

The Seven "I Am's," Jesus, the Bread of Life, John 6:35

Open to the gospel of John, chapter 6, starting in v1.

After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias).² A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.³ Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples.⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.⁵ Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, **"Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?"**⁶ This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do.⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little."⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him,⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?"¹⁰ Jesus said, **"Have the people sit down."** Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand.¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.¹² When they were filled, He said to His disciples, **"Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost."**¹³ So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten.¹⁴ Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world."¹⁵ So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Now skip to John 6:22-27:

The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but *that* His disciples had gone away alone.²³ There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks.²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus.²⁵ When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?"²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled."**²⁷ **"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."**ⁱ

This is the story of people who are searching for Jesus, and they find him, only to discover that the Jesus they find isn't the one they wanted. Sad to say, that's not an uncommon problem, even in the church. How do we make sure we are following the Jesus who really is instead of the Jesus of our imagination?

We need a stronger grasp, a richer understanding of who he really is. I think the best way to do that is to see how Jesus described himself, then make sure that our understanding of him matches his own. No better place for that than the gospel of John.

John is very specific about his purpose for his gospel, and he states it in 20:31, **"these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."**

In other words, John's purpose for his gospel was that those who read it would know him truly, and would be convinced that Jesus was both Savior and Son of God. And as a result of that, they would place their faith in him and receive the salvation he provides.

He uses several devices to accomplish that goal. He presents specific miracles, and uses key words and themes, but one of the most important devices John uses is what we know as the "I am" statements, seven key statements by Jesus about himself.

- "I am the bread of life" 6:35
- "I am the light of the world" 8:12
- "I am the gate for the sheep" 10:7
- "I am the good shepherd" 10:11, 14
- "I am the resurrection and the life" 11:25
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life" 14:6
- "I am the true vine" 15:1, 5

These seven statements are critical for us to understand who Jesus really is. They are his self-description, how he wants us to see him. When I preach in 2007, I will focus on who Jesus really is, in his own words. Today, we will see Jesus, the bread of life.

I just read the opening portion of John 6, where Jesus feeds the 5,000. Actually he fed more than that, because that number only counted men. The true figure would have been closer to 10,000.

He uses the lunch of a poor boy, cheap loaves of barley bread and a couple of pickled fish, to teach a major lesson about spiritual nourishment.

The initial reaction to this mass feeding sounds good, v14, "Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." But it's not, v15, "So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

This is a violent scene, a wild, churning mob, coming to take him "by force," v15. Greek "harpazo," *seize, take away*. Same word is used in Mt 12:29, describe robbing man's home; in Jn 10:12, for wolf carrying off sheep, and in Acts 23:10, for Roman soldiers dragging Paul from Temple mob before he was murdered.

This mob of thousands intended to force Jesus to head a political revolt against Rome. This is the human instinct for religion. It focuses on personal happiness and self-contentment, with a poster boy messiah at its head. Jesus would have no part in it. The other gospels tell us he made the disciples go ahead to other side of lake, while he orders crowd to break up, and go home, with the authority only he could command. Then he goes into hills to get away and pray.

Next morning, the crowd returns for breakfast, only to find the chef has disappeared. To their credit, they are looking for Jesus. The problem is, they are looking for the wrong Jesus.

Stop for a second, and consider the difference between our culture and theirs on the matter of food. What happens to the food supply in the USA when a catastrophic drought hits, or flood, or freeze? It may get more expensive, but its still available. What happened in the 1st century? *Famine.*

We have so much excess income we can spend money to go live outdoors in a tent for a week. Scholars estimate that at least 80% of a first century family's income went just for food. And so when the crowd goes looking for Jesus because they believe he will feed them, they weren't necessarily looking for luxury's lap. They were looking for their most basic physical need to be met. One who could, and would, make food out of thin air means no more hunger. No more starving babies, old people. Their reaction is *very* understandable.

And yet, Jesus says it is still the wrong reason to seek him, because our deepest *physical* need isn't our deepest need. He accuses them in verse 26 of not coming because of who he is, but because of what he had given them. They had no understanding that Jesus' miracle pointed beyond the food to the spiritual nourishment they really need, and which Jesus alone could give.

They were looking for a Messiah to meet their physical needs, not their deepest need. They wanted a Messiah who would make no demands, do what they want.

What do they really need? Jesus tells them, v27, **"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."** The food that perishes is just earthly stuff. Even though it is made miraculously, it still only lasts a few hours. And once you eat it, you'll just get hungry again.

Here's where we see a real disconnect between Jesus and the crowd. He's talking about spiritual food, they think he's talking about what kind of work they need to be doing to get fed, v28, **"Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?'"** Just tell us what to do, and we'll do it! Show us how to make bread, too! But there is no physical work they could do to do God's work. What God requires is trust in him, v29, "Jesus answered and said to them, **"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."**

He's telling them to come to him, to trust him, put their faith in him. But they are deaf to his words and blind to the implications of what they've seen. The first meal is already forgotten, and they demand that he meet their expectations, v30-31, **"So they said to Him, 'What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.'"**

Do you see the impact the first feeding had on their appetite? It only made them want more. They are daring him to rain down food on their heads like manna in the wilderness, the food that God miraculously provided Israel in its wanderings. And so Jesus answers them in v32-33, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."**

They are telling Jesus to prove he's Moses' successor, but Jesus makes a completely different comparison, not between himself and Moses, but between himself and manna. Manna was God's provision to nourish and preserve Israel. Jesus says, I'm not another Moses, I'm the true manna.

I think the people are very confused now. They aren't sure what he's talking about, but it's been a long time since they ate and they're getting really hungry now and tired of talk, so they cut to the chase in v34, **"Then they said to Him, 'Lord, always give us this bread.'" And so Jesus speaks plain, v35-36, "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.'"**

How does J say their hunger and thirst will be satisfied? Not by eating magic bread, but by coming to him. There will be no more hunger for the one who comes to him, no more thirst for the one who believes in him. And the rest of chapter 6 spells that out, using a metaphor that the crowd found difficult to handle, v51, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."

And if that weren't enough, he goes further still, v53-58, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever."

Wow! That must have rocked them back on their heels. Five times he says they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. It is simply more than many of these people can handle, and so they bolt, v66, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." You get the idea that this is a permanent departure. They're going and they're not coming back.

They leave because they have no spiritual understanding. Jesus says he's the bread of life, a metaphor of food, drink to speak of his atoning death, and their need for spiritual feeding on Christ. What are they hung up on? His claim to come from heaven, not to give bread, but to be bread, to give eternal life, to require a relationship so intimate that the best description is that of ingestion.

Of course his words are outrageous! That's the point – this is spiritual truth, not literal. We eat and drink for life. When you eat food, you aren't eating something alive, you are eating something that has died. Whether its beef or wheat or whatever, food sources die so that we live. That's Jesus' point. He dies, we partake of him, and the result is, we live.

That's who Jesus is. The bread that gives eternal life, the true manna, giving his own life on our behalf. But that's not the Jesus these disciple's want. Sure, they want a king, but one who'll do what they want. They want him at arm's length, controllable. They were looking for a Messiah who would meet their needs as they defined them.

Which raises this question: If you could have the God you want, what kind of God would he be? Theologian N. T. Wright saw the provocative book title, *THE GOD I WANT*, in a second-hand bookshop, and that set him thinking: *The God I Want? Left to myself, the god I want is a god who will give me what I want. He will be a projection of my desires... who offer their devotees money, or sex or power. All idols started out life as the god somebody wanted... The net result is that I become god; and this god I've made becomes my puppet. Nobody falls on their face before the god they want. Nobody goes out... to heal the sick, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, because of the god they wanted. They are more likely to stay at home with their feet up. Can such a god really be God?*ⁱⁱ

The God we want will give us the food we want, will keep us from harm, or even inconvenience, and he will meet all our desires and wants, and never make demands on us. But that's no God, that's an idol.

What strikes me about John 6 is that it shows that is possible to seek Jesus, to believe in him on some level, and yet be absolutely lost. That was the case with these people, who started chapter 6 as disciples and ended as deniers. You can be as religious as you please, but unless Christ is your bread and drink, it means nothing.

But I don't think that truth is limited to the non-Christian religious. I think it is possible to be saved, to have placed your trust in Christ and to seek to please him, yet to slip, unnoticed, into a self-centered, self-pleasing form of discipleship. Discipleship that asks Jesus, "what have you done for me lately? And what are you going to do for me tomorrow?"

What is missing in both these cases is a spiritual feeding on Christ, an inner delight in all that he is, a desire to be pleasing to him, and to submit to his Word.

Self-denial is the perennial challenge of humanity. A rampant selfishness is omnipresent in every generation, and the church...is not immune...God is pictured as the dispenser (and withholder) of life's prizes – a television game-show host... We conclude that such things as good health, fortune, and success are sure indicators of his approval for our lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Don't dismiss Jesus' admonition to these people too quickly. He may be urging you to examine your own heart, to see if even in your worship life, you are laboring for the bread that perishes instead of that which provides true satisfaction, the Lord himself.

Which brings me to my final point. Why does coming to Jesus satisfy? Because he provides what really satisfies...namely himself. God himself, and God alone, satisfies. If you follow him for the blessings he provides, how are you different from the mob of John 6? To be sure, God's many blessings are a gift, to be received with gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise. But the Jesus who is the bread of life says come to me, for me, alone.

"Your lovingkindness is better than life..." Psalm 63:3. Asaph cries out in Psalm 73:25-26, **"Whom have I in heaven but you? Besides you I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever."** Nothing in creation could satisfy his soul, but God alone.

John Piper writes in "A Godward Life," David and Asaph teach us by their own God-centered longings that God's gifts of health, wealth, and prosperity do not satisfy. Only God does.

As we pray, take a moment and search your heart. Are you looking for the God you want, or the God who is?

Lord, you alone hold the key to truth and knowledge; to forgiveness and acceptance; to hope and eternal life; to meaning and purpose; righteousness and peace. So I come to You today, taking You for all that You have revealed yourself to be. Bread of life, I forsake all else and cleave to You alone as Savior and Lord. Thank you that you have loved me and offered me all that you are for all of eternity. Amen.

ⁱ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update.* 1995. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

ⁱⁱ *For All God's Worth*, N. T. Wright

ⁱⁱⁱ Jon Johnston, "Growing Me-ism and Materialism," *Christianity Today*, January 17, 1986

Jesus, Light of the World – John 8:12-30

In our time in God's word this morning, we are going to continue looking at who Jesus really is. Last week, I said that we need a stronger grasp, a richer understanding of who Jesus is, and we are using the gospel of John to see how Jesus describes himself. John was specific about his purpose for his gospel, 20:31, **"these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."**

In other words, John's purpose was that those who read it would know Jesus truly, and knowing him, would therefore come to know that he is both Savior and Son of God. And as a result of that, they would place their faith in him and receive the salvation he provides.

Key to that purpose are the "I am" statements in John, 7 key statements by Jesus about himself. 7 statements that tell us who Jesus really is, how he wants us to see him: "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the gate for the sheep," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," "I am the true vine."

Last week, we saw Jesus is the bread of life, meaning he, himself, is the spiritual nourishment that we need for life. We must come to him, partake of him, be fed by him and him alone. This morning, we will see that the Jesus who is the bread of life is also the "light of the world."

This truth is found in John 8, in the middle of a great debate between Jesus and his adversaries, the Pharisees, the religious rulers of Israel who hated Jesus for exposing their hypocrisy. The truths here are absolutely fundamental to the faith. The things Jesus claims in this chapter draw some to put their faith in him, and by the end of the chapter, drives others to throw rocks at him.

It is set during the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths or Ingathering. One of the 3 big feasts of Israel, it takes place in the fall, about 6 months after Passover (Ex. 23:14-16). It is called "Ingathering" because it celebrated the fall harvest. It is called "Booths" or "Tabernacles" because during it, the people were to take tree branches and build themselves temporary shelters to live in during the festival. (Lev. 23:33-43)

Rich in symbolism, Tabernacles commemorated their Israel's nomadic lifestyle during the Exodus in the wilderness, living in temporary homes. It was a joyous festival, fun for kids and a big time for families. Neh. 8:17 says it was a time of "great rejoicing."

Besides living in booths, two other symbolic ceremonies took place at Tabernacles, ceremonies Jesus used to tell us something about himself. The first dramatized replenishing Israel's water.

