

# “I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” //

John 14:6 // “I AM” #7<sup>1</sup>

## Announcement

All this week we’ve hosted our church planters and their families in town to encourage and refresh them and, man, what a reminder it’s been for me to keep pressing toward that “planting 1,000 churches in our generation” goal. Currently we are at about 550, with about 80 of those being domestic. Well, our NA church planting team has informed me they don’t want to include international churches in that 1,000 goal anymore. They want to do that themselves. We’ll count that in another goal.

Did you know, this Easter, in our Summit Collaborative churches in North America, we had over 30,000 people worshipping? And that’s not counting the 21,000 here! And over the last 12 months, our Collab churches have baptized 1,009 people! And that doesn’t count our 1,000 baptisms here, either.

Lastly, and this might be my favorite, the majority of our plants have now started planting themselves. In fact, we have 20–25 grandbaby churches that have launched—or are in the pipeline to launch. I’ve

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<sup>1</sup> Works consulted: Jay Pathak, “[I am the Good Shepherd](#)”, January 22, 2023, Bridgetown Church; Tim Keller, “[Knowing the Father](#)”, October 27, 1991, Redeemer Presbyterian; Dr. David Jeremiah, “[I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life](#)”, March 17, 2024, Shadow Mountain Community Church; Hakeem Bradley, “[I am the Way, the Truth and the Life](#)”, February 12, 2023, Bridgetown Church; Craig Groeschel, “[Am I Too Bad for God?](#)”, 2023, Life Church; Ray Vander Laan, *Echoes of His Presence*; Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*; Grant R. Osborne, *John: Verse by Verse*; and others as noted throughout.

made jokes about getting old—or some of you have made jokes about me getting old, but if old means I get to see grandbaby churches flourish, then I’ll take the joy of age any day!

Would you join me in thanking God for how he’s moved through our Summit Collaborative churches?

## Introduction

**If you have your Bibles one final time in this series, open them to John 14. John 14.** I had a friend who was a pretty good track athlete in high school; he finished in the top three of every event he ever ran—except for one where he came in dead LAST. It was one of his first meets—an away meet on a course he’d never run before.

But mentally, he was ready. He said the whole bus ride there he had his headphones on—which in those days was a SONY Walkman with a mixtape your girlfriend had made for you the night before. He kept them on the whole ride up; kept them on when they got off the bus; kept them on through the entire warm-up. He said, “I remember at one point my coach was up talking to all of us, and him getting really animated about something and pointing and gesticulating with his arms, but I figured it wasn’t that important—I mean, it’s cross country, you basically just run, right? What’s there to talk about?”

“Well, the race started,” he said, “and I shot ahead. It was shaping up to be my best race yet; by the halfway mark,” he said, “I was a couple hundred meters ahead of the entire field.” At that point, the course started its last leg down this little trail through a section of woods. Feeling good, with only one kilometer to go and now out of sight from the second place runner, he suddenly came to a fork in the trail. One direction, he said, had a blue arrow; the other had a yellow arrow, and

he had no idea which way to go. And then he realized what his coach must have been talking about back there.

Here was his dilemma: If he waited for the next runner to catch up, to see which way he'd go, he'd squander his amazing lead. But if he guessed and chose the wrong road—well, you know how that might turn out. He didn't want to squander his lead, so he chose the path that *looked* right to him, and took off with confidence. "But it did not lead me down that last kilometer to victory," he said. "Instead, it put me on a separate 7K loop. Back and forth through the woods, around a lake. ... When I finally got back to the finish line, the stadium was empty. All the fans were gone. My coach was the only person standing out on the field. I ran right by him, didn't even make eye contact, climbed up onto the bus. ... Our bus was the only vehicle left in the parking lot. The whole team was already on it. I spoke to no one, made eye contact with no one, made my way back to my seat, and put back on my headphones."

