

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

John 14:6 // “I AM” #7<sup>1</sup>

## Announcement

Well, it’s been a great week here at TSC: This was the week we hosted around 200 of our church planters and their families from all over North America and Asia and the Caribbean to encourage and refresh them and, man, what a reminder it’s been for me for us to keep pressing toward that ‘planting 1000 churches in our generation’ goal. Currently we are at about 550, with about 80 of those being domestic and other 470 international. Well, our NA church planting team has informed me they don’t want to include international churches in that 1000 goal anymore. They want to do that themselves. We’ll count that in another goal.

Summit, did you know that this Easter, our Summit Collaborative churches had a combined attendance of over 50,000? And over the last 12 months our Collab churches have baptized more than 2000.

And this might be my favorite: the majority of our plants have now started planting themselves. In fact, we have 20-25 grand baby churches that have launched—or are in the pipeline to launch. I’ve

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<sup>1</sup> Works consulted: Jay Pathak, “[I am the Good Shepherd](#)”, January 22, 2023, Bridgetown Church; Tim Keller, “[Knowing the Father](#)”, October 27, 1991, Redeemer Presbyterian; Dr. David Jeremiah, “[I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life](#)”, March 17, 2024, Shadow Mountain Community Church;

made jokes about getting old—or some of you have made jokes about me getting old, but if old means I get to see grand baby churches flourish, then I’ll be a happy great-grandparent and I’ll take the joy of age any day!

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

## Introduction

**If you have your Bibles, open them one final time to the Gospel of John. *John 14*.** I had a friend who was a pretty good track athlete in high school; he finished in the top 3 of every event he ever ran--except for one where he came in dead LAST.

Physically, he said, he was ready—the best athlete of the bunch. And mentally, he was ready, too. It was an away meet, and he said the whole bus ride there he had his headphones on--which in those days was a SONY Walkman with a mixtape your girlfriend had made for you the night before. He kept those headphones on the whole ride up; kept them on when they got off the bus; kept them on through the entire warm up. He said, “I remember at one point my coach was up talking to all of us, and him getting really animated about something and pointing and gesticulating with his arms, but I figured it wasn’t that important--I mean, it’s cross country, you basically just run a 5K, right? What’s there to talk about?”

Hakeem Bradley, “[I am the Way, the Truth and the Life](#)”, February 12, 2023, Bridgetown Church; Craig Groeschel, “[Am I Too Bad for God?](#)”, 2023, Life Church; Ray Vander Laan, *Echoes of His Presence*; Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*; Grant R. Osborne, *John: Verse by Verse*; and others as noted throughout.

“Well, the race started,” he said, “and I shot ahead. It was shaping up to be my best race yet; by the halfway mark,” he said, “I was a couple hundred meters ahead of the entire field.” At that point, the course started its last leg down this little trail through a section of woods. Feeling good, with only one kilometer to go and now out of sight from the 2nd place runner, he suddenly came to a fork in the trail. One direction, he said, had a blue arrow; the other had a yellow arrow, and he had no idea which way to go. And then he realized what his coach must have been gesticulating about so wildly about back there.

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

**There's** nothing worse than feeling lost except, perhaps, the sneaking feeling that you're on the wrong path. We're on our last week of our study through the 7 I AM statements that Jesus made in the Gospel of John: 7 times Jesus takes for himself the loftiest name of God in the

Old Testament--*I AM* (*Yahweh* in Hebrew, *Jehovah* in Latin)--and then connects that glorious name to one of our greatest points of brokenness and need. It's the ultimate place where transcendence meets immanence: God's incredible majesty meets us at our most human places. Today, we come to our last one--one that connects to all of us: **Jn 14:6, “I AM the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me.”**

*Let me set the context before we dive into what Jesus is saying here: It was the night before Jesus died, and Jesus has gathered his disciples together with him in the Upper Room one last time to eat and drink with them and share instructions with them about what is to come.* He speaks urgently and passionately about what's going to happen “*when he goes away.*” And the more he talks this way, the more confused and frightened the disciples become. They're like, “Going away? What are you talking about?” And they're not articulating it yet, but they're wondering, “Have we made a mistake? Is Jesus not going to deliver us after all? Has he been the wrong one to follow?”

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

**5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”** (Thomas assumes Jesus is referring to some fortress of solitude he is building in the woods from which he

can launch his kingdom in the future, so he's looking for actual, physical instructions on how to get to this place.)