The rainy season in Israel is spring. By fall, the time of the feast, water supplies are low, springs are weak, and the hills are brown. So, each day of the feast featured a "water ceremony." A priest led a procession all the way to the pool of Siloam, below the Temple mount, and filled a golden pitcher while the choir chanted Scriptures like Is. 12:3, "Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation," And Is. 55:1, "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."

Then the pitcher of water was carried back up to the Temple, followed by the people, reciting psalms as they went. When they got to the Temple, the priest climbed the altar steps and poured the water out over the altar. Doing so reminded Israel that God brought water from a rock in the desert (Num. 20:8-10). Recognized God as the source of life-giving water. It was a solemn occasion, yet full of joy. In the Mishnah, the Jewish rabbinic commentary, it is stated, "He that never has seen the joy of the Water-drawing has never in his life seen joy."

On the seventh day of feast, the last day, this ceremony occurred 7 times. That is the context for John 7:37-38. As the 7 processions are climbing the mountain to the temple, Jesus makes this stunning announcement, "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'"

He is using a physical ceremony to underscore a deeper spiritual truth, that he is the source of the life-giving water that satisfies completely and ultimately transforms from within, through the Holy Spirit.

It is a fantastic physical image, and Jesus uses it to give meaning to spiritual truth. Same is true of the second ceremony, the "Illumination of the Temple."

Keep in mind that the world of the gospels is, to borrow a phrase, a world lit only by fire. In 21st century America, we barely know what physical darkness is anymore. Streets and parking lots are constantly lit, neon glares in shop windows telling us if they are open or closed, and night-lights are all but extinct because virtually every room in our homes has some electronic gadget whose soft, green glow takes us from room to room.

Not so 2,000 years ago. Homes were lit by a few candles, city streets were dark after sundown, with the occasional torch making a small pool of light here and there. That's why this ceremony was so incredible. Remember that Tabernacles took place in the fall, so the days are shorter and the nights are longer, making the illumination of the Temple all the more grand.

In this celebration, the Temple was lit by four huge candelabras, with four huge oil candles each. To give you a sense of their size, the "wicks" were made of the worn-out linen robes of the priests. Placed in the Temple's Court of the Women, the most frequented part of the temple, these massive candles were lit the first night of the feast and every night after for seven nights.

When the flames reflected against the yellow limestone of the Temple walls, it was probably the brightest man-made light people had ever seen. The effect was virtually electric. Contemporary descriptions say people danced and sang through the night, with light from the Temple area, which was the highest ground in Jerusalem, lighting a good part of the city.

The light shining out of the Temple and lighting up every court in Jerusalem symbolized two things. First, God's Shekinah glory, which once filled the Temple, and, they prayed, would one day fill it again. Second, the light was a symbol of that "great light" which "the people that walked in darkness" were to see, God's promised light, Messiah, who would renew Israel's glory, release them from bondage, and restore their joy.

That sets the scene, because when we see Jesus in chapter 8, it is the day after the feast. The candles which have lit Jerusalem for 7 nights have been extinguished. No more light. And in v12, Jesus is standing in the Court of the Women, right in the shadow of the now dark candles, and cries out, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."

In the absence of that fantastic light, Jesus' claim is all the more impressive. He is clearly claiming to be much more than mere candles. Consider how light relates to the person of God throughout the Bible (from D. A. Carson):

In the Exodus, Israel was led and protected by God's presences as a Pillar of Fire (Ex 13:21-22, 14:19-25). The Psalmist said "the LORD is my light and my salvation" (Ps. 27:1), and that God's presence is light (Ps. 44:3).

Related to the last days, Scripture said Messiah will be a light to the Gentiles (Is. 49:6), God will be the light for his people (Is. 60:19-22). Zechariah said that at the Last Day, light would be eternal (Zechariah 14:5b-7), something the book of Revelation confirms (Rev. 21:23).

And finally, Scripture says God is light (1 John 1:5), and the Incarnate Word, Jesus, the Messiah, is the light of man (John 1:4).

So when Jesus says "I am the light of the world," he is saying no small thing. Notice, he's not saying "I have the light," or "I can point you to the light," but "I *am* the light." It's a statement of his being, his nature, his essence. And at the end of v12 he says his light is the light of life.

Jn 1:4 says "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Just as Jesus is the bread that gives eternal life, so here, he is the light that gives life. You can see a simple physical illustration of how light gives life in the process of photosynthesis. In the presence of light, green plants convert water and carbon dioxide into carbohydrates and oxygen. No light, no photosynthesis. No photosynthesis, no oxygen. No oxygen, no life. Light means life.

So Jesus is saying that he is the source of life, that all life comes from him, that if you want to live you must turn to him. Which means that he is saying two things: first, that he is Messiah. Is. 49:6, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

So as the light of the world he is Messiah, the one whom God sends to save the world, but more than that, he is the God who gives life in the first place, John 1:1-4, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men."

And as the light of the world, he gives a promise in v12, do you see what it is? That those who walk in his light, who follow him, will never walk in darkness. The darkness of evil, of fear, of uncertainty, of doubt, will all replaced by his light.

This is not a promise for everybody, but only for those who follow him. If he is the light of the world, where else can you go for light? *Nowhere*. If he is the light, there is no light apart from him, so to enjoy his light, you must have a relationship with Him, you must follow him. That statement in v12 is a present participle, meaning that it is a continual following, a whole-hearted discipleship, a life of commitment, not a casual relationship.

And when we follow the light of the world, something amazing happens. He transforms us into light. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matt 5:14-16)

"But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness." (1 Thessalonians 5:4-5)

“For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” Col 1.13

How can we be the light of the world? Only Jesus gives life, right? The difference is huge. It is the difference of *reflecting* the light versus *being* the light. He is the *fundamental source* of light, and we have lit our torches in his flame, reflecting a tiny bit of it, pointing the way to the source.

In his devotional book, "It's Not About Me," Max Lucado makes a great point, using the moon as his example. "What does the moon do? She generates no light. Contrary to the lyrics of the song, this harvest moon cannot shine on. Apart from the sun, the moon is nothing more than a pitch-black, pockmarked rock. But properly positioned, the moon beams. Let her do what she was made to do, and a clod of dirt becomes a source of inspiration... The moon reflects the greater light... Just as John the Baptist lived to testify to Christ (the light), so too should we."

Christians, you and I, are the light of the world, but get this: we are the light of the world only insofar as we reflect his light. Turn to Eph. 5, and consider what it means to be light. v8 says **“For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.”** You were formerly darkness, now you are light. Notice, and this is important, he doesn't say you were *in* darkness, but you *were* darkness. Not *in* light, but light itself. The change is in us, not in our surroundings. If it was only a question of seeking out the light or living in it, Christianity would be no different from any other religion or philosophy.

But Christianity is fundamentally a change of nature, from dark to light. God, in Christ, drawing you to him, by his grace placing your sins on Christ, placing Christ's righteousness on you, saving you and transforming you into the light as He is light.

Therefore, Paul continues in v8-9, **“walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth.”** The light of a Christ-filled life is displayed in a fruitful life, a life of moral excellence, of integrity and honesty, shining in a world of dismal darkness.

Practically, that means, as Paul says in v10, “trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord,” testing, examining, putting our thoughts, words, and actions to the test. WWJD? What does Christ think about this? If he were in the room right now, what would change about my conversation, my business, my entertainments, my standard of living, my friendships?

Because, v11 says, believers have no participation with darkness. “Participate” is the Greek *koinonia*, fellowship. Christians have no fellowship, communion, or companionship with darkness. Rather, we have a call to expose it.

How do we expose darkness? Consider what light does to darkness? Destroys it by simply *being*. Light doesn't have to do anything extraordinary to overcome darkness. A tiny match or a 4 watt nightlight destroys the darkest dark.

That's the effect a Christian should have, and will have, on the world around him. Expose darkness by being light, by showing what light looks like, by walking worthy. The contrast of a worthy walk to a dark world reveals the emptiness of unregenerate lives. When Christians shine, others are exposed to the light. Not everyone exposed to light will come to faith, but all will have been exposed, which is all that is asked of us.

Back to John 8. Note something he tells us in v20, **“These words He spoke in the treasury...”** There's a point to be gleaned here. Immediately adjacent to the treasury was the hall where the

Sanhedrin met, the spiritual and national leaders of Israel who, almost to a man, hated Jesus and wanted him dead because he called them on their own spiritual poverty and hypocrisy.

And I imagine that this august body is inside, trying to figure out how to get rid of him, when outside they hear his voice booming thru the temple, "I am the Light of the world."

Jn 1:5 says "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend it." Jn 3:19, "the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil." Because he is the light, he has a strong word of warning to those who reject him, speaking to the Pharisees, v24, "unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins."

He came to bear the sins of men. If they reject him, where else can they go for atonement? *Nowhere. There is no other place to go.* This is a sad moment for Israel, when they rejected the Light of the world. These spiritual leaders demonstrate their spiritual darkness by their total lack of spiritual discernment. They are hearing him talk, but they are not listening to him.

And let me make this very personal and very direct. What was true 2000 years ago is true this morning. Unless you believe that Jesus is the light of the world, the promised Messiah, the Savior who died on the cross for you, you shall die in your sins. There is no other place to go.

Yet even in Israel's darkness, there are rays of light and hope. John closes this scene by telling us that the same words which turned many against Christ caused many to believe in Him, v30, "As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him." Once again, Jesus divides men. The same words that draw some to faith drive others away.

The self-righteous don't want to be told they are sinners, they want to hear that they are saints. The self-sufficient don't want to be told they are needy, they want to hear that they are rich. The self-centered don't want to be told they aren't the center of the universe, they want the universe to recognize their centrality. If the light hurts your eyes, what do you do? Either put it out, or put something over your eyes to keep the light out.

The Pharisees twisted the OT law by substituting traditions and twisted interpretations, defining God's holiness down until it was something they could keep, rather than be exposed and condemned by the light.

Modern man does the same thing, defining what is good and right, what is light, not darkness, until it is something he can do on his own. Is it any wonder that Satan, the great deceiver, masquerades as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:13-15)? He wants to give us new "light," wants us to look at things in his "light." But his "light" is not light at all, it is darkness personified.

Don't be deceived, don't look for light any other place than in Jesus Christ. Let his light shine in your heart, exposing your sins and your need for him, and placing your trust in him moment by moment, follow him in the light that only he can provide.

Jesus said that unless you believe that he is the Light, you will die in your sins. But God's forgiveness is available to you by the blood of Christ. You may have heard gospel a hundred times, but if you have never turned to God, repenting of your sin, asking him to save you, cleanse you, wash you pure, then you are still in your sins.

Before you leave here this morning, seek Christ. Join with me in this prayer, "Lord, I am guilty, I deserve your wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself, but I want a new heart and a new spirit. Lord, I can do nothing, come and work in me to will and to work of your good pleasure."

And Lord those of us who have responded to the gospel, who follow Christ in his light, I pray that you would so shine in us and so be in us that all we come in contact with may know your presence in our souls. Let them look at us and see the light of the life that only Christ gives.
Amen.

Jesus, the Door of the Sheep, John 10:1-10

We have been looking at Jesus' self-definition in the Gospel of John, the 7 "I am" statements that tell us who Jesus really is. We have seen that Jesus is the bread of life, the bread that gives spiritual life and satisfies every true need. We have seen that Jesus is the light of world, the light of life, and that those who walk in his light will never walk in darkness.

This morning, in John 10, we will see Jesus as the door of the sheep. The teaching of John 10 is rooted in the events of John 9, the healing of the man born blind. Christ healed his blindness on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees questioned the man, looking for a way to attack Jesus. When the man faithfully confessed that Jesus opened his eyes, they threw him out of the synagogue.

When Jesus heard about it, he sought the man out and revealed himself to be the Son of God. When the man confessed his belief and worshipped him, Jesus announced, v39, **"For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."**

Some of the Pharisees heard that and responded, "Are you saying we are blind?" To which Jesus replied that their self-confidence and spiritual complacency proved they were blind, and therefore still in their sins.

That's the background for John 10. When Israel's unbelieving, hard-hearted religious leaders respond to a miraculous healing by throwing the healed one out of the fellowship and attack the healer as of Satan, it's time for some hard truths. So, right in the middle of the surrounding crowd, Jesus talks about spiritual leaders who destroy the sheep rather than lead them to safety.