**There's** nothing worse than feeling lost except, perhaps, the sneaking feeling that you're on the wrong path. We're on our last week of our study through the seven "I AM" statements that Jesus made in the Gospel of John: seven times Jesus takes for himself the loftiest name of God in the Old Testament—*I AM* (*Yahweh* in Hebrew, *Jehovah* in Latin)—and then connects that glorious name to one of our greatest points of brokenness and need. And today, we come to our last one—one that connects to all of us: **John 14:6: "I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

*Let me set the context before we dive into the surrounding passage: It was the night before Jesus died, and Jesus has gathered his disciples together with him in the Upper Room one last time to eat and drink*

**with them and share instructions with them about what is to come.**

He speaks urgently and passionately about what's going to happen "when he goes away." And the more he talks this way, the more confused and frightened the disciples become. They're like, "Going away? What are you talking about?" And they're not articulating it yet, but they're wondering, "Have we made a mistake? Was Jesus the wrong one to follow? Trouble's about to come and he's leaving?"

**Jesus, sensing this, says to them, John 14:1: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going."**

**5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"** (Thomas assumes Jesus is referring to some fortress of solitude Jesus is going to build out in the woods and launch his kingdom from, and so he's looking for actual, physical instructions on how to get there.)

**6 Jesus said to him, [Thomas], "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me..."** What Thomas wants is a map. A set of directions or instructions that ensures he gets there. What Jesus offers him instead is *relationship*.

Philip responds (watch this, it's a similar question), vs. **8 "Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' 9 Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'"**

Philip's request is similar to Thomas' in that he also is looking for some kind of thing from Jesus he can hold onto for certainty. Let us

see ultimate things. Let us get our minds fully around theological mysteries. Let us see the Father, Philip says, and that will be enough for us. Then we'll feel confident.

Jesus responds, again, not with wisdom and illumination, but with *relationship*: "If you've seen me, Philip, you've seen the Father."

The longer you go in the Christian life, the more you realize that from start to finish, this whole thing resides in a relationship with Jesus. Christianity is not primarily a set of instructions about a better way to live, nor a comprehensive set of answers to all of life's mysteries; it is a relationship with a person who has all those things in himself. And when you know him, he leads you to those things. But don't miss the big point: Christianity is not *primarily* a set of beliefs or lifestyle behaviors. It's a relationship with a Person.

Which is what makes the imagery that Jesus employs here in John 14 so significant. You may not immediately pick up on it, but Jesus is using overtly marital language in these verses.

Let me tell you a few things about Jewish marriages you may not know:

- First, we often (wrongly) assume that all marriages back then were arranged—as in, the parents just decided who you were going to marry and that was that. But that really wasn't the case.
- Here's how it usually went down: A boy and girl notice each other—she caught his eye; he likes how she smashed grapes or whatever—and he feels like she is sending groovy vibes back his way. They exchange a few flirty glances and have some good conversations, so he talks to his dad, and if his dad approves, his dad approaches the girl's dad and if he also agrees it's a good pairing, then the girl's dad throws a big party inviting the groom's family and a bunch of friends. At this party, the groom-to-be offers the bride-to-be a cup of wine. At this point, she has a legitimate

choice. If she takes the cup of wine and drinks it, that means "yes," and the party really begins. But if she declines, the party gets awkward, the band starts to play Taylor Swift breakup songs—shake it off, shake it off—and everybody moseys home.

- Now, here's the important part: If she said yes, then after the party was over, the young man returned to his family home (called an "insulah") and began construction on a new wing, or a new set of *rooms*, to the family house that he and his future bride will live in. (In those days, you see, families lived on these big compounds; family property was their most valuable asset, handed down from generation to generation, and each new generation would just add on a new room onto the family insulah so they all lived in the complex together.) Some of you are thinking, "That sounds awesome!" Others of you are thinking, "That sounds like a nightmare!" I'm sure they had both emotions back then, too.
- Well, when the groom-to-be was finished with construction of his "rooms," he would return to pick up his bride. But here was the thing: Only the groom's *father* could determine when the rooms were sufficiently completed. (I mean, young men back then were not that much different than they are today, and if it were up to them, they'd probably just slap a few boards together, put a LeBron poster up on the wall, stack a couple of box crates up for tables and call that home, they're just so excited to consummate the marriage.)
- So, the father of the groom determined when the room was ready—since ultimately this was his house, too—and he and he alone gave permission for the young man to go back and get his bride. (By the way, back then, the father of the groom was the single most important person in the wedding ceremony, outside of the bride and groom themselves. Today, in American weddings, he's just decoration. He doesn't do anything; he basically just shows up to the ceremony like any other guest and gets a seat on the second row, smiles, and waves. But in those days, he controlled everything.)
- So every day, this young man worked on the new rooms, and every night, the bride would wait. She didn't know when he was