6 Jesus said to him, (Thomas), "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me..." What Thomas wants is a map. A set of directions or instructions that ensures he'll be taken care of. What Jesus offers him instead is *relationship*.

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

What Philip wants is some kind of intellectual certainty: Let us see ultimate reality; let us get our minds fully around theological mysteries; "let us see the Father," Philip says, and that will be enough for us. Then we'll know that everything's gonna be okay. Then we'll feel confident. "

Jesus responds, again, not by giving him that vision, but, again, with *relationship*: "Whoever has seen me, Philip, has seen the Father."

The longer you go in the Christian life, the more you realize that from start to finish, this whole thing is about a relationship with Jesus. Christianity is not primarily a set of instructions about a better way to live, nor is it even a comprehensive set of answers to all of life's mysteries; it is a relationship with a person who has all those things in himself. Knowing him is the way to those things.

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

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

- First, we often (wrongly) assume that all marriages back then were arranged--as in, the parents just decided who you were going to marry and that was that. But that really wasn't the case.
- Here's how it usually went down: A boy and girl notice each other; she caught his eye; he likes how she smashed grapes or whatever; and he feels like she is sending groovy vibes back his way. They exchange a few flirty glances and have some good conversations, so he talks to his dad, and if his dad approves, his dad approaches the girl's dad and if he also agrees it's a good pairing, then the girl's dad throws a big party inviting the groom's family and a bunch of friends. At this party, the groom-to-be offers the bride-to-be a cup of wine. At this point, she has a legitimate choice. If she takes the cup of wine and drinks it, that means 'yes,' and the party really begins. But if she declines, the party gets awkward, the band starts to play Taylor Swift breakup songs--*shake it off, shake it off; we are never, ever, ever getting back together, I knew you were trouble when you walked in*, and etc--and everybody moseys home.
- Now, here's the important part: If she said yes, then after the party was over, the young man returned to his family home (called an "insulah") and began construction on a new wing, or a new set of *rooms*, to the family house that he and his future bride will live in. (In those days, you see, families lived on these big compounds, family property was their most valuable asset, handed down from generation to generation, and each new generation would just add on a new room onto the family insulah so they all lived in the complex together. (Some of you are thinking, "That sounds awesome!" Others of you are thinking,

“That sounds like a nightmare!” I’m sure they had both emotions back then, too.)

- Well, when the groom-to-be was finished with construction of his “rooms,” he would return to pick up his bride. But here was the thing: only the groom’s *father* could determine when the rooms were sufficiently completed. (I mean, young men back then were not that much different than they are today, and if it were up to them, they’d probably just slap a few boards together, put a LeBron poster up on the wall, stack a couple of of box crates up for tables and call that home, they’re just so excited to consummate the marriage.)
- So, the father-of-the-groom determined when the room was ready--since ultimately this was his house, too--and he and he alone gave permission for the young man to go back and get his bride. (BTW, *How many men here ever served as father of the groom?* Back then, the father-of-the-groom was the single most important person in the wedding ceremony, outside of the bride and groom themselves. Today, in American weddings, he literally does nothing. He pays for the rehearsal dinner, but after that he basically just shows up to the ceremony like any other guest, gets a seat on the 2nd row, smiles and waves. But in those days, he controlled everything.)
- So every day, this young man worked on the new rooms, and every night, the bride would wait. She didn’t know when he was coming. He couldn’t post pics of the project on FaceBook. And so, as a symbol of her anticipation, she kept a candle lit in her windowsill, hoping that this might be the night he returned for her. She didn’t know when he’d come; in fact, he didn’t even know when he’d come; again, **only the father-of-the-groom** determined that.
- (BTW, it might have dawned on you as I explained this, that this is the same imagery behind some of Jesus’ other teachings, too. For example, when Jesus said, “No one knows the day of my return,

not even me. Only my Father in heaven knows,” he is invoking the imagery of a wedding, not giving a technical explanation of the nuances of Trinitarian omniscience.

- Or, when Jesus tells the story about the 10 virgins, some of whom kept their candles lit so they were ready when the groom returned, and some who didn’t--so that when their groom comes back, there’s no candle in their window because she’s out partying with her friends, and he gets his feelings hurt and returns home without her, that’s the imagery he’s using.<sup>2</sup>)

The point is when Thomas and Philip want to know the “how” and “what” of the Christian life, Jesus points to a relationship. I AM the way, the truth and the life.