The Gospel of John has told us much about Israel's rulers already: they are men who judge unjustly (7:24), who are spiritually self-confident (7:48), and damn their own flock (7:49). Men who reject truth (8:45), who are spiritually proud (8:33), children of Satan (8:44). Men who are spiritually arrogant (9:22), who hate the weak and helpless (9:34), and ultimately, reject God's Son (7:19, 8:37).

They stand in the long, sad tradition of Israel's elders thru the ages – shepherds who abuse their flock rather than protect it. Ezekiel wrote of them:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them." Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: "As I live," declares the Lord God, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them."' (Ez. 34:2-10)

600 years later, not much has changed. Sheep and shepherds are something all were familiar with, a significant part of an agricultural economy, and the principal biblical image for leadership. It's familiar stuff for them, but for us, some background on Middle Eastern shepherding is in order.

Sheep were herded throughout country, towns, and desert. The Judean desert was a dangerous place, just outside every town of New Testament Israel, where water is scarce, food sources are rare, and dangers abound: predators, steep cliff faces with drops of 1,000 ft. A life-threatening environment.

At night, the flock was herded into a walled enclosure. If they were out in the country, they might be backed against a cliff face or canyon wall. Enclosed by stone walls, waist high, and topped with thorny branches for protection. One opening only, a single entrance and exit. Sometimes the opening would be closed with thorn bushes, but often the shepherd would lie across it himself, to serve as sentry. In towns, there was sometimes a common sheepfold holding multiple flocks, with a hired man who let the shepherds take their flocks in and out.

They had to do this because sheep are, to be polite, a couple of lamb chops short of a rack. Someone less delicate than I might even suggest that sheep are...stupid. Sheep need to be led. Led to food, water, to safety, to home. They are defenseless, easy prey in need of protection, especially from those who intend them evil, thieves and robbers.

The Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees claimed to be Israel's spiritual rulers, self-appointed guardians of God's holiness, but they were anything but. They perverted God's holiness into a list of twisted do's and don'ts that they could keep, substituting human righteousness for God's. They did everything possible to keep the Jews from following their true Messiah. They persecuted those who followed Jesus, and ultimately put him to death.

They are the thieves and robbers of v1, men who take what isn't theirs and use violence to do so. Men whose intentions are obvious by how they try to get at the sheep.

The shepherd will come thru the door, straightforward and forthright, v2. A thief will come anyway other than the door. The last thing he wants is to be seen, so he will climb over the wall, tunnel under it, go around it, anyway he can to get at the sheep. What the thief wants from the sheep is clear: personal gain.

Not so the shepherd, v3. Sheep know their shepherd, and he knows them. He is motivated by personal care for the flock, not personal gain. The shepherd would talk to his sheep, even sing to them, and most famously, play for them on a "shepherd's flute," a simple tune the sheep would recognize as their own and follow wherever it goes. They will not follow a tune they don't know.

A story of the Palestinian Intifada of the '80's makes the point well. Israeli troops rounded up a village's livestock by the 100's and put them in a barbed wire pen. A widow and her young son approached the commander and begged release of their flock as their only source of income. He told her it was impossible to release just hers – who could pick out her 20 or so from 100's? She asked to be allowed to try, so he agreed. The gate was opened, the son took out his pipe, and began to play a simple 4 or 5 note tune, over and over. Soon, sheep heads were popping up across the pen, heading for gate. After a few minutes, their flock of 25 was assembled, following them home as he continued to play.

Sheep know their shepherd, and the shepherd knows his flock. Sheep need to be led, and the shepherd wants to lead. Is there anything hard to get about this picture? No, and yet, v6 says they couldn't understand him.

Not because the picture was unfamiliar. Jesus' example is as common for them as if we say "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." Everybody understands the words, it's the meaning that eludes them. He is using a figure of speech, v6, Greek *paroimia*, similar to a parable. A *paroimia* is a cryptic saying, one that requires further explanation. It is meant to enlighten the discerning and confuse the blind.

They understood shepherding – they just didn't understand that he wasn't talking about sheep! That shouldn't be a surprise. They are, after all, thieves and robbers who think of themselves as righteous, holy men. It's not an intellectual problem, but a spiritual one. They've rejected Jesus all along, unwilling to hear him, to allow his truth to penetrate their minds and hearts.

If the flock knows and recognizes their shepherd, then it follows that the thieves and robbers, the false shepherds, wouldn't recognize the true shepherd's voice. Because they don't understand, Jesus expands on the figure, starting in v7:

So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. "All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:7-10)

This is the third "I am" statement in John's gospel. J shifts image slightly from the first 5 verses to say that he is himself the door of the sheep. Not the sentry who stands guard, nor the shepherd, but the method of entry itself, the one and only way by which the sheep enter the fold. It's a statement akin to John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me."

There are two points about Jesus' self-description as the door of the sheep here: First, he's the only door there is, and second, there are both eternal and temporal results of going in thru Jesus, the door. He's the only door there is. The early church was first called "the Way" because of this verse and John 14:6. It was called that because that is exactly what Christianity is, who Christ is, the way, the one and only point of entry to the sheepfold.

But what is the sheepfold? Look at v9, "if anyone enters thru me, he will be... saved." The sheepfold is all those who have heard the shepherd's voice, entered thru him, and are saved. In other words, it is heaven, eternal life, the company of believers.

There is no other entrance. "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17). But only thru Jesus Christ. There are no limitations of race, status, or gender. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). But only in Jesus Christ. There is no salvation in Buddha, only fear and uncertainty, a hopeless dependence on human merit. There is no salvation in government, only authoritarian control and loss of freedom. There is no salvation in works, only frustration and guilt.

He's the only door there is, and coming to Christ is not a cultural thing, not a trivial thing. The stakes could not possibly be any higher. Jesus said in John 8:24 that unless you believe he is the Messiah, the Son of God who came to take your sins upon himself at the cross, you will die in your sins. Not only physically, but spiritually, and eternally.

Entering thru him, we find salvation from sin and sin's penalty, death and hell. But entering thru him actually means more than the certainty of heaven, it means a wholesale change of nature. Before Christ, before we were saved, when we were lost, fleshy, of the earth, we were given over to sin (Rom 1). In Christ, we are justified (2 Cor 5:21).

Before Christ, we were subject to wrath (Col 1:21). In Christ, we are at peace with God (Rom 5:1). Before Christ, we were identified with Adam's sin (Rom 5), In Christ, we are identified with his death (Rom 6).

Before Christ, we possessed only Adam's fallen nature (Rom 5). In Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells us (2 Cor 1:22). Before Christ we were in the domain of darkness (Col 1:13). In Christ, we have been rescued, taken to the kingdom of God's dear Son (Col 1:13).

Before Christ, we were dead in our sin (Eph 2:1). In Christ, we have been made alive (Eph 2:5). Before Christ, we were by nature children of wrath (Eph 2:3). In Christ, we have been made partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Before Christ, we were alienated from God (Col 1:21). In Christ, we are reconciled to God (Col 1:22).

What a monumental, fundamental change of nature occurs when you come to Christ. But only when you come to Christ. That's why our message is salvation in Christ alone. He's the only door there is.

Last week, a friend told me about meeting with a guy from work who was going thru some struggles. He said he sat down with him and told him he was going to ask him the most important question he'd ever answer: "do you know Christ?" That is *the* question.

Thieves and robbers will try to draw the sheep away. The "all" of v8 sounds more sweeping than it is. Jesus is not calling Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets thieves and robbers, but those who claim themselves to be the door, intending harm to the sheep.

In Jesus' day, it was the Pharisees. In our day, there are many candidates. The Buddhist monks of Thailand and any government that presents itself as savior, are thieves and robbers.

What they want, v10, is to steal, kill, and destroy the flock. Not merely for evil pleasure, but to serve their own ends. The Pharisees should have had eyes and ears to recognize Jesus as God Incarnate. Instead, jealous of his influence, they focus on belittling, cursing, and expelling the sheep. As thieves, their intent is wholly malicious. They come *only* to steal, kill, and destroy. They have no other purpose.

Jesus, on the other hand, came to bring something else, in truly incredible contrast: abundant life. Greek *perissos* indicates not merely quantity, but quality, something that exceeds the need, that is over and above what is necessary. Something superior, extraordinary, uncommon. The NIV is good here, "life to the full."

This is eternal life, but not just eternal life. Jesus not only came to bring eternal life to his people, he came to bring the best quality of life to them. Not just long, but also rich. He did not just come to gain sheep but to enable his sheep to flourish and to enjoy contentment and every other legitimately good thing possible. It is salvation from a wasted life.

We see it in the 3-fold blessing of v9, "if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." First, salvation, which is deliverance from sin. Second, freedom, shown by the term, "go in and out." You might be saying, "Wait a minute, I thought the sheepfold was heaven. I can understand going in, but who would want to go out?" "In & out" is a Hebrew colloquialism for life without fear, being able to go in and out of the pasture in peace, security, freedom. And third, nourishment and provision in the pasture he provides.

This is eternal life with present day impact, illustrated beautifully in Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You have anointed my head with oil, My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That's some happy, contented, flourishing sheep right there. The life Jesus brings is not merely more time to kill, as though heaven was a duller version of earth, but life at its scarce-imagined best, to be lived with joy here and now because he provides full satisfaction and perfect guidance.

The question for you is, are you living it? Are you enjoying it? Would those around you recognize it in you? If not, why not? What gets in the way? I can tell you one thing that gets in the way: the abundant life doesn't come in a shopping cart. In fact, I believe material abundance plays a key role in limiting our appreciation of true, spiritual abundance.

True abundance is never realized by the satisfaction of our desire for material goods or earthly pleasures. It is realized by entering thru the one and only door, emptying our tiny, trivial, worldly pursuits into the eternal reality of God's superabundant life.

Another thing that gets in the way is our lack of obedience. As I was sharing some of these thoughts in Thursday night's elder's meeting, Jim Fickley observed that "an abundant life is an abiding life." If you are not abiding in Christ in active obedience to his word, commands, and will, you won't enjoy his abundant life.

Given the stakes, consider how high is the calling to preach Christ, especially to places where thieves and robbers rule? In Thailand, it's a dark, fearful religion. There the government is open to the gospel, but people are closed to it for fear of spiritual consequences, truly blinded by Satan's lies.

In China, it's an atheist government that has set itself up as the only savior of the people. Paradoxically, the Chinese government is absolutely closed to the gospel, yet the people are very open. In China, there is a huge response to the gospel, yet Christians there are harassed, imprisoned, and denied the ability to worship openly. Chinese pastors have far less than we do in every way except persecution. And I saw in them a clear sense of peace, trust, and joy.

Don Carson writes, "The world still seeks its humanistic, political saviours – its Hitlers, Stalins, Maos, Pol Pots – and only too late does it learn that they blatantly confiscate personal property (they come only to steal) ruthlessly trample human life under foot (they come only to kill), and contemptuously savage all that is valuable (they come only to destroy)."

What about here, in Signal Mountain? In Chattanooga? In North Georgia? Who are our thieves and robbers? It's any voice that draws you away from dependence on God. It may be rank, obvious evil, it may be addictions, either chemical or mental. It may be trivial pursuits that dull your spiritual sensitivity, or maybe institutions who call themselves churches, but advocate salvation in another. Maybe even a government that promises to be a savior, to give you heaven on earth, right now.

The unfitness of Israel's leaders was obvious by their failure to recognize Jesus. They were thieves and robbers who pointed the sheep away from the door, take from them any hope of salvation.

We sheep need to be discerning. There is only one who can feed and lead us, and no other: Jesus, the door of the sheep.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, John 10:11-30

They liked to call themselves the "Shepherds of Israel." They were Israel's religious rulers, the holy men who set the standard for the whole nation to follow. They loved to talk about their love for God and their obedience to him, they venerated his Word and wrote book after book explaining what it all meant. The Pharisees were truly the spiritual elite of Israel.

And yet they had a harsh notion of spiritual leadership, so harsh that when, on a Sabbath day, Jesus healed a man born blind, these "shepherds of Israel" reacted by first trying to make the healed man deny that Jesus was the healer. When the man faithfully confessed that Jesus indeed opened his eyes, the Pharisees threw him out of the synagogue, branding him as unclean, unbelieving, and unsaved.