coming. He couldn't post pics of the project on Facebook. And so, as a symbol of her anticipation, she kept a candle lit in her windowsill, hoping that this might be the night he returned for her. She didn't know when he'd come; in fact, he didn't even know when he'd come; again, **only the father of the groom** determined that.

- By the way, it might have dawned on you as I explained this that this is the same imagery behind some of Jesus' other teachings, too. For example, when Jesus said, "No one knows the day of my return, not even me. Only my Father in heaven knows," he is invoking the imagery of a wedding, not giving a technical explanation of the nuances of Trinitarian omniscience.
- Or, when Jesus tells the story about the 10 virgins, some of whom kept their candles lit so they were ready when the groom returned, and some who didn't—so that when their groom comes back, there's no candle in their window because she's out partying with her friends, and he gets his feelings hurt and returns home without her, that's the imagery he's using.<sup>2</sup>

But what I want you to see here is that this whole passage where Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life, is given in a deeply relational context. And that's the only way you can really understand it.

So, what does he really mean? And how does knowing him provide for us the way, the truth, and the life? And what should we make of the bold exclusivity of this claim?

So, that will be our outline for today:

1. **What is Jesus really saying here?**
2. **How is knowing him "the way, the truth, and the life"?**
3. **What should we make of the bold exclusivity of this claim?**

## 1. What is Jesus saying here?

**He's saying that the Christian life, from start to finish, is about knowing him.** Again, the Christian life is not primarily advice about a better way to live, or about gaining wisdom and understanding on all of life's mysteries; it's about a relationship with a person.

Please note, in saying that I'm NOT downplaying Christian practices or theology when I say that. After all, another way of saying "practices" is "way," and another term for "theology" is "the truth," both of which Jesus also talks about here. Clearly they matter! Just that they're not the essence of the Christian life.

It's like Pastor Bryan said last week: You can know a lot about theology and die and go to hell. You can tithe, memorize verses, take regular Sabbaths, live with healthy rhythms, lead small groups, save sex until marriage—and die without a relationship with Jesus. Salvation is not granted because of a score you get on a theology quiz, or because you get a series of gold stars in Christian practices. Salvation is found by knowing and trusting in a Person. FULL STOP.

One of the things I fear we don't talk about enough (that I appreciate Pastor Bryan bringing up last weekend), is the unsaved church member; the unconverted "Christian." In Matthew 7, Jesus said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'" (Matthew 7:21–22).**

**Look, these people have the right theology!** They know to call Jesus Lord. And they're earnest about it. Whenever you repeat something in Greek, like "Lord, Lord," that's a literary way of saying you're

<sup>2</sup> Ray Vander Laan

passionate about it. These people know when to raise their hands in church and shout, “Amen!” **And they have experience in ministry:** They testified in Jesus’ name; they even cast out demons and did miracles in Jesus’ name. I mean, if you get picked in our church to be on the demon-exorcism squad, that means we consider you varsity! These are experienced Christians! (Vs. 23) “**And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”** **Oh, Summit: This verse sends a tremor of terror down my spine.** Why does Jesus turn these earnest church-goers away from heaven? In all their Christian activity and behavior, he never knew them. **They knew all about him. But they never really trusted in him;** they never had a personal relationship with him.