So, here’s our outline for today:

1. **The Christian life, from start to finish, is a relationship with Jesus**
2. **Knowing him is the way, the truth and the life**
3. **Claiming he is the only way is loving, not cruel**

**1. The Christian life, from start to finish, is a relationship with Jesus.** The Christian life is not primarily advice about a better way to live, or about gaining wisdom and understanding on all of life’s mysteries, it’s about a relationship with a person.

And please note, in saying that I’m NOT downplaying the importance of Christian practices or theology. Following Jesus leads to a set of lifestyle practices, or a “way,” and knowing him involves learning good theology--that’s “truth.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Vander Laan

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

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

**Look, these people have the right theology!** They know to call Jesus Lord. And they're earnest about it, too. Whenever you repeat something in Greek (like 'Lord, Lord,') that's a literary way of saying you're passionate about it. These people know when to raise their hands in church and shout "Amen!" **And they have experience in ministry:** they testified in Jesus' name; did miracles in Jesus' name; they even cast out demons in Jesus' name. I mean, if you get picked in our church to be on the demon-exorcism squad, that means we consider you Varsity! IOW, these are experienced Christians! (Vs 23) "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" **Oh, Summit: this verse sends a tremor of terror down my spine.** Why does Jesus turn these earnest church-

goers away from heaven? In all their Christian activity, and behavior, he never knew them. **They knew all about him. But they never really trusted in him;** they never had a personal relationship with him.

**BTW, this passage doesn't have to scare you.** It doesn't mean that you have to get yourself to some super spiritual state before you can be sure you'll go to heaven. **In fact, it means the opposite:** salvation doesn't come from getting yourself into some spiritual state, it comes from **leaning on Jesus, trusting in him personally** as your Savior, your help, your guide, your life. **Even a child can do that! Charles Spurgeon, after preaching on this passage, said, "Oh, but Jesus could never say to me, 'I never knew you,' for he has known me for years as the beggar at his door."**<sup>3</sup> I'd say to him, "Never knew me, Lord? But I depended on you as my forgiveness. I leaned on you when I felt weak. I looked to you when I felt lost. I trusted you to fix what was broken in me." No, he could never say to me, "I never knew you," for he would recognize me as one who depended on him for everything. So, let me just ask those of you sitting in church this weekend: Do you actually KNOW Jesus? I know you got your theology and Christian practices down, but do you have a relationship with him?

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

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

You see, there are different kinds of knowledge of someone. When I walk into a room crowded with people, I can immediately recognize my wife. It wouldn't matter if I didn't know what she was wearing that day or how she'd styled her hair; I could still pick her out immediately. If for some reason she'd dyed her hair, or even if it were all shaved off, I could still pick her out immediately. I could do it if all I could see was the shadow of her silhouette walking across the room. In fact, if someone just walked up to me and put their arm around me and stood by me, and I couldn't see them, I'm pretty sure I would know if it was her or not. After two and a half decades of closeness to her, I know the feel of her touch; I know what it's like to be in her presence. I know the rhythm and sound of her breath. In group conversations, I know how she'll respond before she does. I know what makes her laugh--I know when she's laughing just to humor you and when she really thinks something is funny. I *know* her. But how do I describe THOSE things to you? If I'm trying to tell you how to pick her out of a crowded room, I'll have to resort to physical characteristics, because that's all you can see, but those aren't the most important ways I know her.<sup>4</sup>

The question is, which better describes your knowledge of Jesus? Do you know him more in the 'height,' 'what he's wearing,' and 'what color his hair is' sense? Or is it in the personal knowledge sense? You may know him theologically, but do you know him personally--what it's like to cling to him in pain and disappointment and confusion; what it's like to trust him when you don't know how to see your way out of a problem; do you know what's it like to feel him moving in the depths of your soul--comforting, assuring, convicting, guiding you?

This kind of knowledge--Jesus said in John 17--this kind of knowledge, is the essence of eternal life, and this kind of personal, intimate knowledge is precisely what many miss in the Christian life. It's why their spiritual life is so dry, and cold, and dead. I know a lot of seminary students and professional Christians who have a great deal of knowledge about God but very little knowledge of him. I know because I was one for a while. And this shows up in how little they pray in private—they can get a perfect score on a theology test, but ask them about their prayer life, and they'll get quiet—it shows up in how passionless their heart for worship is, or how anxious they are about the future, and how dependent they are on the validation of others or how little of the fruits of the Spirit you see in their lives, even with all their theological knowledge. They may be Ph.D.'s in their theology but they are still infants in the fruits of the Spirit.