What kind of shepherds are they, who destroy their own sheep? They are hard-hearted and unbelieving themselves, yet Jesus tells us in John 10:1-10 that they are much worse than that. He says they are thieves and robbers who destroy the sheep rather than lead them to safety. He says that their only purpose is to steal, kill, and destroy. With shepherds like these, who needs wolves?

We have been looking at Jesus' self-descriptions in the Gospel of John, 7 "I am" statements that tell us who Jesus really is. We have seen that Jesus is the bread of life, the bread that gives spiritual life and satisfies every spiritual need. We have seen that Jesus is the light of world, the light of life that promises that those who walk in his light will never walk in darkness.

And we saw in the last study, in John 10:1-10, that Jesus stands in stark contrast to the Pharisees. They are thieves and robbers whose only purpose is to steal, kill, and destroy the sheep. He is the door of the sheep, the one and only way into the sheepfold.

As the door of the sheep we find salvation thru him from sin and sin's penalty, death and hell, and something more besides, if there could be such a thing as more than heaven. That something more is what Jesus calls the "abundant life," Life that is superior, extraordinary, uncommon, eternal life with a present day impact. As the door of the sheep, Jesus opens the way to that abundant life because he provides full satisfaction and perfect guidance to his flock.

And that brings us to the 4th picture of Jesus' self-description. Where he described himself as the door of the sheep in v7 and 9, he shifts the image in v11 to say that he is the shepherd over the sheep, but not just any shepherd. He is "the Good Shepherd." "Good," Greek *kalos*. Not merely good as in "nice" but good as in honorable, noble, right, true.

He is a world apart from the thieving, robbing Pharisees, and he tells us why in John 10:11-30:

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father." A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?" At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at

Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (John 10:11-30)

He is the Good Shepherd not just because he is good, though he is. He is the Good Shepherd not just because he gives us good things, though he does. In fact, in these verses he gives us 6 reasons why he is the Good Shepherd. And the first, found in v11-13, is the most important: **He is the Good Shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep.** This truth is the focal point of the whole passage, the Good Shepherd saves his flock by laying down his life for them.

Look thru v11-18 – how many times does Jesus say he will lay down his life for the sheep? 5, v11, 15, 17, and twice in v18, in the space of about 15 seconds of teaching. Something a hired hand would never do. He works for a wage, not because he cares about the sheep. A hired hand certainly wouldn't put himself in harm's way for a lousy bunch of sheep!

Imagine a hired hand watching over a flock in a remote country, far from home. Sometime in the night, he begins to hear wolves howling, way off in the distance. Soon, those howls are closer, and closer. What is he thinking? "Hey – there's a pack of wolves coming at me. I'll bet if I just pick up this little lamb right here and throw it to them, I can get away. Of course, I'm being paid to watch these things, but they're stupid and they stink." It isn't even a question. A hired hand will sacrifice the sheep for himself. The Good Shepherd sacrifices himself for the sheep. We'll come back to this.

He is the Good Shepherd because he knows his sheep and his sheep know him, v14-15.

Unlike the thieves and robbers, unlike the hired hand, the Good Shepherd has an abiding personal interest in flock. Mark 6:34 says that when Jesus was teaching the 5,000, he "felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." His heart went out to them because they were lost.

Isaiah said that's what Messiah would do, 40:10-11, "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes." We have a living shepherd to guide us, feed us, heal and protect us. And the truth of v15 should take your breath away, "I know my own, and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

How intimate is the knowledge between God the Father and God the Son? How deep? How long? How wide? There is no deeper, more satisfying relationship in the world than the eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

Think about that. Our intimacy with our Good Shepherd is an expression of the divine love and understanding that exists between God the Father and God the Son. Just as God the Son knows God the Father's heart, recognizes his truth, hears his voice, and follows him, so we can know our Good Shepherd's heart, recognize his truth, hear his voice, and follow him.

How can we know his heart, hear his voice? Through his word. He has revealed himself to us thru it, and the more time you spend in it in study and meditation, seeking to know him, the more you will know his heart and desire to follow him. And thru prayer, opening your heart to God, submitting your life to him. And thru fellowship and accountability with other believers, seeing how God is at

work in other's lives, sharing your own struggles and joys so the whole flock grows together. The Good Shepherd knows us and wants us to know him.

And he is the Good Shepherd because he makes two flocks into one, v16. "Other sheep" in another fold clearly refers to the Gentiles. How does that indicate his goodness? Because Jesus didn't lay down his life just for a few disciples in Israel. He lay down his life for sheep in Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. He lay down his life for sheep in Tokyo, Sydney, Beijing, Calcutta, Baghdad, and Signal Mountain. Because he is the good shepherd, his flock extends around the entire planet. The Gentiles also recognize Jesus' voice and follow him, united as one flock, with one Good Shepherd.

So he is the Good Shepherd because he lays down his life, because he knows his sheep, and because he makes two flocks one. **And he is the Good shepherd because he willingly sacrifices himself, v17-18.** When he says "I lay down my life" 5 times, he is making clear that sacrifice is **his** choice. He uses a very ordinary word, *tithemi*, to describe what he does with his life. It means to put down or lay aside, to stop carrying something, kind of like we'd come in the house, lay our car keys on the table, then pick them up again on our way out. It is almost casual, something completely within his rights and power to do.

He underscores this further in v18. He wants to do this, he has the authority to do this. "Authority," Greek, *exousia*, means power of choice, the ability to do something. We see the same word translated "right" in John 1:12, and "control" in Acts 5:4:

- Jn 1:12, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the **right** to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."
- Acts 5:4, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your **control**?"

When Jesus says he has the authority to lay his life down and take it up again, he is saying he has both the right to do it and the control or the ability to do it. In other words, he's not a victim, he's not a martyr, but the authoritative, powerful, willing participant in God's plan.

And it is **God's** plan. Peter, in Acts 2:22-23, said "Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--this Man, **delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God,** you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."

In Acts 4:27-28, the church prayed, "in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.**"

Whose plan was it? *God's*. Not Pilate's, not Herod's, not the Pharisees, and certainly not Satan's. They were merely actors, willing, responsible for their own actions, but not the initiators. Remember the movie, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*? Story of Jesus' life. I remember watching it as a kid and thinking, as he was being nailed to the cross, why didn't God stop them? He didn't stop them because it was his will and his Son's will to die. Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, Rev. 13:8 says.

And that willingness to sacrifice himself demonstrates his Father's love. Just as there is absolute knowledge between God the Father and God the Son, so is there absolute love between them, v17, read. Note, this doesn't mean that in laying down his life the Son *wins* Father's love. Instead, it demonstrates an already established fact.

- The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand, 3:35
- The Father loves the Son, and shows him all his works, 5:20
- The Father loves the Son, and the Son shows his love by keeping the Father's commands, 15:9-10
- The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world, 17:24
- The Father loves the Son, and the Son makes his love known to his disciples, 17:26

And this is a key point: Look at v17 again, why does he lay his life down? "*that* I may take it up again." Jesus lay down his life *for the express purpose of* taking it again. In other words, Jesus was no victim, and the resurrection was no afterthought.

How good a shepherd would he be if he lay down his life, and that was the end of it? If the story ends with a dead shepherd, then the sheep will wind up scattered, thirsty and starving in the desert. But **he is the Good Shepherd because he lays his life down, and because he takes it up again.**

The resurrection is not God's practical joke on Satan, letting him put Jesus on the cross, then pulling the rug out from under him. Neither is the Resurrection God's way of righting a terrible wrong, reaching into man's world to counter injustice.

We must understand the inevitability of both the cross and the resurrection. God intended both from the beginning. The cross was inevitable because it was God's pre-determined plan. The resurrection was inevitable because of who Jesus is:

- He is the one who has life-in-himself, Jn 5:24, 26, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life... For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself."
- He is the bread of life that gives eternal life, Jn 6:48, 50-51, "I am the bread of life... the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."
- He is the resurrection and the life, John 11:25. The one who promises that if we believe in him, we will live even if we die.
- He is the way, the truth, and the life, Jn 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Not a life, but the life, just as he is the door, v7, he is the only way in to the company of believers.

The resurrection was inevitable because it was impossible for Jesus, the one who has life in himself, who is the bread of life, who is the resurrection and the life, who is the way, truth, and the life, to be held in death's power (Acts 2:24).

Have you ever considered that the cross without the resurrection is incomplete? The cross was only the beginning of Jesus' work, the resurrection is the end of it.

The resurrection was necessary to accomplish our **salvation**. Rom. 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." You can believe Jesus is God. You can believe he died on the cross for your sins. But unless you believe he was raised physically, historically, you aren't a Christian.

The resurrection was necessary to provide our **justification**, Rom 4:25, "Him who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification." For God to justify us, declare us righteous, Jesus had to rise from the dead. Resurrection is the proof that his sacrifice was effective, that his death accomplished its intended purpose, that it satisfied God's holiness.

John MacArthur states: "If Jesus didn't rise, he's just Jesus Christ Superstar and His death has no saving value." But He did rise that God might forgive our sin, that we might be purified, be made righteous, and be renewed in heart. It was as if God said thru the resurrection, "I accept your sacrifice."

The resurrection was necessary for our salvation, our justification, and it is necessary for *eternal life*. 1 Cor. 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Eternal life depends on the resurrection. Jn 14:19, "Because I live, you shall live also." If He never rose, then he never conquered death. If he didn't conquer death he couldn't give us eternal life.

And that takes us to the final point, but before we get there, there is a parentheses in the text, v19-26, that shows the reaction of those not in his flock. We see it in v19-21, with the divided crowd. Some think him a demon-possessed lunatic, others recognize there is something more here.

Verses 22-23 fast forwards 3 months to December and the feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). Walking in the portico of Solomon in the Temple, the crowd gathers around him and demands, v24, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

But he has told them plainly, in both word and deed, v25, "I told you, and you do not believe." It isn't a matter of plain speaking, it's a matter of having ears to hear. He couldn't have been clearer on who he is. He's been doing exactly what the Messiah was supposed to do: heal the blind, lame, and deaf, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and preach the gospel to the poor.

But Jesus met with widespread unbelief in his own day just like he does today, and for the same reasons. Not because he isn't clear on who he is, but because of what John Piper calls "a deeply rooted spiritual unwillingness." They reject him, his gospel, and his works, either because they think they are sufficient in themselves, or because they place their trust in something else to save them.

The reason they don't believe has nothing to do with Jesus and everything to do with them: they aren't his sheep, v26-27. He reiterates what he said in v4-5, that his sheep hear and follow him. The fact that they don't believe him simply illustrates the fact.

And that takes us to the final point. We've seen that he is the Good Shepherd because he lays his life down, because he knows his sheep, because he makes two flocks one, because he willingly sacrifices himself, and because he has the authority to take his life up again. And, **v27-30, he is the good shepherd because he gives his sheep eternal life, founded on God's power and sovereignty.**

This is perhaps the greatest text in all Scripture on the believer's eternal security, and is worth taking some time to consider. He says eternal life is a gift. Can you give something you don't own? *No*. Jesus couldn't give eternal life if it wasn't his to give. As the Bread of Life, the Light of Life, the Resurrection and the Life, it is his to give.

When you give a gift to someone, to whom does it belong? *Them*. Is it yours to take away? If it was, it wouldn't be a gift. Inherent in the truth that he gives eternal life is the truth that he won't take it back.

And because that is true, two things result, v28: 1) his sheep will never perish, and 2) no one can snatch them out of Jesus' hand. Eternal life is guaranteed by the Son, but more than that, it is guaranteed by both the Son and the Father.

Look at v29, no one is able to snatch them out of whose hand? *The Father's*. We are held not only in Jesus' hand, but in the Father's, and he is "greater than all." No force, no being, no circumstance can ever separate sheep from Shepherd, children from heavenly Father.

And what is more, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one," v30. One in purpose, action, and will. Both God the Father and God the Son are focused on the preservation of their sheep.

- Jn 6:37-39, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day."

The believer's eternal life is protected by the Father and the Son and guaranteed by the Son's authority over life. No one can take it from you, and I would submit to you that you can't take it from yourself, either. If you are truly in Jesus' hand, you cannot jump out of it and into hell.

But, what about the Scriptures that seem to indicate salvation is conditional on continued obedience?

- Col. 1:21-23, "Once you were alienated from God...but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel."
- Heb. 3:6, 14 "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast...We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first."