**By the way, this passage doesn’t have to scare you.** It doesn’t mean that you have to get yourself to some super spiritual state before you can be sure you’ll go to heaven. **In fact, it means the opposite:** Salvation doesn’t come from getting yourself into some spiritual state; it comes from **leaning on Jesus, trusting in him personally** as your Savior, your help, your guide, your life. **Charles Spurgeon, after preaching on this passage, said, “Oh, but Jesus could never say to me, ‘I never knew you,’ for he has known me for years as the beggar at his door.”**<sup>3</sup> I’d say to him, “Never knew me, Lord? But I depended on you as my forgiveness. I leaned on you when I felt weak. I looked to you when I felt lost. I trusted you to fix what was broken in me.” No, he could never say to me, “I never knew you,” for he would recognize me as one who depended on him for everything.

So, let me just ask you sitting in church this weekend: Do you actually KNOW Jesus? I know you got your theology and Christian practices underhand, but do you have a relationship with him?

And if you do, are you growing in that intimate knowledge of him? You see, just like salvation comes from knowing him, spiritual maturity comes from knowing him more. And I don’t mean just knowing more facts about him, but knowing him more intimately, more personally.

You see, there are different kinds of knowledge of someone. Lesslie Newbigin described it like this: When I walk into a room crowded with people, I can immediately recognize my wife. It wouldn’t matter if I didn’t know what she was wearing that day or how she’d styled her hair; I could still pick her out immediately. If for some reason she’d dyed her hair, or even if it were all shaved off, I could still pick her out immediately. I could do it if all I could see was the shadow of her silhouette walking across the room. In fact, if someone just walked up to me and put their arm around me and stood by me, and I couldn’t see them, I’m pretty sure I would know if it was her or not. After two and a half decades of closeness to her, I know the feel of her touch; I know what it’s like to be in her presence. I know the rhythm and sound of her breath. In group conversations, I know how she’ll respond before she does. I know what makes her laugh—I know when she’s laughing just to humor you and when she really thinks something is funny. I *know* her. But how do I describe THOSE things to you? If I’m trying to tell you how to pick her out of a crowded room, I’ll have to resort to physical characteristics, because that’s all you can see, but those aren’t the most important ways I know her.

Which better describes your knowledge of Jesus? Do you know him more in the “height,” “what he’s wearing,” and “how much he

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<sup>3</sup> From “The Ploughman,” in *Farm Sermons*

weighs” sense? Or is it in the personal knowledge sense? You may know him theologically, but do you know him personally?: what it’s like to cling to him in pain and disappointment and confusion; what it’s like to trust him when you don’t know how to see your way out of a problem; do you know what’s it like to feel him moving in the depths of your soul—comforting, assuring, convicting, guiding you?

This kind of knowledge, Jesus said in John 17, this kind of knowledge is the essence of eternal life. And this kind of knowledge, Jeremiah said, is more thrilling and satisfying than all the wisdom, might, and wealth in the world.

This kind of personal, intimate knowledge is precisely what many miss in the Christian life. And it’s why their spiritual life is so dry, and cold, and dead. I know a lot of seminary students and professional Christians who have a great deal of knowledge about God but very little knowledge of him. I know because I was one for a while. And this shows up in how little they pray in private, how passionless their heart for worship is, or how anxious they are about the future, and how dependent they are on the validation of others, or how little of the fruit of the Spirit you see in their lives, even with all their theological knowledge. They may be PhDs in their theology, but they are still infants in the fruit of the Spirit.

Do you *know* him? That’s what John 14 is all about.

## 2. How is knowing him “the way, the truth, and the life”?

Well, **The WAY** speaks to “direction.”