You say, "Pastor, how do I develop this intimacy with Jesus?" Well, it doesn't happen all at once where you get flooded with a wave of warm fuzzies. That's the artificial way. It takes time, and patience, and consistent choices to trust him and be like him in big and small things. And then you start to look back at your life and see his hand of faithfulness. You realize where and how he's guided you. You start to realize what his warnings and his convictions were like and how you trusted him.

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

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Lesslie Newbigin

## 2. Knowing him is the way, the truth and the life

**WAY** speaks to “direction.”

- What Thomas asks is a question we all ask at some point: ***How can I live my life so that it ends up at the right place? So that I'll be happy? Safe? At peace?***
- The subtext of all this is that we think that safety and happiness and success are found in a place over there you might get to one day--the place of career achievement. A marital status. A certain level of financial security. But it's not there. Jesus says, “Knowing me is the way.”
- ***(I have a terrible sense of direction.*** Veronica says that whatever part of the brain intuitively remembers the you just came from never developed in me. I get turned around in very familiar places. She says there's a part of my brain that's never formed; I SAY it's because we all have a limited amount of brain circuits to deploy and I just choose not to use any of mine on mundane things like direction... *I devote them all to loftier things.* But the bottom line is that I live conscious of getting turned around and getting lost. And this goes back to when I was a kid.) One of my earliest childhood memories is of the first time my dad took me overnight camping in the woods. We slept in a tent, and I remember feeling terrified that I'd wake up and he'd be gone, and I wouldn't know what to do. It was dark and scary in those woods and I wouldn't have any idea how to get back to the road. Dad says he remembers waking up in the middle of the night and my little 5 year old hand was on him; so he moved it off. He woke up a few minutes later and my hand was back. So he moved it off again. And we repeated this little charade again and again, until he figured out that my hand was there intentionally; because he

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

- **And, of course, Jesus is not only talking about the way to happiness in life, he's also talking about the way to heaven itself.** He says in vs 6: “I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through me.”
- There's no way to get to the Father, to heaven, other than him. I know this is quite an unpopular thing to say today, but do you see anything else this can mean? Be intellectually honest. Is there any ambiguity? He's not “a” way but “THE” way. ***You can't get to the Father any other way except through him.*** He's the one road into heaven.
- **God is not like a mountain** where you can take one of many roads to get to the top. BTW, even on a mountain not all roads lead to the top; some will lead you right over a cliff. Salvation is the way to his house, and it's something only he can provide.
  - **The whole point of the Bible** is that we couldn't save ourselves by being good enough; God had to provide salvation for us, and he did that by coming in the person of Jesus to live the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died, in our place. That's the only way of salvation because God is the only one who can provide salvation.
- **I remember hearing about a pioneer missionary in Africa** who years ago wanted to take the gospel into a remote, completely unreached tribe deep in the jungle. But there were no known roads into this part of the jungle. So he asked the chief of the village he lived in if there was a guide who could take him, and the

chief said there was only one man who could do it. The chief summoned a large man with an ax. The man was covered with all kinds of scars on his face and arms. The next day they set off together through the bush. At first, they walked along several trails, but as they progressed, the way became increasingly rough and the path all but disappeared. At this point, they hacked their way through thick bush and climbed down over rocky cliffs. Occasionally the missionary would see a mark of some kind blazed on a tree or something, but absolutely no path. Eventually the missionary said to the man, “Are you sure this is the way?” The man smiled and said, “Do you see this ax in my hand? And do you see these scars on my body? I am from this tribe, and with this ax, years ago, I blazed the trail out of my village. No one has ever been to this tribe, and no one else has ever come out of it. You ask me if I know the way. Before I came, there was no way. I am the way.”<sup>5</sup>

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

“I AM **the TRUTH.**”

Knowing Jesus is the way to know truth. Again, Philip wanted to understand life’s mysteries. He wanted to see the Father. Jesus said, “But if you know me, Philip, then you know truth even when you don’t understand everything.”

Listen, knowing Jesus is a whole new way of seeing the world. When you know him, everything in the world starts to look different. Many

of us live in fear; with this sense that we are all alone in the universe. And everywhere you look you see evidence for that. But when you start to believe in Jesus, you start to see his presence everywhere. He’s a new lens for looking at the world. If you’ve seen him, you’ve seen the Father—and the Father’s world.