Because of these verses and several others, there are those who teach that salvation, and thus eternal life, can be lost because of the sin of the believer. That by walking away from the faith and rejecting Christ, we can lose our salvation.

But consider, if eternal life is yours at one point, then not yours anymore, for whatever reason, in what sense is it "eternal?" That is instead the very definition of temporal. Once given, if eternal life can be lost, even by the willful action of an apostate believer, Jesus' words have no meaning.

So, how do we explain these so-called "conditional" verses? By understanding that Scripture never speaks of losing eternal life, but of never having had it in the first place.

Jesus says not all who call him Lord are saved, Mt 7:22-23, "Many will say to me...'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

1 Jn 2:18-19, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come... They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

When professing Christians abandon the faith and reject and deny Christ, they are proving that their profession was never genuine. The message of Scripture is that endurance in the faith is evidence of true salvation. Fallen men and women can fool themselves and others and give the appearance of salvation. But if we are to believe Jesus, then we must know that the life he gives is truly eternal, not merely a temporary offer contingent on our own obedience.

That is the testimony of the rest of Scripture as well. Our eternal security is seen in the *character* of our salvation:

- Peter says our salvation is imperishable, undefiled, reserved, and will not fade away, 1 Pt 1:3-5, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from

the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

- The author of Hebrews says Christ save us forever and promises our assurance, Heb. 7:25, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." Heb 10:22, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."
- Paul and Peter both say salvation is God's work, not man's, Eph 2:8-9, For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast; 2 Pt. 1:10, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble."

Our eternal security is seen in the *ongoing* work of God in our lives:

- Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for us, Heb. 7:25, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." Rom 8:26; In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;
- God's love perseveres over all, Rom 8:38-39; "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- God is at work in us, and his work is effective, Phil. 1:6; "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." 2 Tim 1:12, "For I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."

Our eternal security is seen in the *intimate relationship* between the saved & their Savior:

- We are one with Christ, Jn 15:4-5; "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."
- Indwelt by HS, John 14:16-17; "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you."
- Held in power of Jesus' hand, who is one with the Father, Jn 10:27-30.

We can truly say "once saved, always saved," but we have to be very careful about equating salvation with walking an aisle, praying a prayer, or signing a decision card if there is no change of life, no fundamental change of direction from following one's own sin to following the Good Shepherd.

The crowd that heard Jesus certainly thought of themselves as lovers of God, and yet the chapter ends with them picking up rocks to stone Jesus in an absolute rejection of all he has said and done.

And so the fundamental question for each of us this morning is this: Are we his sheep? Are you one of the Good Shepherd's flock? Do you hear his voice? Do you follow him? Do you trust in his

saving work on the cross, his resurrection to new life, and promise of eternal life to you? That's what it means to be his sheep.

You become one of his sheep because God acts in your heart. God chooses you and works in your heart a transformation to draw you to love what he loves (Ezekiel 11:19); he breaks your pride and gives you a humble openness to God's love, truth, and authority.. It is no accident we are called sheep: we need a shepherd to save and guide us. When that transformation happens, *then* we will believe. Then Jesus will appear for what he really is, our Good Shepherd.

Listen to the voice of Jesus, and follow him. If you do, Jesus himself has a promise for you: John 5:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life – John 11:1-46

I want to begin by asking you a question: What do you think about sin? Honestly. When you think of the word "sin," what comes to mind?

It's a word that doesn't get a lot of respect today. In fact, the world would have you believe it doesn't exist, at least, not in the way the Bible describes it. Robert Heinlein, the noted science-fiction author, said "Sin lies only in hurting other people unnecessarily. All other 'sins' are invented nonsense."

French writer Andre Gide said, "Sin is whatever obscures the soul," which sounds particularly like something a French writer would say. And an anonymous quote is perhaps the best summation of our culture's view of sin, "Where there is love there is no sin." Oh, please.

That's what the world thinks of sin. This morning, we'll see what Jesus thinks of it. We are going to be in John 11, the fifth portrait of Jesus in the seven "I Am's" of the Gospel of John. As we saw in our last study, chapter 10 ends with Jesus asserting his deity and the crowd seeking to stone him for blasphemy. So 10:40 says that Jesus "went away again beyond the Jordan, to the place John was first baptizing." We find in John 1:28 that that place was called Bethany, in the far north of Israel, about 90 miles north of Jerusalem.

Chapter 11 opens with events in another Bethany, just a couple of miles outside Jerusalem, a four-day journey from where Jesus is. A family lives there of particular import to Jesus, and there is a problem in this family. One of them is desperately sick.

"Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." (John 11:1-3)

The text identifies Mary explicitly as "the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped His feet with her hair." Famous lady. But something more important marks this family as special: Jesus' love for them. When sending word that Lazarus is sick, v3 doesn't identify him by name, but calls him "he whom you love." John reiterates the point in v5.

Clearly, they had a strong sense of Jesus' love. Confidence enough in his affection to send a messenger to tell Jesus he's sick. That's a cry of desperation, sending a messenger on a 4-day journey. What purpose could they have had except to call him to his friend's side?

How does Jesus respond? We see it in v4-6. "But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was."

Note what Jesus says about Lazarus in v4. Not that Lazarus won't die, but that his sickness won't end in death. Lazarus may well die, but death won't be the final word. Instead, there is a very specific purpose for this illness, v4, God's glory. God will use Lazarus' sickness and death to glorify himself and his Son.

As I said earlier, John makes a special point of confirming Jesus' love for this family, which is all the more intriguing when we read in v6, "When therefore He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was." If you have the NIV, note that v6 says "**yet** when he heard..." That is a bad translation. The Greek *sun*, means "therefore," not "yet." "Yet" suggests that

in spite of Lazarus' sickness, Jesus delayed going to Bethany. Instead, John is saying that *because* Lazarus was sick, Jesus delayed. Odd behavior for one who loves the sick man. Why did he wait? Would Lazarus have been alive if Jesus had left immediately? No - we see in v17 that when Jesus arrives after a 2-day delay, Lazarus has been dead 4 days. In other words, if Jesus had left immediately, Lazarus still would have been dead 2 days. So why the delay?

The delay was necessary not to ensure that Lazarus was dead when Jesus arrived, but that he was dead 4 days. I believe the reason is due to that culture's popular belief that for 3 days after an apparent death, resuscitation was possible. During those 3 days, the superstitious believed the spirit of the dead hovered nearby, just in case the body revived. They believed that decomposition set in on the 4th day, making resuscitation impossible, so at that point the spirit would leave.

So Jesus waited in order to make sure Lazarus was good and dead, in fact, rotting. You would have thought that Jesus' love would have driven him south immediately. Instead, his love compelled him to wait.

Jesus' delay illustrates an important point. We'll see how painful his delay is to Mary and Martha, yet that pain didn't prevent Jesus' delay. He knows best, and that's a lesson we need to learn. We want what we want when we want it – now. There's an old saying that God answers all prayers: some yes, some no, some wait. The last two are easy to say but hard to live, but that is often where we find the most benefit and growth. Don't fear delay and disappointment. When Paul says in Romans 8:28 that "all things" work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, he means just that, all things, including some that may be very painful.

Jesus finally announces their departure in v7-8. "Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"

They are incredulous. Just a short time ago he escaped stoning in Jerusalem, and now he wants to go back? What's worse, he wants to take them with him? They are scared. They know the threat to Jesus' life and theirs is real, and the prospect appalls them.

Jesus answers in v9-10 with a simple illustration from daily life. "Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. "But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

There are 12 hours in day, during which we work, travel from place to place, and do things. Nighttime is when you cease from work and stay put. In other words, we are to walk in the light of God's purpose for lives and the work he has for us to do, even if it carries danger. There are far more shins barked by stumbling around in the dark, going against God's will, than by walking with him, no matter where he calls or leads you. Think of Jonah.

Jesus explains further in v11-13. "This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep."

Using what would become a Christian metaphor for death, the disciples misunderstand, thinking that if Lazarus is resting, surely he must be on the mend. So Jesus cuts thru their confusion in v14-15, "So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."

Lazarus is dead, but the result will be a good thing for the disciples, because it will build their faith. To be sure, the trip will have its dangers. Bethany is only 2 miles from Jerusalem, the place where they seek Jesus' life. Stones may come their way again. Thomas, being who he is, responds in v16, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."

Some see cynicism here, but I see a faithful follower, a devoted and courageous disciple who says that if Jesus is going to die, then he wants to die, too. Still incomplete in his faith, still doesn't understand the nature of Jesus' coming death, but completely committed to Christ.

So, Jesus and the disciples travel 90 miles south to Bethany, v17-19, "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother."

When they arrive, Lazarus has been dead 4 days, and the house is in full mourning. "Many Jews," would include both family and friends, and probably some "professional" mourners as well. There was a strong social and religious obligation to mourn the dead. Sorrow was then, as it is today in the Middle East, very public, even showy, with a week-long period of mourning to show how much the deceased was loved.

Think about this. Mary and Martha knew where Jesus was (they knew where to send the messenger). That means they also knew how long the trip would take. What did they expect? "He'll be here in 8 days, 4 there, 4 back." But on the 6th day, Lazarus dies. Where do you suppose they were on the 8th day? Watching the road, wondering where Jesus could be. But he doesn't come. Then the 9th day, and again, nothing.

Now it's the 10th day. How did they view his delay? Did they worry something had happened to him, or did they begin to exercise their worst fear, that he wasn't going to come at all? How did Jesus' delay help ease their sorrow? It didn't, at least not in the short term. But the short term is never the issue, even though it is where we live. The short term is where we feel the most pain, joy, or worry, but the short term is just that: short. It's where we wind up that matters, and that is the reason for Jesus' delay.

His encounter with Martha is in v20. "Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house." She hears of Jesus' approach and goes to meet him, but Mary stays put. The text doesn't say why, John is just telling us what happened. When Martha sees the Lord, her grief spills out in her greeting, v21, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." There is no sense of rebuke here, just sorrow. She is confident that, had Jesus been there, Lazarus would have survived, and she's telling him so.

She tells him further, in v22, that she retains her confidence in him, "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." In spite of Lazarus' death, great faith, right?

But Jesus wants to push her further, and so he makes a rather bland statement in v23, "Your brother shall rise again." From Martha's perspective, Jesus could simply be saying nothing more than the religious cliché that "you'll see Lazarus in heaven," which seems to be how Martha hears him, v24, "I know that he will rise again in the Resurrection on the last day." But that isn't what Jesus is talking about.

Does she believe in Jesus? Absolutely. Yet, her belief is abstract, theoretical. Her reality is that her beloved brother is in the tomb. The idea that he will rise again is confined to a dim future, hoped for, believed in, but not current, not concrete, not real.

I wonder if that is anything like our own view of heaven? The "sweet by and by," "pie-in-the-sky," with chubby little angels flying around with funny looking guitars. How much comfort do you take from thinking about heaven? Do streets of gold and gates of pearl excite you? Does the thought of living forever fill you with joy? No? Maybe that's because God doesn't intend heaven itself to be our comfort. Rather, he intends us to take comfort in the One who makes heaven his home.

It's exactly that truth that Jesus is about to drive home to Martha. What he tells her in v25-26 is meant to move her from the abstract to the concrete, from theory to reality, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Note, he's not saying that he gives life. He's said that already. He's actually saying something more, something bigger, something about who he is, not what he does. He isn't talking about his power, he's talking about his person. He is saying that he is the personification of resurrection, the embodiment of life. Jesus doesn't merely have the power of Resurrection and Life, he *is* the Resurrection and he is the Life. He is both the one who will raise the dead, and the one in whom the dead are raised. He is both the one who gives eternal life, and the one in whom eternal life exists.

And so to put your faith in Jesus, to believe in him, means that physical death is not the end, but more than that, to believe in Jesus means you will never die, v26, "everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." Death may take your body, but it won't ever touch your soul or your spirit, which is the only death to fear.

And then he makes it personal at the end of v26, "Do you believe this?" That's a big thing to believe about someone who is standing right in front of you. "Martha, you believe in me in theory, do you believe in me in truth?" Beyond theory, beyond pie-in-sky to personal trust in Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life?

She answers as best as she can in v27, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, *even* He who comes into the world." Note, she doesn't say yes, Lord, you are the Resurrection and the Life, but what she knows is enough: that he is the Messiah, the Savior prophesied of old, the Son of God who comes into the world to visit man in his need.