- What Thomas asks is a question we all ask at some point: How can I live my life so that it ends up at the right place? So that I’ll be happy? Safe? At peace?
- You **may not think of yourself as an overly philosophical person**, but these are the questions that drive you, even at the subconscious level. There are a **set of things that you’ve determined** will make you happy, a set of things that will help you feel complete. *Romance. Marriage. Family. Being all you can be. Realizing your maximum potential. Leaving a legacy.*
- Jesus says, “I AM the way.” You think that safety and happiness are found in a place over there you might get to one day—the place of career achievement. A marital status. A certain level of financial security. But it’s not there. I AM the way.
- **I have a terrible sense of direction.** Veronica says that whatever part of the brain intuitively remembers the way you just came from never developed in me. I get turned around in very familiar places. She says there’s a part of my brain that’s never formed; I SAY it’s because we all have a limited amount of brain circuits to deploy and I just choose not to use any of mine on mundane things like direction ... *I devote them all to loftier things.* But the bottom line is that I live conscious of getting turned around and getting lost. One of my earliest childhood memories is of the first time my dad took me overnight camping in the woods. We slept in a tent, and I remember feeling terrified that I’d wake up and he’d be gone and I wouldn’t know what to do. It was dark and scary in those woods and I wouldn’t have any idea how to get back to the road. Dad says he remembers waking up in the middle of the night and my little 5-year-old hand was on him, so he moved it off. He woke up a few minutes later and my hand was back. So he moved it off again. And we repeated this little charade again and again until he figured out that my hand was there intentionally, because

he was my safety, my guidance, my protection. He wasn't there to tell me the way to those things; he was the way. I just wanted to be close to him. The happiness and contentment that you seek is not found in a place over there; it's found with the I AM in this place.

- "I am the way." Of course, when Jesus says that he also means he is the only way to get to God. That's the immediate context of what he's talking about. Vs. 6: "I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through me."
- You can't get to God or his house or his kingdom unless you come through me.
- I know this is quite an unpopular thing to say today, but look at it! Do you see anything else this can mean? Is there any ambiguity? ***You can't get to the Father any way except through him.*** He's the one road into heaven. The only way of salvation.
- God is not like a mountain where you can take one of many roads to get to the top. By the way, even on a mountain, not all roads lead to the top. Some will lead you right over a cliff. Salvation is the way to his house and it's something only he can provide. To get it you have to come through his door.
- The whole point of the Bible is that we couldn't save ourselves by being good enough. God had to provide salvation for us, and he did that by coming in the person of Jesus to live the life we should have lived—a life without sin; and then dying the death we should have died—under condemnation, in our place. That's the only way of salvation. No one can come to the Father by any other way except the one he provided.
- **I remember hearing about a pioneer missionary in Africa** who years ago wanted to take the gospel into a remote, completely unreached tribe deep in the jungle. To get there, you had to go through dense and deep forest. There were no roads and no

paths. He appealed to the chief of the village to send a guide with him, but the chief said there was only one man who could do it. The chief summoned a large man with an ax. The man was covered with all kinds of scars on his face and arms. The next day, they set off together through the bush. At first, they walked along several trails, but as they progressed, the way became increasingly rough and the path all but disappeared. At this point, they hacked their way through thick bush and climbed down over rocky cliffs. Occasionally, the missionary would see a mark blazed on a tree or something, but absolutely no path. Eventually the missionary said to the man, "Are you sure this is the way?" The man smiled and said, "Do you see this ax in my hand? And do you see these scars on my body? I am from this tribe, and with this ax, years ago, I blazed the trail out of my village. No one has ever been to this tribe, and no one else has ever come out of it. You ask me if I know the way. Before I came, there was no way. I am the way."<sup>4</sup>

- Jesus is the way because he's the only one from heaven—the only one with the ability to cut down the barrier between man and God and he did it by dying on a cross.

"I AM **the TRUTH.**"

What does this mean? It means that even when you don't know all the answers, you know the one with the answers, and when you can't understand *them*, you can still hold onto *him*.

Remember, Philip in this passage had said, "**Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us**" (vs. 8). "Let us see ultimate reality, and we'll feel confident." Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." You see enough of God in me to trust me with the future.

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<sup>4</sup> John Phillips, as related by David Jeremiah

Listen, knowing Jesus gives us a new way to see the world. When you know him, everything in the world starts to look different. Many of us live in fear, with this sense that we are all alone in the universe. And everywhere you look you see evidence for that. But when you start to believe in Jesus, you start to see that everywhere. He's just a new lens for looking at the world. If you've seen him, you've seen the Father.