And Jesus is who we hold onto when we encounter mysteries that we just can’t understand yet. I’ve told you before: I am a full-time pastor with a PhD in theology and I still have unanswered questions; questions about eternity and divine judgment and the role of suffering in the world.

John the Baptist had his own questions about Jesus. John, the prophet who had heralded Jesus’ coming, had been put in prison and was awaiting execution, and he wondered (as one would), “Jesus, if you really are the Messiah, why aren’t you coming to rescue me?” So he sends a messenger to Jesus, saying, “Are you really the one?” *Y’all*, this is John the Baptist--the one who when he was baptizing Jesus saw heaven opened and the Holy Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him and who heard the voice of the Father say, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” **THIS** John is now saying, “Jesus, are you really the one?”

You say, “Why would he doubt after all that?” It’s because his unanswered questions were so severe, his troubling doubts so acute, that he wondered ‘*HOW COULD all this be real?*’ How could Jesus REALLY be in charge and this still be happening? *I’ve been there, haven’t you?* And Jesus sent back a message saying, “Yes, John. Think

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<sup>5</sup> John Phillip, 19th century missionary to South Africa, as related by David Jeremiah

about what you've heard from me and seen me do. You can trust me." What John did is a model for us: John went personally to Jesus with his doubts and unanswered questions, and ultimately he put his faith not in a set of answers but in a Person he knew he could trust.

I know you have your own unanswered questions: you can't understand why God did or didn't do something, or if he's a loving God how the world is in the state it's in, or maybe it's some apparent Bible contradiction that's troubling you, **and you find yourself saying, "Jesus, are you really the one?"** Take a cue from John the Baptist and take those questions to Jesus. Look deeply into his Person, who he is, and his works, and I think you'll find that you can trust him.

You see, contrary to some of our critics: **Faith is not a blind leap into the dark; it's a leap into the arms of a person we can trust.** And that's totally different. Yes, it's a leap! But it's not a leap in the dark. It's a leap into the arms of Jesus.

And, btw, that means for those of you still investigating Jesus... Listen, I've walked with lots of people down this path, and walked down it myself. There's only so much assurance about Jesus you can get from the outside looking in; there's a much richer, personal assurance that only comes from walking with him. Sometimes as you are investigating his claims, you get to a place where you say, "Well, I'm not 100% sure about this, but I'm more convinced he is who he says is than that is all a hoax, and you have to take a leap into his arms, with all your questions and fears. And then you more fully experience that he is real and he is trustworthy. He is the truth.

**"I AM the LIFE"**

The primary theme of John's Gospel is that Jesus brings life to dead things. John ties Jesus to life 40 different times in this Gospel. Jesus brings light to dead eyes; he puts breath in dead lungs.

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

A few weeks ago I was sitting backstage in this green room area of a Christian talk show I was about to do an interview for, and there was another guest back there, and we had about 30 minutes before the show started, so I asked him what his name and story were. His name was Ronald Olivier and he'd just written a book called *27 Summers*. I said, "Well, tell me about those summers." He said, "That's how many summers I spent in a maximum security prison in Louisiana." When he was 16 years old, he'd got caught up in dealing crack cocaine and one day got into an altercation with some guys whom he thought were trying to steal his jacket, and in an attempt to get away from them he'd jumped onto a bus, and one of them grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him off. Ronald panicked and pulled a gun out of his pocket, shot the guy twice, and killed him. The guy was unarmed, and because drugs were involved, it was considered 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder.

In Louisiana, 1st degree murder was punishable by the death penalty. So Ronald was convicted, at 16 years old, and put into a holding cell to await his sentencing. He said, "I felt sure the judge would come back with the sentence of death. He was gonna make an example out of me." He told me, "There I sat; pronounced guilty, alone in that holding cell. I remember the sound of the door locking and the footsteps of the guard walking away. I was all alone, and so afraid. I kept expecting my mom to somehow show up--she'd always been the

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

20 years later, the US Supreme Court, in the case *Miller vs Alabama*, argued famously by Bryan Stevenson, and as told in the book *Just Mercy* (some of you have read the book, or seen the movie with Michael B. Jordan), found it unconstitutional to give a juvenile a life

