and suffering. We are not talking about a distant Savior who knows nothing about peoples' lives. We are talking about a humble King who knows what it's like to face every facet of life.

Are people around you hurting? Jesus hurt. Are people around you broken? Jesus was broken. Do people around you feel rejected? Jesus was rejected. Do people around you feel alone? Jesus was alone. Hebrews 4 talks about how we don't have a Savior who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, so when we or when others go through times of weakness, talk about Jesus' identification with us.

Talking about Jesus' death ...

Then, talking about Jesus' death, first, I want to encourage you to never stop emphasizing the gravity of sin. We talked last week about the sinfulness of man, but I want to reiterate this here, because people will never see their need for Christ until they see this divine/human dilemma that we have talked about. And our tendency in our day, even in the church, and as Christians, is to minimize the severity of sin and its effects, to talk lightly about sin. But here's the deal: Whenever we minimize sin, we will end up minimizing the cross. Whenever we take a casual approach to sin, we will lighten the significance of the cross. If we want people to see how lovely the cross is, we must talk about how deadly sin is.

I was talking to a corporate group not long ago, and I started talking about the severity of sin, and even of hell, and later I was kicking myself, thinking, "Maybe I shouldn't have gone so far in that setting." But a couple of days later, someone who was in that corporate meeting approached me and said, "I've got some questions about some of the things you mentioned in that talk," and I said, "Okay," and we went to lunch and started talking about them, and by God's grace the Lord used that to draw this person to turn from sin and trust in Christ. Never stop emphasizing the gravity of sin.

But don't stop there. Then, never stop talking about your gratitude for Christ. Sin is obviously not the end of the story, so speak about your gratitude for what Jesus has done on the cross. Do people you work with know how thankful you are for the cross of Jesus Christ? Do the people in your house and the houses next to you know how thankful you are for the cross of Jesus, where He took all your sin upon Himself in order to restore you to God? Look for opportunities this week to share with someone how thankful you are that Christ died for you, and that Christ rose from the dead!

Talking about Jesus' resurrection ...

In talking about Jesus' resurrection, point to Jesus' resurrection by speaking about difficulties with hope. When we face marital difficulties or relational difficulties or job difficulties or physical difficulties, and we talk like there's no hope, we undercut the gospel. The gospel is a gospel of hope. There is a confidence that fills our speech when we are faced with trials and when we have the opportunity to encourage others in trials – we never, ever speak like we're hope-less. You might say, "Well what if I don't see any hope for this circumstance? For getting over this cancer or getting past this obstacle?" And this is where I remind you to remind others that our hope is not ultimately in this life. Jesus has conquered death, and we know that this world is not all there is. We have a hope that transcends death.

You know, it's interesting that most of the stories you've shared this week revolved around opportunities to speak about the gospel with people around you who were going through some kind of difficulty. For some of you, it's family that you've been praying for for years, brothers or sisters who have wandered far away from God. And now they find themselves coming to the end of themselves. And you've had opportunities to point them to the hope that's found in Christ alone. To say to people around us who are realizing that all the possessions you can imagine in this world, and all the plaudits you can receive from this world, and all the pleasures and pursuits that this world has to offer are ultimately meaningless ultimately all lead to hopelessness -- to be able to say to people, "There is hope that is more precious and more valuable than everything this world has to offer that will never let you down", and to point them to that hope in Christ.

One of you shared about your brother who for the last 20 years has been a slave to drugs and alcohol. And for the last six years, this brother had basically cut off communication with you, all relationship with you. And this last week, he reached back out to you simply for a

ride. And you picked him up, and you asked him, "Do you ever feel loved?" And your brother slowly choked out a "no" as he shared how he doesn't feel loved by anyone more than anyone else in this world. And so you spoke with tears in your eyes about the love of God shown in His sending His Son to die for him.