Jesus presses her no further, so in v28, Martha goes to fetch her sister Mary for her own private appointment with him. Mary's not alone. She is surrounded by the mourners who are there to show their love for Lazarus and console the sisters. Maybe you've experienced that yourself in the loss of a loved one, the comfort of friends around you, reminiscing about the one who has died. There's nothing bad about that, but it's really just anesthetic. It deadens the pain, it doesn't restore the loss. Only Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life can meet the need, not anesthetize it.

The mourners are the only ones to see her go, v31, and thinking she's going to tomb, they follow her outside. Mary's encounter with Jesus is similar to Martha's, right down to her greeting in v32. That's not surprising. I imagine that for 4 days they have been grieving together, saying over and over again to one another, "If Jesus had been here, our brother would not have died."

And the effect on Jesus is powerful, v33-37, "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her *also* weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, and said, "**Where have you laid him?**" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?"

The word translated "weeping" in v33 doesn't mean quiet tears. The Greek *klaiō* means wailing. Mary and the crowd are weeping with loud, bitter, breath-racking sobs. John says Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled."

English words are sometimes puny, pasty things, bland and shallow in comparison to bold, powerful Greek. This is one of those places. "Deeply moved" is the Greek "*embrimaomai*," an onomatopoeic word that was literally used to describe a horse snorting in anger, outrage, and indignation.

He is angry, "troubled," in deepest part of his being. What's he so mad about? Some suggest he's angry at the crowd of professional mourners and their insincere grief over the death of his friend. One or two go so far as to suggest that he's angry that the crowd is forcing him to do a miracle instead of letting nature takes its course. Which only goes to show that a doctorate in theology is no guarantee of intelligence.

So what is he mad at? The text doesn't say, but I believe the witness of Scripture makes clear that what so burdens Jesus is sin and the destruction that sin wreaks: 1 Corinthians 15:22, "in Adam all die..." Romans 5:12, "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned..."

Sin brought death to all mankind. Just as the person of Jesus takes heaven from abstract to concrete, so too does a funeral take sin from abstract to concrete. The scene at Lazarus' funeral is a direct result of sin's devastation.

Now take all the grief and sorrow at this single funeral, and multiply it by untold millions, for all those who have died every single day since the Fall. Add to it the perpetual destruction of lives eaten up by sin's spiritual, social, emotional destruction, to say nothing of the judgment of a holy God against it. No wonder Jesus is angry.

Taken to the tomb, Jesus famously weeps himself in v35, but this is not *klaiō*, funeral sobs, but *dakryō*, quiet tears. Not out of control, just very sad. The crowd thinks he cries for the loss of his friend, v36. Clearly not, because he knows his friend is about to walk out of that tomb. He isn't weeping for Lazarus, he is weeping for sin.

Even as he is about to show that he is the personification of resurrection and life, Jesus' reaction reveals a holy God's outrage at sin's destructiveness, and a loving God's grief at its consequences.

Does sin affect you like that, with great sadness? Or do we sometimes think of it as that an old and disreputable but very familiar friend that we like to hang out with now and again? We're only fooling ourselves. Sin wants nothing more than to destroy you, to cause great pain in this life and eternal destruction in the next.

All these verses may seem like mere prelude to the main event of c11, but these lessons are given their power by the event itself, and they in turn inform the meaning of the event. Jesus' tears and anger, and his claim to be the Resurrection and the Life are meaningless if he can't do something about the dead man in the tomb.

That tomb is most likely a cave cut into rock, 10-15 ft. square, with benches carved out of the wall where the body was placed. Wrapped head to foot, it would have been left a year to decompose. At the end of that year, the tomb would be opened and the bones placed in a burial box, or ossuary. So Lazarus is lying on a slab in the sealed tomb, wrapped up, decomposing.

The scene continues in v38-42, "So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four

days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me."

Jesus' prayer in v41-42 is voiced publicly for the benefit of the crowd. Not to impress them (unlike many of ours), but to instruct them. He's praying so his hearers will know that His will is God's will, that God hears him. And that they will know that he is the Resurrection and the Life. Here's where God's glory, promised in v4, is revealed.

Having prayed, John says that Jesus "cried out with a loud voice, 'LAZARUS, COME FORTH.'" Anything less than a shout doesn't do justice to the Greek here. The same word, *κραυγάζω*, is used to describe the Palm Sunday crowd shouting "Hosanna." It is used to describe the crucifixion crowd shouting derision. Not just loud, but shouting at top of his lungs!

And so, v44, out from the tomb shuffles Lazarus, still bound in the burial cloths. I can picture a crazy scene, with some shrinking back from him in horror while Mary and Martha run to embrace him, as Jesus gives instruction that he is to be unwrapped. John purposely ends the story there. He leaves the immediate response, which must have been incredible, to our imagination. We will have to hear Lazarus' experience when we meet him in glory.

Instead, John shows us the faith response of those present, v45-46, and of some far away, v47-53. As always, Jesus brings sharp division. V45 says that some believed but others, v46, having seen the dead man raised to life, felt that this needed to be reported to the Pharisees. The chapter closes with these religious leaders unbelievably responding to this miraculous show of power and authority by plotting Jesus murder, so as to avoid any possible political repercussions from Rome.

It's a great reminder that miracles don't necessarily touch the heart. Emotions and intellect don't always connect to the soul. Remember another Lazarus, in a parable told in Luke 16, where a good, poor man named Lazarus, and an evil, unnamed rich man both die. Lazarus goes to heaven, where he is comforted by Abraham, but the rich man goes to Hades, where he is tormented. The rich man asks Abraham to send someone to his family to warn them of their coming judgment, and says they will listen if someone rises from the dead. But Abraham replies, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead." That parable certainly had a foundation in real life, didn't it?

What does it mean that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life? First of all, it means that for the Christian, death is nothing to fear. Remember the disciples' fear of the return to Jerusalem in v8? Because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, they, and we, can face death with confidence, not fear.

We are all subject to death. If the Lord delays, there is not a single soul in range of my voice right now that won't go the way of the grave, but we can have confidence in Jesus' power over death to know that he is with us in death, thru death, and out the other side of death. I wonder what Lazarus' frame of mind was on his second deathbed, however many years later? Do you think death held any fear for him? Not that time it didn't.

And because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, we can face death with hope, not despair. It hurts to lose someone you love. I certainly don't want to go through that. Yet, while there is sorrow and grief in the loss of a beloved believer, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, we can grieve with hope, knowing that because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, we will see believers who have gone before us again.

And because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, the miracle of Lazarus is repeated every time someone trusts Christ for salvation. Many of you can bear witness to the life-changing power of Jesus, because when you put your faith in him, he came into your life and began to show his power in you, changing you from the inside out. The changes that he has made in us, and the changed lives we see around us, are an undeniable evidence that he is alive and real and at work today.

If you don't know that life-changing power, then the most pressing need you have this morning is not health or family, money or job. The most pressing need you have is to have your sin taken away and a right relationship with God established, and the need to overcome death.

I started by asking how you view sin. That question is of paramount importance, because if you don't take sin seriously, if you don't deal with it, it will kill you dead, spiritually. Do you know that since we started this service just over an hour ago, more than 8,000 people have died, worldwide? And most of them died without knowing Christ.

The two great enemies of our lives are sin and death, and Jesus is the only one who can deal with them because he alone is the Resurrection and the Life, and he alone paid sin's price in his death on the cross, after which he himself was raised from the dead. And if you will turn to him in faith, if you will confess your sin and your need for a savior, if you will acknowledge him as Lord, knowing that God raised him from the dead and that he lives today, he will turn to you.

Jesus, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, John 14:1-11

In a series of man-in-the-street interviews, people are asked if there is more than one way to God. Their answers almost invariably fall into the pattern of "there is one God and many ways to get to him. Poll after poll shows that most people, even most who call themselves Christian, believe that there is more than one way to God.

Where did these folks learn their theology? From their friends and their feelings and from the world around them. And that's a bad place to draw your theology from. At best, such doctrine will give you feelings-based, simplistic, contradictory, largely incoherent and ultimately unlivable answers.

Last year, billionaire Warren Buffet announced he was donating approximately \$37 billion to 5 charities. Commenting on what is truly great generosity, Buffet said: "There's more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."

Does Buffet really believe he can buy his way into heaven? Probably not, though I would say parenthetically that if you could, \$37B would probably do it. But even if he's joking, the standard line, "there's more than one way to get to heaven," says a lot about Buffet's theology.

One of those responses in those man-in-the-street interviews really illustrates the problem with religion: "They're all good. There shouldn't be a set one because every religion has things that some people can relate to and others can't."

And you know what? She's right. And that's the problem. They are talking about religion, and religion is something man makes up to describe the God he wants to relate to. And because it is man-made, man gets to make it whatever he wants it to be.

That's why the world's religions are completely contradictory. Islam teaches God wants your good works, as do the cults of Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others, but Buddhism says what counts is to follow the 8-fold path for enlightened living so you can be born again, literally and physically, to a better, higher plane of existence. And modern Judaism dismisses the idea of salvation entirely, teaching instead that we are to do the best we can with what we have. The more we do that, they say, the more we will enjoy the world to come.

And if all roads lead to God, does it matter what you do at all? Some Old Testament pagans worshipped by child-sacrifice. Would the folks being interviewed say their road led to God? Remember the Heaven's Gate cult? The people who committed mass-suicide in 1997 so their souls could join Jesus, who they said was in a spaceship behind the comet Hale-Bopp, then visible in the sky. They were committed and sincere. Who's so arrogant as to say that their religion was wrong?

How can all these religions lead to God if none of them agree on what pleases him? You have to wonder how any thinking person can claim that all this mishmash leads to the same place. And if it did, would that be the kind of God that is worthy of worship?

No, religion is man reaching up to God. And that is not what God wants, because God himself reached down to man. That is what Christianity is. Not man-made religion, but a God-initiated relationship with his creation, reaching down to us, restoring us to a place where we can worship a holy God, to the ultimate praise of his glory.

Why all this talk about religion? Because our Scripture this morning gets at the very heart of the question, "are there many ways to God, or only one way?"

As we have been looking at Jesus' self-description in the Gospel of John, we see anything but a mishmash. In fact, it is crystal clear. He is the bread of life that satisfies spiritual hunger, the light of

the world that banishes spiritual darkness, the door of the sheep who gives entry to God's peace and safety, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and gives them eternal life, and the embodiment of Resurrection and Life.

And this morning, in the 6th of the 7 "I am's" of John, we will see Jesus make the most exclusive, narrow claim possible. Open your Bibles to John 14. This chapter opens in the middle of a conversation that began in c13.

It is the night before Jesus will go to the cross, and he is in the Upper Room with his disciples for the Passover. He has enjoyed a last supper with them and has washed their feet as an example of the love he expects them to show and he has told them that he would be betrayed by one of them.

And amid the questioning and concern that followed that bit of news, he has told them something that has rocked their world, v33, "Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

Jesus immediately goes on to tell them that in his absence, he expects them to love one another. But the disciples aren't listening anymore. The talk of betrayal, and now this announcement that he's about to leave has their heads spinning.

The one thing they heard loud and clear is: Jesus is leaving and they can't follow. So Peter, in character, blows right past what Jesus just said about loving one another, and says, "Wait, you're leaving? And I can't come?" And he asks the obvious question, v36, "Where are you going?"

Jesus doesn't answer directly, but he does soften the blow a bit, telling Peter, v36, "Where I go you cannot follow me now, but you will follow later."

Now Peter loves Jesus and is as devoted to him as any of the disciples. Bold, headstrong, prideful, Peter can't leave it at that. And in v37 he not only wants to know why he can't follow Jesus now, but he absolutely contradicts him and says he *will* follow him, and even die for him!

Or will he? Peter has a heart for Jesus, but no idea of his own weakness as a fallen man. In fact, his boldness betrays the same proud independence and self-assurance that infected Judas.

What does Jesus do? He presses Peter, painfully, v38. He doesn't just question his devotion, but denies it outright. Even as the other disciples are sitting there, listening, Jesus brings Peter face-to-face with the harsh truth of what Peter will do in the next few hours.

How do you think Peter took that? It's not recorded, but surely he was wounded and hurt, his heart aching. And he's not the only one. As we move into c14, it is very clear that all these men are hurting. They've been with Jesus since the beginning. He has been their world for 3 years, and all of a sudden, in this comfortable room, filled with friends, good food, and the holiday atmosphere of a Passover Seder, Jesus has told them that their world is about to fall apart.

