

“Jesus: The Way. Period.”

John 14.6; Philippians 2:9-11; Acts 4:12; Matthew 7:13-14

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“You must make your choice,” wrote C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.” Who do we believe Jesus is – *really*?

We’re exploring some difficult questions this summer. Do we believe that Jesus is *the way*? That the *only* way to the Father is through him? What about our co-workers and friends who believe in a different God, or a set of gods? Do we tell them that *we’re right* and *they’re wrong*? Do we tell them, as some Christians do, that unless they become a Christian they’re going to burn in hell for all eternity?

I laid out those questions several weeks ago. Since then, Fred and Charlie have both taken a turn at bat. Fred talked about reading the New Testament with a group of Jews; Charlie talked about the class he taught recently on law in Islam. Fred referenced the passages in the New Testament that indicate that God desires that *everyone* be saved through Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9); Charlie outlined two approaches that we should avoid, including the notion that every religion is really aiming toward the same thing on the one hand, and declaring polemically that “my way” is the one and only way and shutting the door for further conversation, on the other. Charlie challenged us to look for a third way, a way that does not insist that we are intrinsically better than people of other faiths, or that compromises the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a way that puts us in conversation with people of other faiths – or no faith – so that we will have an opportunity to share *why* we live out our faith in Jesus Christ.

So back to the central question: Is Jesus truly *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*? Is it really true that *no one come to the Father* but through him? My answer: *Yes and Yes*. This *flies in the face* of what our secular culture wants to say. In the postmodern world, *there is no such thing as absolute truth*. We Christians have to be willing to say, “No, there *is* Truth, and his name is Jesus Christ.” That is not what many people in our culture want to hear. That is not the message that’s being broadcast in the popular media and in numerous university classrooms. But it *is* the message of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is not just, as Charlie said last week, a *good teacher* or a *prophet* or a *rabbi*. He is *Lord! King of kings and Lord of lords*. We *must not* compromise that! The earliest confession of the church was “Jesus Christ is Lord.” That hasn’t changed in twenty centuries, and it shouldn’t change now. Either Jesus Christ really is the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Door, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Resurrection and the Life, or he’s not. There is no middle ground! As C. S. Lewis wrote 64 years ago: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say

about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus 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 a 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."

I am not saying that Christianity is better than any other religion. Christianity is a human institution, full of human people, *none* of whom have been completely sanctified, *none* of whom have reached full maturity in Jesus Christ, *none* of whom are completely free from sin. Christianity is not perfect, not anywhere *close* to perfect. This religion has *all sorts* of problems! Ask just about any non-Christian out there. They'll tell you all the things that are wrong with Christianity. In many cases they're right. Just because we worship Jesus Christ as Lord doesn't make this religion any better than any other. It's not our *religion* that's better – it's *Jesus*. It's not *Christianity* that saves people – it's *Jesus*.

So what about someone who grew up in another faith tradition, firmly believes that they worship the one true God, and lives a life filled with good character, good deeds, and service to others? C. S. Lewis offers an answer. In *The Final Battle*, the last book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, there is a character named Emeth, who serves a god named Tash. "Always since I was a boy," Emeth says, "I have served Tash and my great desire was to know more of him and, if it might be, to look upon his face. But the name of Aslan was hateful to me." Aslan, of course, represents Jesus Christ. Emeth tries to preserve his god's name and reputation from those who would make a mockery of it, and in doing so winds up having a face-to-face encounter with Aslan himself. Emeth later says: "I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honour) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him. But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son thou art welcome. But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, ... that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites.... I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him.... And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yes I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly." To put that simply: Emeth *thought* he was serving Tash, but in reality – because his heart was in absolutely the right place – he was truly serving Aslan even though he didn't know it. And Aslan loved him for it.

That is Lewis's interpretation of the biblical teaching on this difficult topic. He took some criticism for it back then, and I know some Christians even now who do not like his approach; they feel it opens the door far too wide. For doesn't the book of Revelation say that unbelievers will "be consigned

to the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (Revelation 21:8), and doesn’t Paul say that “those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus ... will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9)? The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 says that Christ will bless some people with kingdom inheritance and curse others to “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” – but curiously, in that passage, it is not *belief* that is the determining factor; *deeds* are. Similarly, in John 5, Jesus says that “those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29). What makes the critical difference – *belief* or *deeds*? Be careful that you don’t say it’s just *one* of those when scripture clearly says that *both* matter. And is it God’s intention to save everybody, or just some? In the book of Joel, God says that on the last day “I will pour out my Spirit on *all* people” (Joel 2.28), but a few verses later God says “everyone *who calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved” (Joel 2.32). In Colossians, Paul says that through Christ God was pleased “to reconcile to himself *all* things” (Colossians 1.20), but three verses later he says that Christ’s reconciling work is only effective “if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1.23). In 1 Timothy, he says “we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of *all* people, and *especially* of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4.10). In John’s gospel, Jesus says “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* people to myself” (John 12.32), but several chapters earlier he said “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6.44). Does God draw *everyone* to him through Christ, or just *some*? Is salvation *offered* to everybody, but only *granted* to a few? What about Philippians – that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11)? If *everyone* will ultimately be worshipping Jesus, then why do some passages say that there will be people consigned to the fiery lake?

I have to be honest: there are some things that I do not fully understand. Like Job at the end of the book that bears his name, like Paul at the end of his discussion of the ultimate fate of Israel in Romans 9-11, I throw up my hands and confess, *There are some things about God and his ways that I don’t fully understand*. I have trouble getting all of scripture to fit in one nice, neat, coherent, consistent package. But one thing is abundantly clear: whether God ultimately offers salvation to everybody or not, that salvation is *only* available through Jesus Christ and his saving death on the cross that brought reconciliation to the whole cosmos. “Salvation,” as Peter puts it in Acts 4.32, “is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

And I also know this: Jesus tells us explicitly to go out into the world and tell other people about him. “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5.16) “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28.19) Those instructions are *clear* and *unequivocal*. We are not supposed to be just sitting around, waiting for people to show up. No, Jesus tells us to engage in an ongoing ministry that is much less *passive* and much more *active*. At the end of the day we may not fully understand everything we’d like to understand, but that gives no excuse not to do what our Lord so *clearly* tells us to do.

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