I think about another story. One member of our faith family was running on a treadmill at the gym when she saw a girl across the way that she vaguely recognized, but didn't know. And this member said, "As I was running, I kept sensing that God was telling to pray for her, so I did. But then I sensed that God was telling me to pray with her, and I thought, 'No way – not here – I can't just walk up to her. She'll think I'm crazy.'" But she said, "God still kept putting her on my heart as I ran, so I had no idea what I'd say or how she'd react, but I got off the treadmill and went up to her, introduced myself, and told her I hoped she didn't think I was crazy, but that I wanted to offer to pray with her, and I asked her if there was anything I could pray for/with her about." She said, "This girl started crying and said 'yes' and we went outside and sat in my car for the next hour praying and talking as she shared how things in her life were spiraling out of control and she needed God to save her." And the member wrote, and I quote, "This was definitely not random. This was rigged."

Now you may hear stories and like this and think, "So we're just supposed to capitalize on others' difficulties for the sake of the gospel?" And that's not it, at all. But just realize that in all of our lives, difficulties wake us up to the reality of our mortality, to the emptiness of the things of this world (even the best things of this world), and ultimately difficulties in this world create in us a longing for hope that transcends this world – a hope that is ultimately found in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Speak about difficulties with hope, and much like we talked about last week, speak about death with joy. The gospel says we rejoice in death because Christ has conquered it. We don't worry about death. You believe that, you live like that, and you talk like that, you will be speaking the gospel. You talk about your cancer with authentic joy, you talk about pain with authentic joy, you talk about risking your life to go to the nations with authentic joy, and people start wondering what's up. I'm not talking about a flippant happiness; I'm talking about an abiding sense of confidence and joy that because you know Christ is risen, you know that death is gain.

Now, I added a few other exhortations in your notes specifically regarding conversations with people in our culture about Christ, particularly people who may question the uniqueness of Christ. For example, I put "Talking with Pluralist Paul". So picture here is the person – we'll call him Paul – who thinks all religious roads either end up in the same destination or all are equally valid. "Christianity works for you; Jesus works for you. That's great, but that doesn't mean Christianity should work for everybody or that Jesus is for everybody."

Talking with Pluralist Paul ...

And this is where I want to encourage you as followers of Jesus, when you're talking with Pluralist Paul, to highlight the all-important distinctions between taste, tradition, and truth. Here's what I mean by that. Taste: We live in a world and a culture where religious beliefs are regarded as mere matters of personal taste, and whatever works best for you. Religion is a matter of preference, so choose whichever one you like. Just like you choose your favorite flavor of ice cream, choose your flavor of faith. Or religion is a matter of tradition -- where you're born, what your particular culture finds acceptable. If you're born in India, you're likely Hindu. If you're born an Arab, you're likely Muslim. If you're born in Birmingham, you're likely Christian. Religion and faith are merely a matter of tradition.

So there's this pluralistic idea that all religions are equally the same, and you should just pick whatever works best for you (even if that's atheism, for that matter) based on your tradition or your particular taste. But what's lost in all of this looking at religion and faith in terms of taste and tradition is looking at religion and faith in terms of truth, because all of these religions cannot be true at the same time. And so, in at least some (if not many or most) of them, you are basing your life and your faith on a lie.

This is obvious; just think about it. Either God does exist, which Christianity and other religions would claim, or God doesn't exist, which atheism or agnosticism would either claim or lean toward. This is not a matter of taste or tradition; this is a matter of truth. And either atheists or Christians are basing their lives on a lie; they are not both right.

Or think about Islam and Christianity. When it comes to the death of Christ, Christians obviously believe that Jesus died on a cross. Muslims, however, deny that Jesus died on a cross. Some say that the man who died on the cross 2000 years ago looked like Jesus, but he wasn't really Jesus. Other Muslims believe that Jesus went to the cross, but He didn't die there. He was just hurt really, really, really bad. So either way, according to Islam, Jesus didn't die on the cross, and therefore He didn't rise from the grave three days later.

Now I'm not asking you at this point to say which one you think is true; I'm just pointing out that both of these belief systems can't be true at the same time. Either Jesus didn't die on the cross and didn't rise from the grave, and if that's the case, then Christians, you are wasting your lives and are to be pitied among men. Or Jesus did die on the cross and did rise from the dead. In which case this has huge ramifications for every single Muslim and every single person in the world. And eternity is dependent on what's true here, not on where we were born or what we prefer. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but certainly where we will spend eternity is a more important decision than whether we eat chocolate or vanilla ice cream. So humbly highlight this reality.