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

Ronald said, "That was the second time I'd been released from bondage, and this second release, where I was released from prison, was not as important to me as the first one. The first release happened 27 years prior when I was on my knees alone in a jail cell with Jesus..." There I was released from my sins and set free to live unto God. This second release came because of my good deeds, but the first release, the real one, was granted because of the good deeds

of my Savior, who lived and died in my place. His gift of life to me was much more important than the court's.<sup>6</sup>

Listen, I'll be honest. When this guy Ronald first told me that he had been released from prison after being convicted of murder, I felt myself tense up. I knew I shouldn't feel that way, but I mean, I'm sitting with a murderer. I thought, "Is this ok? Is this safe?" But as he told me his story, he's got a wife, and kids, and a ministry now, that sense of fear was replaced by one of wonder, and soon all I could think about was that I was sitting in the presence of someone covered head to toe by the Great I AM, the one speaking here in John 14:6, the one who takes dead things and restores them to life.

And, good news, he can do that for you, too. You see, maybe you feel like your life is hopelessly irredeemable. I can assure you it's not. Like our friend Joby Martin says: If the tomb is empty, anything is possible.

But that leads me to the last point

### III. Claiming he is the only way is loving, not cruel

As I said, there's perhaps nothing more offensive in our generation right now. Oprah Winfrey said once on her TV program, **"One of the biggest mistakes people make is to believe that there's only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you may call God."** Another one of our nation's most popular religious figures, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach says, **"I am absolutely against any religion that says that one faith is superior to another. I don't see**

**how that is any different than spiritual racism. It's a way of saying that we are closer to God than you, and that's what leads to hatred."**

But what I want you to see is that this is exactly what Jesus said, and contrary to Oprah and Rabbi Boteach, it's not cruel, it's loving.

First, and maybe this is most important--we have to understand that Jesus makes this claim in the context of describing a love relationship. We understand exclusivity in a love relationship, don't we? It's not loving for the groom to let the bride go with any other guy who shows up. The groom wants the bride for himself; they are in love with each other. It's because I love my wife that I say, "I'm the only man for you and you are the only woman for me."

Jesus feels that way about us. He wants our affection on him as our Savior. The one in heaven I'm going to love most is the one who saved me. Jesus says, "I AM your God and your Father and your Savior; your one divine husband; I want your affection s."

Through the prophet Isaiah, God had said (I love these verses, **"I am the LORD (YAHWEH), that is my name** (in your Bible, whenever you see LORD all caps, it means it's the name YAHWEH), **and my glory I will not give to another... "I am YAHWEH, and beside me there is no Savior."**<sup>7</sup> The uniform testimony of the Old Testament is that only God can save. The claim of Jesus in the New Testament is, "YAHWEH (I AM) that Savior." In fact, do you know what the name "Jesus" literally means? Jesus in Hebrew is "Ye-Shua." Ye-- Yahweh; Shua--

<sup>6</sup> Those last words are mine, in the spirit of what he was saying that day.

<sup>7</sup> Isa 42:8; 43:10–11.

saves. His very name means “YAHWEH the Savior.” So to those who are hungry, in John, Jesus said, ‘YAHWEH the bread of life.’ To those in darkness, he said, “YAHWEH the light of the world.’ To those in need of shelter or refuge, he says, “YAHWEH the door.’ To those feeling the sting of death, he says, “YAHWEH the resurrection and the life.’ To those in need of spiritual vitality or strength, he says, “YAHWEH the true vine.’ And now, to all those who want to know God and the way of eternal life itself, he says, “YAHWEH *the way, the truth and the life.*” Whatever you need, whatever you lack, wherever you are incomplete, or broken, or addicted, whatever you are missing in yourself or didn’t get from a parent or a spouse or a boyfriend, YAHWEH the way, the only way, the truth and the life.”

And if this is true, it’s not cruel or hateful or bigoted to testify to that. I serve a Savior who died to redeem people and that includes you and I want to tell you about him. We don’t control the way of salvation, we just testify to it. Listen, I’m not saying my way is better than yours, of course not; I couldn’t save myself; I’m not recommending something about ME to YOU. I’m saying that Jesus is the only one who could save us both.

There is one testimony we must take to our graves, Summit Church. “I AM the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.” *There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel’s veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stain... And when this poor lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave, then in a nobler, sweeter song, I’ll sing thy power to save, I’ll sing thy power to save...*

Do you know him? And are you telling people about him?