It's not like Jesus hasn't been telling them all along that this day would come. For months and months, he has been telling them that when he comes to Jerusalem, he would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then rise again. But they never really understood him, at least not literally. They thought he was surely talking about some metaphysical, spiritual truth, not actually *dying*. And now, finally, they are really coming to understand the truth: he's going to leave them alone!

Their hearts are torn at the thought of being permanently separated from Christ, and in c14, Jesus answers the ache in their hearts with words of great comfort: "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me."

Note the word "troubled." Jesus is troubled himself, we see in John 13:21. The disciples are feeling the same emotion, but for a fundamentally different reason. Jesus is troubled because of his impending death. Think about this: he knows that the next day, he would be forsaken by the very men who profess to love him, would have to die on a cross, bear the sins of every person who ever lived, be forsaken by his heavenly Father, and finally, die an agonizing death. And yet, he was concerned with their needs and fears. He wanted to prepare them for the shock they would soon experience, and so he tells them, "Let not your hearts be troubled."

Do you see what he's doing? He's commanding them to trust him, "Believe in God, believe also in me." In other words, even though he is gone, the disciples are to trust him just as they do God. Can they see God? No, they can't. Do they trust God? I think so. So, just as they trust the God whom they cannot see, so they should trust the Jesus they can no longer see.

Obviously, it is pretty significant that Jesus is making himself equal with God, but he's done that throughout his ministry. That's why so many times his encounters with the Pharisees end with people picking up rocks to stone him for what they think is blasphemy. But it isn't blasphemy if it's true, and the disciples understand that. Jesus is God, and Jesus tells them they need to trust him just as they do God.

Trust him instead of indulging troubled hearts, because a troubled heart is the sign of a heart that does not trust God. 1 Jn 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love."

Where there is fear, there is no trust in God. So when your heart is troubled, when you fear something really terrible, or when it isn't even just fear, it's the reality you prayed you would never have to confront, what do you do? Trust God, because he is completely trustworthy.

Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; The righteous runs into it and is safe." Isaiah 26:3-4, "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, For in GOD the LORD, *we have* an everlasting Rock." Psalm 56:11, "In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

And so Jesus tells them to stop letting their hearts be troubled, and instead to trust him because there is a purpose to his leaving, v2-3: "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

He's leaving so he can go and prepare a place in heaven for them. That should take some of the sting of his leaving away! "Dwelling places," or the familiar KJV, "mansions," is the Greek *monē*, which means literally "abode," or "home." Not like a celestial Brow Estates, individual mansions on streets of gold stretching into eternity, but rooms in his Father's house for them, where he will bring them to live with him.

As an aside, who gets the home ready for guests, host or guest? How could he lead the way to heaven, prepare it for guests, unless he is the master of heaven? Heaven will literally be our home, where we will live forever in the presence of Jesus, who will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will no longer be any death, or mourning, or crying, or pain.

Now, Jesus says he goes to prepare that place. What kind of preparation does heaven require? How does he prepare the rooms? I don't believe Jesus is talking about having to sweep out rooms or add on to the Father's house. Instead, his going, his departure in his death and Resurrection, is *itself* the preparation. Heb. 10:20 says he opened a new and living way to heaven by the giving of his body. Because he goes, a home in heaven is prepared for us.

And he tells them, v3, he's coming back for them, something to comfort their hearts, which should comfort us as well. 1 Th. 4:15-18, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

Christ's return should comfort us, but I'm afraid we gum it up with too much speculation regarding when and how its going to happen, trying to figure out the detail that Jesus himself said no one knows but the Father alone.

Comfort is found not in a focus on the unknowable details of end-time theology, but in the promise of his return to take us to live with him forever. Instead of all the hoopla of pre- or post-Trib, pre- or post-Mil, simply trust God, and let him take care of the timing.

So Jesus concludes, v4, "And you know the way where I am going." But do they? Thomas speaks for all, v5, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" If we don't know *where*, how can we know *how to get there*? That's a good, honest question, and Jesus responds with a crystal clear statement, perhaps the single greatest expression of the exclusive, exhaustive, absolute nature of his claims, in v6.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but thru me." Note, the Greek here is very specific. *The way, and the truth, and the life*. Not a way, as though he is just one of many. Not the way of truth and life, as though he blazes a trail we are to follow. He *is* the trail. He uses 3 specific, discrete, yet related truths to make the point. He is the way and he is the truth and he is the life.

He is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God. He is the Truth: the incarnate Word that reveals God, 1:14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

He is the Life: 1:4, "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." He is the Bread of Life and the Resurrection and the Life.

He is the only thing we need for salvation, and he is everything we need for salvation, the exclusive, exhaustive way to God. How many come to Father thru other means? Zero. No one can know God if they don't also know Jesus. Outside him, no way to God exists.

Thomas doesn't realize it, but they do know the way because they know Jesus! They just don't understand him as they should, as Jesus says in v7, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."

To be honest, the disciples are kind of clueless. Like the young children of a president or king who don't really understand their daddy's power, they only know Jesus on one level. Now its time to grow in their understanding. "From now on," he says, they must understand this is all about the way to the Father, whom Jesus perfectly reveals, and who opens a new and living way to reconcile God's creation to himself.

There's a question again, v8, this time from Philip (and do you notice they feel the freedom to ask?). He asks Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus' answer is in v9, "you've had a personal vision for 3 years." "He who has seen Me has seen the Father..."

He reminds them that what he has done and said is ample proof that he and the Father are one, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves."

He speaks the words of God and does the works of God. Between Jesus and the Father there is mutual indwelling and complete unity.

That Jesus is the one, unique, exclusive way to God is in itself a supreme statement. Add to that Jesus is also the destination, the One in whom God is found, and you have a truly exclusive, exhaustive, absolute statement.

How narrow can you be? How intolerant of other views? Oh, those petty, harsh, narrow-minded evangelicals. Petty? I hope not. Harsh? We shouldn't be. Narrow-minded? You bet. Because if it's true, then narrow-minded is exactly what you want to be.

In our pluralistic society, exclusive claims are roundly rejected, but that doesn't make them any less true. As GK Chesterton said, "Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions."

If you decide you want to drive to Atlanta and ask someone for directions, some pretty narrow-minded people are going to tell you that there is only one way to get there, 75 South. But you're broad-minded, you know all roads lead to Atlanta, so you get on 24 North. Will you ever reach Atlanta on that road? If you do, it will look an awful lot like Nashville. So, if you need a narrow-minded approach to get to Atlanta, how much more to get to heaven?

As we bring this to a close, I'm struck by a couple of observations. First, time with Jesus doesn't guarantee spiritual understanding. The disciples lived 3 years with Jesus, 24x7, but they still have much to learn. Their time with Jesus were years of superficial knowledge. How many of us wish we could have walked with him, heard him teach, seen him work? That wouldn't guarantee a closer walk or greater devotion.

And that means that you may have been sitting in church all your life, but unless you put your trust in Christ as the only way to heaven, years of superficial knowledge won't do a thing for you.

Second, truth is true whether we accept it or not. It doesn't matter if you think Jesus is arrogant, or Christians are narrow-minded. Truth is outside of us, and our doubts don't affect it one bit. If Jesus is the exclusive, exhaustive, absolute way to God, then our relationship to him can't be a casual part of our lives. John Zieser shared Wednesday night, that the truth you base your life on will determine what you value, your convictions. Your convictions in turn will determine what you hope for, which will in turn determine what motivates you. But it all starts with the truth you base your life upon.

If you have based your life on the truth that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but through him, then that should be the central truth of your life, the thing that determines what you value, what you hope for, and what you live for.

"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important." C. S. Lewis.

If you have not based your life on that truth, you are walking down the wrong road, the one that Jesus called the broad road that leads to destruction. Instead, you need to take the "straight and narrow" road, which is not morality or good works, it is Jesus himself.

And the way of Christ is the way of the cross. God's forgiveness is available to you by the blood of Christ, alone. There is no other entrance. He died on the cross to provide the only possible way of salvation for you.

The early church first called itself "the Way," because of this truth. Because that is exactly what Christianity is, who Christ is, the one and only way to God. You may have heard the gospel over and over, but if you have never turned to God, never repented of your sin, never asked him to save you and wash you clean, then you are still in your sins. Before you leave here this morning, seek Christ.

More than 500 years ago, a monk named Thomas a Kempis wrote a devotional called "The Imitation of Christ," and I will close with this quote from it: "Follow Me: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. Without the way there is no going, without the truth there is no knowing, without the life there is no living. I am the Way which thou must follow; the Truth which thou must believe; the Life which thou must hope. I am the Way unchangeable; the Truth infallible; the Life everlasting. I am the Way altogether straight, the Truth supreme, the true Life, the blessed Life, the uncreated Life. If you abide in My Way you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free, and you shall attain life everlasting."

We will close with a hymn written the same year as our Declaration of Independence, though that's not why we sing it. The reason we sing it is its incredible message of the all-sufficiency of Jesus atoning sacrifice. Hymn #204, Rock of Ages. Before we sing, look at the words.

Christ is the Rock of Ages, to whom we pray, "cleft for me, open to me so that I can hide myself in you. And as the water and blood flowed from your side on the cross, may I be cured doubly, of both sin's guilt and its power."

And the 2nd verse, what can we do to save ourselves? Absolutely nothing. No human labors can fulfill the law, no zeal, no tears can pay for our sin. Christ must save, and Christ alone.

Verse 3 underscores the truth that salvation is God's work alone. We bring nothing in our hands, we simply cling to his cross, naked, looking to him to graciously clothe us in his righteousness, and wash us clean.

And the hymn ends where it began, only now the singer looks to his own death. Soaring thru the heavens to stand before God's judgment throne, where the only appeal he can make is to that which saved him in the very beginning, the Rock of Ages, cleft for me, and for you.

This wonderful hymn was written by a pastor named Augustus Toplady. Do you know what his original title was? "A Living and Dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World." Obviously, that title didn't stick, and the simpler one did. But Toplady titled it that way for a purpose: to show that however good a Christian man or woman might be, however holy, he is still a sinner in need of God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness. It's a song for the greatest saint and the greatest sinner alike.

Toplady died a young man, just 38. But on his death bed he was jubilant. "I enjoy heaven already in my soul," he said. "All my prayers are turned to praises."

Jesus said that he is the Bread of Life. There is no other source of Life. He said that he is the Light of the World and unless you believe that he is the Light, you will die in your sins. He said that he is the door of the sheep, the one and only entrance into the place of peace and safety. He said that he is the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep and gives them eternal life. He said that he is the Resurrection and the Life, the one in whom the dead are raised and the one in whom all life exists. And he said that he is the Way and the Truth and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but thru him.

Jesus, the True Vine – John 15:1-11

As I've had opportunity to preach this year, we've been looking at the 7 "I Am" statements of Jesus, found in the gospel of John. These 7 statements are Jesus' self-description, telling us who he really is, his own view of his identity, purpose, and work. This morning, we will see the 7th and last one.

It comes in John 15, after the Passover meal in the Upper Room, where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, communion. After that meal Jesus taught his disciples one last time, literally his last words before going to the cross. C15 is right in the middle of that last discourse. In a few hours, he would be arrested and crucified, and his disciples will run like dogs.

In that context, Jesus is teaching them about their relationship to one another (John 15:12-17), to the world (John 15:18-27), but first, foremost, about their relationship to himself, John 15:1-11:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."

This is a metaphor, a familiar, agricultural picture. In the Old Testament, Israel was often pictured as a vine planted by God to bear fruit in the world:

Psalms 80:7-11, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River."

Isaiah 5:1-2, 7, "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes... For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!"

So common was the vine and vineyard imagery for Israel that it was featured on their coinage, and the inner courtyard of the Temple was decorated with a golden vine. Of course, Jesus made frequent use of the vineyard as a picture of God's Kingdom.

As he so often does, Jesus appropriates that Old Testament imagery and applies it to himself. If Israel was the vine in God's vineyard, it was only a picture of someone else: himself. There is only one vine in God's vineyard, and it is Jesus, "the true vine."