And humbly encourage people to then explore what's true. Whatever faith position someone takes involves just that: Faith. You're either going to put your faith in God or no God. And either one of these is going to involve a leap of faith. You're either going to believe in the resurrection of Jesus or not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. And either position you take is going to involve a leap of faith.

This is where I point out to my non-Christian friends that the burden of proof when it comes to the resurrection is not just on Christians; it's on non-Christians, as well. Because there's no question, even among the most secular of scholars, that around 2000 years ago an entirely new religious community and movement was formed almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, even when it meant they would die for claiming that. This was a fast-growing movement of people that now makes up what some estimate is as large as a third of the world survives as a result. So how do you explain that? If you don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, then there's a burden of proof here to provide some other plausible account for how the church started. But in all of these discussions, the point is that faith is not merely a matter of taste (which puts faith on the level of flavor), and it's not a matter of tradition (which assumes that just because you were born in a certain place, what people around you believe is right). No, this is a matter of truth.

Recently, a non-Christian friend of mine said to me, "David, we're born into a culture where there's a lot of churches, but if we were born into a culture where there's a lot of mosques or Hindu, then we'd be Muslims or Hindus, and that'd be okay. Besides the fact that Jesus is more accepted in our culture, why should I be a Christian?" And I shared with him,

"Because Jesus is true." And I asked him, "Would you be willing to explore that with me?" He said yes, so we walked through a little book by John Stott called, "Why I Am A Christian". It was very helpful, and there are other resources that are really helpful along these lines, which would include Stott's *Basic Christianity* as well as Tim Keller's *Reason for God*. And at the end of that journey of exploring the claims of Christ, my friend said, "I believe Jesus is true, and I am trusting Him to save me from my sins." Highlight the all-important distinctions between taste, tradition, and truth.

Talking with Open-Minded Olivia ...

And then what about talking with Open-Minded Olivia. The sincere person who says, "If God is loving, then certainly He would not condemn people to hell." Or, "If God is loving, then why would there be only one way to Him through Jesus. And all of these other ways and religions are wrong?" People even say, "God is more loving and more creative than Christians give him credit for." And whenever well-meaning non-Christian friends or family say things like this, I always try to explain the pursuing love of God in the perceived narrowness of the gospel. In other words, I try to put their sincere questions in perspective.

For instance, let's suppose that it would make sense to say to this God, "Why is there only one way? Isn't that narrow-minded, God? Couldn't you be more creative? I thought you were loving!" Now, when we realize the whole story, we realize the question is not, "Why is there only one way?" Instead, we realize that the question is, "Why is there any way at all?" And we recognize that this is really not a matter of how many ways there are. If there were a 1000 ways, we would want a 1001. This issue is not how many ways there are. The issue is that we want to make our own way, and the God of the universe has said in His pursuing love and His pursuing grace, "I have made a way to you. Trust in me." Explain the pursuing love of God in the perceived narrowness of the gospel.

Talking with Nominal Nancy ...

And then finally, I put in your notes, talking with Nominal Nancy. And this is huge particularly in our culture in Birmingham, where sometimes it seems like everybody thinks they are a Christian, but being a Christian so often involves nominal adherence to Christ. We live in a day where people privatize their faith. And much like we've talked about with Pluralist Paul, if Jesus works for you, then that's great, but don't try to push Jesus on others. Just keep Jesus to yourself. And many supposed Christians live with this same philosophy.

Now next week we're going to talk specifically about sharing the gospel with nominal Christians who may or may not actually know Christ. But in light of what we've discussed today, I want to say to us, and to encourage us to point out to others how a privatized faith in a resurrected Christ is practically impossible. It is impossible to believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the only way to be restored to God, and then to say nothing to people around you about this. That makes no sense. It's like knowing where to find water in the desert and telling no one where to find it. Privatized Christianity is an oxymoron; it doesn't add up. Nominal Christianity is impossible. C.S. Lewis said, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."

So I want to encourage you, Christian, to intentionally speak this week about the life, and the death, and the resurrection of Jesus and see what God does. And at the same time, I would encourage every non-Christian who is here today to see God's love for you. God so loves you that He sent His one and only Son to live, to die and to conquer. And I invite you to trust in Him today and to follow Him today.

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