And he is who we hold onto when we encounter mysteries that we just can't comprehend yet. I've told you—even as a pastor who has served for 25 years with a PhD in theology, I still encounter A LOT of divine mysteries I'm not sure how to think about yet. Questions about eternity and divine judgment and the role of suffering in the world. And sometimes I just find myself wanting to throw up my hands and say, "I don't understand!"

But in that moment I feel this same invitation: "Trust me. I AM the truth. If you've seen me you've seen the Father." **Matthew 11**, John the Baptist had had his own doubts about Jesus—John had been put in prison and was awaiting execution, and he wondered, "Jesus, if you really are the Messiah, why wouldn't you come rescue me?" And so he sends a messenger to Jesus, saying, "Are you really the one?" Think about this: This is John the Baptist—the one who called out to Jesus on the shore, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The one who saw heaven opened and the Holy Spirit, like a dove, descending upon Jesus at his baptism, and who heard the voice of the Father say, "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*"

**THIS** John is now saying, "Jesus, are you really the one?" It's just that his confusion was so strong; his unanswered questions were so severe he wondered, how could all this be real? How could Jesus really be in

charge? *I've been there, haven't you?* And Jesus sent back a message saying, "Yes, consider the works I've done and what you know about me. You can trust me." What John did and how Jesus responded is a model for us: John went personally to Jesus with his doubts and unanswered questions, and ultimately he put his faith not in a set of answers, but in a Person he knew he could trust.

I know you have your own unanswered questions: some unanswered question, some intellectual obstacle, some apparent Bible contradiction, and you find yourself saying, "Are you really the one, Jesus?" Well, take a cue from John the Baptist and take those questions to Jesus. Look deeply into his works and his death and his resurrection. And I think you'll find that you can trust him. He is the truth. My favorite definition of faith: "**Faith is accepting what you cannot understand based on what you can understand.**" There is so much—about the world, about theology—I still do not understand, but what I do understand is that Jesus really was the Son of God, and he died and rose again. And if that's true, that means he holds the answers to my questions even when I'm not sure what they are yet. You see, contrary to some of our critics: **Faith is not a blind leap into the dark; it's a leap into the arms of a person we can trust.** And that's totally different.

#### **I AM the LIFE:**

A major theme in John's Gospel is that Jesus brings life to dead things. John talks about life 40 different times in his Gospel. Jesus, he says, is the light that brings light to the world; he's the bread we hunger for, the water we thirst after; he's the Good Shepherd whose love and leadership we crave, who leads us to the abundant life; he's resurrection and healing for our mistakes; he can rebuild what was



broken and repair what sin has destroyed. He heals blind eyes and brings dead men out of graves. He makes all things new. He is the life.

Some points are best explained through a story, so let me do that here:

In the first week of this series, I shared with you about this interview I had done the week before on a Christian talk show on TBN. The guy who went on right before me, I told you, was a former actor in the adult film industry who had come to Christ and had this unbelievable testimony of how Jesus had completely transformed him. He told me his story as we sat backstage at lunch together right before the show started. I just asked him, “What’s your story?” What I didn’t tell you about was there was a third guy sitting at our table who also was going to be on the show with us. His name was Ronald Olivier. I asked him what his story was, and he said he’d just written a book called *27 Summers*. I said, “Well, tell me about those summers.” He said, “That’s how many summers I spent in a maximum security prison in Louisiana.” When he was 16 years old, he’d got caught up in dealing crack and one day got into an altercation with some guys whom he thought were trying to steal his jacket, and in an attempt to get away from them he’d jumped onto a bus and one of them grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him off. He panicked and pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot and killed the guy. The guy was unarmed and because drugs were involved, it was considered first-degree murder.