Jesus says he is not just any vine, but the true vine. Israel is pictured as God's vine in the Old Testament because it represented him to world, but it went its own way, becoming unfruitful, and so it was judged. Jesus is the *true* vine, not a mere representative and anything but unfruitful. He is the very image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

What is the relationship between the vine and the vineyard? Simple: no vine, no vineyard. The vine is the foundation, the life stock, of vineyard. The movie, "A Walk in the Clouds," tells the story of a family and their Northern California vineyard. At the end of the story, the vineyard is destroyed by fire. The family survives, but they are hopeless and despairing, until a single, living root is found – the vine. With that one root there is hope, and the vineyard can be replanted, because the vine is *life*.

So when Jesus says he is the true vine, he is not simply saying he has taken Israel's place – which would be a pretty amazing statement in itself, but he is saying something even more dramatic. He is...life. To be connected to the true vine is to be connected to life itself. That's why Paul says in Col. 3:4, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

And Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

This is a living, organic relationship, a truly vital union between disciple & master, living in him. Not merely following Christ, but deeper, being in Christ. And Jesus promises this: if you are in Christ, you will be pruned.

He's the vine, the Father is the vinedresser, or gardener or farmer. What does a farmer do? Nurtures growth, cares for the vine, ensures fruit by getting rid of dead wood and trimming the living wood. There are two branches in v2, those that bear fruit, and those that don't. Branches that don't bear fruit, the Father "takes away." Greek, *airo*, implies cutting off *permanently*. We'll see more on that in just a minute. Those that do bear fruit, the Father "prunes." That's a related word, *kathairo*. It doesn't imply a permanent cutting off, but a trimming or pruning.

I used to grow roses, and I can tell you, they need lots of care. When a cane would die and dry up, it was no longer getting any juice from root, I'd cut it off as close to the ground as I could. Live canes didn't need cutting off, just a little pruning. I'd pull off the old blooms and trim away any wood that would inhibit new blooms. Sometimes snipping away at a spectacular hybrid tea seemed the unkindest cut of all, but it was essential for healthy roses.

The difference between the two is this: dead wood is taken away once for all, but the live wood is pruned continually, snipping a little bit here and there, to make the living cane more fruitful. What's another word for pruned? Disciplined! Something every parent understands.

When our children were little kids, we looked forward to the day we didn't have to discipline them so much. Actually, just my son, Jonathan. No child could possibly have had his tail whipped as often as he did. Now that they're grown there are no more spankings, but we wish we were back to dealing with simple matters like eating their vegetables before dessert.

Discipline is constant with children, isn't it? Why is that? Because they are sinners. Discipline is constant with us too, isn't it? Why? Same reason. Our heavenly Father is continually pruning us, Hebrews 12:6-11, "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be

joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

What gets pruned in our lives? Anything that inhibits fruit. Sin, hindrances, sometimes God just needs to direct our growth in a certain direction. Roses often need pruning simply to keep them from growing in on themselves, and the same is true for us.

When I was growing roses, I had a really good pair of pruning shears. What tool does God use to do his pruning, v3? His word. At salvation, he spoke his word to our souls: "forgiven," "purified," "paid in full by the death of my Son," and in an instant, you were made clean. His word continues its ministry in our lives, because it is "profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16)

His word reveals things that mere human wisdom could never discern. Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

So one of the things that characterizes the one who is in Christ is that he is continually pruned. Another is that the one who is in Christ, abides in Christ, v4-6. Living branches are attached to the vine in a way that gives life. They have taken root in him, they are planted in him, and once connected, they then abide.

What does he mean, "abide in me?" "Abide," Greek *meno*, means to stay in, to endure. Jesus is saying, in effect, "be in me." And every Christian is in him. But there's more to abiding here. Jesus is also saying "live like you are in me." It's not just about enduring, but about an intimate relationship.

The same word is used in John 14:10 to speak of the relationship between the Father and the Son, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father *abiding* in Me does His works."

The same word is used in John 6:56 to talk about the relationship between Son and disciples, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood *abides* in Me, and I in him." We said when we looked at that passage in February that it is a relationship so intimate that the best picture is that of ingestion.

He's talking about an intimate connection. No branch has life in itself, it depends on the vine for life. In the truest sense the branch is in the vine, connected to it at its root, and the life of the vine is in the branch. Scriptures often make the point that Christ is in us. Here, the emphasis is on us in Christ. Both are true, both are necessary. This is a mutual abiding. He is in us by choice, we are in him by necessity.

In a garden, it's not a secret which branches are living and which are dead. The living ones are the ones giving fruit. In the same way, life in Christ is proved by fruit, v4, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me."

Fruitfulness is a natural, inevitable part of a living connection to the vine, it is a by-product of abiding. If you abide in Christ, you will bear fruit, right? Yes, and that's underscored with a very important truth in v5, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Without abiding we produce nothing, while those who abide will bear not just fruit, but much fruit. Nothing of eternal value is produced apart from Christ. Human strength can do stuff, but stuff isn't

fruit. Stuff out of human strength glorifies man, not God. Stuff out of human strength produces at best temporary earthly value, nothing eternal. Stuff out of human strength is ultimately meaningless.

And that brings us to v6, which is a tough verse, "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned."

There's a correlation between v6 and v2. Every branch that abides bears fruit, right? That means the branches in v2 that don't bear fruit, don't abide, right? And what happens to them? They are taken away – remember, a permanent cutting off. And v6 says any branch that doesn't abide is what? Thrown away, dries up, and is burned. The same branches are in view in v2 and v6.

What do we make of the branches that are broken off? If branches represent believers in relation to Jesus, is he saying we can lose our salvation? Some interpret these verses as saying exactly that. That once connected to Jesus, we can lose the connection through sin or unbelief.

The only problem is, that doesn't square with the many Scriptures that teach we can't lose our salvation, including this very same gospel, John 10:27-28, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." Once saved, always saved.

Nor is Jesus just talking about sinning believers being disciplined. The image is of being thrown into fire, we all know what that means. This is final and ultimate destruction. Besides, the discipline of sinning believers is what pruning is all about, not a permanent cutting off.

I think the best way to understand these branches is to see that they have no real connection to the vine. These are folks who identify in some way with Christ, or the church, but they are like the crowds that followed Jesus until they realized he wouldn't do their bidding. They are dead, fruitless branches that appear to be connected to the root, but the connection is only a superficial, external association, there is no true union.

That should be something that gives every one of you pause. Could that describe you? Is it possible that you have spent your life sitting in a church Sunday mornings without a real connection to the vine? How can you know? What assurance of salvation do you have?

Not walking an aisle, not praying a prayer, not making a public decision for Christ. Nor is there assurance in being baptized, attending a confirmation class, or catechism. The only assurance Jesus gives for our salvation is...fruit.

To say you can be saved and never bear fruit is to make Jesus' words meaningless. As Jesus said the test of your love for him is obedience, John 14:15, 21, so the test of life in him is fruit. Those who bear no fruit don't abide, and so are headed to destruction, judgment. Does that mean that the one who loves Jesus will never, ever disobey God? Of course not. Otherwise, what need is there for pruning? But he's not saying obedience is the standard by which we are judged. He doesn't say "Go forth and bear fruit," he says, "Abide in me and you will bear fruit."

Fruit isn't the standard, abiding in him is, being in Christ is. That's what produces the fruit that is the sign of connection to the vine. What fruit is he talking about? It all depends on the vine. A grape vine produces grapes, not oranges. A vine gives fruit in keeping with its nature.

So the fruit produced by connection to Jesus, the true vine, is in keeping with his character. That fruit is not just good works, but changed hearts, the fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22-23, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Not just in our own lives but also in others as we go into world and make disciples and do the work that results in others being grafted into the vine.

Because Jesus is the true vine, if you are in Christ, you are connected to him in a way that gives life, and you abide in him in a way that bears fruit. And when you don't live like it, he prunes you for your own good. And from that connection and abiding and fruit, Jesus says 4 things will flow thru your life. Ready for them? Here they are:

First, your prayers will be effective, v7, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This mutual abiding, you in Christ and him and his words in you, results in effective prayer. Not effective in the sense of manipulating God, but in the sense of praying in a way that conforms to God's will, so that your prayers are always answered, because you are always praying for what he wants.

Second, God will be glorified, v8, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." The fruit that comes from abiding in Christ brings glory to God because it comes from his strength, from the living connection to his son, who always glorifies his father.

Third, you will abide in Jesus' love, v9-10, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love." How do we abide in Jesus' love? He tells us in v10, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Love and obedience are joined at the hip. Obedience is proof of love, love is the motivation for obedience. John 14:15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

The life of obedience is a life that knows, experiences, and abides in the love of Christ. What a different view of obedience than the world has. Instead of a list of do's and don'ts, a peaceful certainty of Jesus' love.

Fourth, you will know fullness of joy, v11, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." In other words, abiding in Christ is what makes Christian life *joy*. Abiding in Christ takes obedience from gray, joyless drudgery, a straight-jacket of rules and regulations that prevents you from reading the funny papers on Sunday, to joy. And not just any joy, but Jesus' joy, full and complete.

In closing, let me make a couple of personal observations. It is a fair question: if there is no obedience in your life, if there is no joy in your life, are you connected? Being Jesus' disciple is more than commitment to sound doctrine. Its more than a way of life that is separated from the world. Both are important parts of following Jesus, but he says it is the intimate connection between disciple and master that is the key, a spiritual experience that transforms the dead to life again.

Apart from Christ, you can do nothing. And that means there is absolutely no room in your heart for legalism, for self-righteousness, or for being a half-hearted follower. The church must be in the business of making disciples, not inspiration junkies. We are trying to produce an emotional response to the music, or a video, or even a sermon. We are trying to produce life-long abiding, following, obeying relationships with Jesus Christ.

And one of the implications of that truth is that if you are connected to the vine, you will hang out with the grapes. Be involved in other's lives, praying for them, sharing their struggles, their joys, encouraging them in the word, stimulating one another to love and good deeds. This is not just about sitting in church 75 minutes per week. You need to be plugged into a Sunday school class, to Growth Group, where you can minister, and be ministered to.

This concludes our series in Jesus' 7 "I am" statements. What have we seen? Who does Jesus say he is, really? Who is the historical Jesus, the real deal, living breathing God-Man? He says:

"I am the bread of life" 6:35, the bread that gives life, that satisfies spiritual hunger. He is the spiritual nourishment that we need for life. We must come to him, partake of him, and be fed by him, alone.

"I am the light of the world; 8:12, "he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." He is the light of the world, and his light is the light of life. John 1:4, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Jesus is the bread that gives eternal life, and the light that gives life.

"I am the door of the sheep" 10:7. The one and only way into the sheepfold, a picture of heaven. And the result of entering thru Jesus is in v10, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." To enter thru the door of the sheep is to enter into abundant life.

"I am the good shepherd" 10:11, and what does the good shepherd do? He lays down his life for the sheep. Do you begin to see where all 7 of Jesus' self-descriptions point? All revolve around one thing...*life*.

"I am the resurrection and the life," 11:25, "he who believes in me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life," 14:6. He is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God. He is the Truth, the incarnate Word that reveals God, 1:14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." And he is the Life: the bread of life, the light of life, the door by which his sheep enter into life abundant, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the Resurrection and the Life, and he is the true vine, 15:1, the source of all life.

He is the only thing we need for salvation, and he is everything we need for salvation, the exclusive, exhaustive way to God. Outside him, no way to God exists. Without him, there is no life.

The most important question for you this morning is not, "Do you live in the vineyard?" Do you go to church, do you believe the right things about Jesus. The question is, "Are you attached to Jesus, the true vine?" Do you abide in him? Is God at work in you, pruning you, shaping you, producing fruit in your life?

If the honest answer to that question is no, then I urge you as Paul did the Corinthians, on behalf of Christ who died for your sins, be reconciled to God. Trust him alone for salvation, for he alone is life.

Or maybe the answer to that question is yes, you are attached to Jesus, but you've taken your eyes off him. You abide in him, but don't live like it. Confess that sin, and redirect your eyes to Jesus the true vine, drawing strength only from him, for he alone is life.

Father, we confess that we frequently take our eyes off your Son. We pray you would strengthen us and sustain us by him and in him. Give us a fresh sense of his abundant life, of his abundant strength. May we turn our eyes from the end of our branch to the true vine that sustains us. May you prune us so we bear more fruit to your glory. May we take our comfort in abiding in Christ's love as we live lives of obedience. And may we know the fullness of joy that abiding in Christ brings. Amen.