In Louisiana, first-degree murder was punishable by the death penalty. So Ronald was convicted, at 16 years old, and put into a holding cell to await his sentencing. He felt sure the judge would come back with the sentence of death. He told me, “There I sat; pronounced guilty, alone in that holding cell. I remember the sound of

the door locking and the footsteps of the guard walking away. I was all alone, and so afraid. I kept expecting my mom to somehow show up—she’d always been the one to come and rescue me when I was in trouble—but this time she couldn’t come. I sat there in the darkness, alone, awaiting my sentence. It was as if darkness was about to swallow me. And then I remembered something she’d said. She said, ‘*Ronald, if you ever get into a situation where I can’t help you, call on Jesus and he can help you.*’ And so I did,” he said. “Trembling, I got down on my knees, and said, ‘Lord, if you will keep them from sentencing me to death, I’ll serve you with whatever is left of the rest of my days.’” He said that in that moment there in the cell, he didn’t know how to explain it, but suddenly he was surrounded by a presence he’d never felt, a peace and love like nothing he’d ever experienced. He said, “When I was summoned, I walked back into that courtroom a changed man, and unexplainably, they reduced my charge to second-degree murder, which carried a life sentence instead of death. It was a life sentence without the eligibility of parole, but at least it wasn’t death,” he said. He was taken to a maximum security prison in downstate Louisiana. But he said, “I was a changed man. God had kept up his side of the deal with me, so I was determined to keep up my side of the deal with him.” He got involved in a Bible training program, much like the ones we, Summit, host in our prison campuses here, and eventually he enrolled in a Bible degree program offered by New Orleans Baptist Seminary and earned his bachelor’s degree in New Testament studies. He ended up serving as a kind of pastor there in that prison, leading dozens, if not hundreds, of his fellow prisoners to faith in Christ.

Twenty years later, the US Supreme Court, in a case called *Miller v Alabama*, argued famously by Bryan Stevenson, and as told in the book *Just Mercy*, found it unconstitutional to give a juvenile a life

sentence because it amounted, they said, to “cruel and unusual punishment.” The court battle lasted for years, but eventually, the Justice Initiative prevailed and Ronald was able to be put up for parole. He told me that he was summoned for his parole hearing, the first one in 27 years, something he never thought would happen, and, when he stepped into that dock, he was ready to make his plea for parole because that was the custom—the prisoner makes their case to the board for why they should be considered. But before he could even speak, he said, the judge raised his hand and said, “Mr. Olivier, I've read everything about you already, how for 27 years you've lived as a changed man. This folder (and he held up this big file) is filled with accounts of good deeds you've done; story after story of how you've loved and served other prisoners, and how every corner of that prison is saturated with the love of Jesus Christ because of you.” He said, “I don't need to see anything more. I don't need you to even say a word. I declare you to be a free man.” Brought the gavel down, and that was that.

Ronald said, “That was the second time I'd been relieved of a life sentence. The more important one happened 27 years prior when I was on my knees alone in a jail cell with Jesus.” This second one released me from prison; the first one, the much more important one, released me from sin and death. This second one was granted because of my good deeds. But the first one, the real reprieve, was granted because of the good deeds of another, because of a Savior who had lived and died in my place.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, here I am (J.D.) in March of 2024, and I'm sitting with this guy. He's now got a wife and kids and a ministry and I'm sitting with him at a table. And on the other side of the table is a former porn star whose

life also had been transformed by the gospel. And suddenly I knew I was in the presence of the one who spoke these words to Thomas here in John 14:6. The way, the truth, and the life.

Listen, I'll be honest. When this guy Ronald first told me that he had been released from prison after being convicted of murder, I felt myself tense up. I knew I shouldn't feel that way, but I mean, I'm sitting with a murderer. I thought, “Is this ok? Is this safe?”

But as he told me his story, that sense of fear was replaced by one of wonder, and soon all I could think about was that I was sitting in the presence of the Great I AM, the one who takes dead things and restores them to life. The one who makes all things new.

And, good news, he can do that for you. You see, maybe you feel like your life is hopelessly irredeemable. It's not. If the tomb is empty, anything is possible. The way, the truth, and the life went to the cross for you, to redeem you from your sins. And he came out of the grave for you, to restore you to eternal life.

But that leads me to the last question:

### III. What do we make of the exclusivity of this claim?

Again, look at it (**vs. 6**)—I am THE way. Not “a” way, but THE way. No man comes to the Father except by me. The way to heaven is as wide as Jesus' love and sacrifice for sin, which is incredibly wide, because it's offered to all, but it is the only way.

As I said, there's perhaps nothing more offensive in our generation right now. Oprah Winfrey said on her TV program, ***“One of the biggest mistakes people make is to believe that there's only one way.”***

<sup>5</sup> Those last words are mine, in the spirit of what he was saying that day.

**Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you may call God.** Another really popular Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, said, **“I am absolutely against any religion that says that one faith is superior to another. I don’t see how that is any different than spiritual racism. It’s a way of saying that we are closer to God than you, and that’s what leads to hatred.”**

But that’s exactly what Jesus said. Is it hatred? I mean, if Jesus really is the only one who could save from sin and death, is it hatred to testify to that?

- **What if Jesus, like the tribesman,** is the only one who came from heaven with the power to take us back?
- **What if all the Old Testament is right**—that no one, not even the best of us, like Abraham or Moses or David, could live the sinless life God’s glory required?
- **What if we needed a Savior who came from heaven?** Is it wrong or cruel or hateful to testify to that? I don’t control the way of salvation, I just testify to it.

**A few years ago there was a video put out by Penn Jillette, who is part of the famous Las Vegas magic duo “Penn and Teller.”** In this video, Penn shared about an encounter he had with a man who’d been an audience participant in one of the magic acts that day. The man later tracked him down and presented him with a pocket-sized book New Testament. Jillette, who is an outspoken atheist, was touched by the gesture and posted a video about it later. He said, **“I’ve always said I don’t respect people who don’t try to convert others. If you truly believe in heaven and hell, and the idea of eternal life, how can you not feel compelled to share that information? If I knew that a truck was headed toward you and you**

**were unaware, I would tackle you to save your life. Yet sharing the possibility of everlasting life is considered less important than that?”**

**It’s not cruel to point to Jesus as the only way if it’s true, and Jesus says it’s true.** He’s the only one who can bring salvation and new life to people like Ronald. And you. And me.

The uniform testimony of the Old Testament is that only God can save. In **Isaiah 43:10** God said, **“I am YAHWEH (Jehovah), and beside me there is no Savior.”** The claim of Jesus in the New Testament is, “I AM (Yahweh) that God!” I AM that Savior. So to those who are hungry, Jesus says, “YAHWEH the bread of life.” To those in darkness, he says, “YAHWEH the light of the world.” To those in need of shelter or refuge, he says, “YAHWEH the door.” To those feeling the sting of death, he says, “YAHWEH the resurrection and the life.” To those in need of spiritual vitality or strength, he says, “YAHWEH the true vine.” And now, to all those who want to know God, and peace and security and eternal life itself, he says, “YAHWEH *the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*”

Whatever you lack today, whatever you need, whatever you feel like you’re missing from your life, wherever you’re scared, or alone, or worried—Yahweh Jesus. Jehovah Jesus. He is enough.

**You see, I think it may be best to remember that Jesus’ claim to exclusivity here is *relational*, not just theological.** Remember, the whole context for this statement is Jesus comparing his relationship to his people like a groom with his betrothed bride. We may bristle at Jesus’ claim to be the exclusive way to heaven, but we understand exclusivity in a love relationship, don’t we? It’s not loving for the groom to let the bride go with any other guy who shows up. He wants

her for himself; they are in love with each other. It's because I love my wife that I say, "I'm the only man for you and you are the only woman for me."

Jesus feels about us that way. He says, "There is no other Savior, no other life, no other way for you. I want to be your God and your Father and your Savior; your one divine husband." I AM. Let ME BE for you. **The question is: Will you have him? That's the offer, for all who will receive it.**