

A Faith Worthy of our Longings

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6 ESV)

Is this all there is? In 1969, Peggy Lee walked into a studio and described a series of events in her life such as experiencing a house fire, or going to the circus, or falling in love. They all seemed so grand at first, but then each event left something missing, something elusive that didn’t fulfill the promise of anything meaningful and enduring. So each verse leads to the same chorus:

*Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that’s all there is my friends,
Then let’s keep dancing.
Let’s break out the booze and have a ball,
If that’s all—
There is.*

Look around. What once seemed like our “summer of discontent” seems to have turned into decades. 1969 was a half century ago. The dawn of a new one made us all think the potential for hope was just around the corner, but instead, the average suicide rate rose 24%. And the stated reason for this rapid rise? “Hopelessness.”

We are the most advanced civilization in the history of the world. Did you know the chief mode of transportation 200 years ago was the chief mode of transportation 2000 years ago? And we went from the horse to the rocket ship in just two centuries. The average person understands the basics of chemistry and genetics better than experts who lived not that long ago. We have more information at our disposal and greater technology at our fingertips than ever before. And what is the result? *We are sick, scared, emotionally drained, in broken after broken after broken relationships, in a society that appears to be*

coming apart at the seams. We still stand in need of hope, purpose, moral guidance, the fulfillment of justice or even agreement on what in the world that is.

So what should we do about it? Peggy Lee says “dance it up and have a ball, since that’s all there is.” It was the Greek philosopher Epicurus—the father of the pleasure-seeking philosophy that goes by his name—who coined the phrase “eat, drink, and be merry! For tomorrow we die.” And the writer of Ecclesiastes sees the world through the same lens:

“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days...[because] everything to come is meaningless.” (Ecc 9:9 & 11:8 NIV).

But this is where the story takes a profound turn. Deep down, we want something more...and our soul cries out for it. Hopelessness seems to be the theme of Green Day’s song *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (2004) where Billy Joe sings “I walk alone. My shadow’s the only one that walks beside me.” But keep listening and you’ll see this line in every chorus: “sometimes, I wish someone out there will find me. Til then, I walk alone.” Hopelessness seems to be the theme of Harry Styles’ *Sign of the Times* (2017), where life is nothing more than feeling stuck and dodging bullets. “Just stop your crying,” says Harry, “it’s a sign of the times.” But keep listening, and you’ll hear the longing: “We gotta get away from here...We can meet again somewhere; somewhere far away from here.” And, of course, we see the conflicted message most clearly in a song by U2 from the *Joshua Tree* album, released in 1987. I’ve done everything, says Bono—climbed the highest mountain, run through the fields...crawled and scaled city walls. I even believe in the kingdom come, he says; when all the colors will bleed into one. He goes even further. To the one who broke the bonds and loosed the chains, the Christ who carried the cross of my shame, he cries out “you know I believe it...but I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Incredible. We all have a hole in our soul. And we look around at the universe for something to fill it. Youthfulness doesn’t last, money doesn’t heal all wounds, and every technological advancement only makes the problem worse. For some, even religion hasn’t given them the satisfaction they seek. As every day goes by, and we march closer and closer to death, our soul cries out, “is that all there is?”

What if I told you that the God I serve—the God I found in Jesus Christ—provides the answer to the deepest longings of your heart. He can fill that hole in your soul that money, relationships, and even religion can’t fill. And what he offers is no pie in the sky; it will resonate with you.

I'd like us to start with one sentence recorded in the ancient Gospel of John, and placed on the lips of Jesus of Nazareth:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” ([John 14:6](#)).

Packed into these ten words are five remarkable claims, which lie at the heart of our deepest longings.

REALITY

In a world of fading dreams, and plastic people, we long for something real—and Jesus says, “I am.” Philosophers will tell you the most basic question in existence is this: “why is there something rather than nothing?” But to even ask that question assumes we agree there is something real, crying out for an explanation.

There have been people, historically, who have tried to deny that anything real exists. These people are called solipsists. According to them, everything you experience is simply a fantastic dream...a mental projection that we falsely assume is real. I always find it interesting when solipsists get married, have children, hold jobs, write books, get paid, and use their money to accomplish (limited) things they wish to imagine. These people engage in relationships, in conversation, and act as though life held meaning of one sort or another. It seems patently absurd to live consistently with such a view. Ask any solipsist who is standing in the middle of the road when a truck is bearing down on them. Do they ponder their existence, and describe the imaginary car before them, or do they get out of the road? I wish I could say the solipsists are alone in dismissing reality. Sadly, there are others who say that something as fundamental as morality is just an illusion.

But our experience says otherwise. We see our opponents cheat in the midst of competition, and we say “that’s not fair.” We hear about cyber bullying, and we say “that’s not right.” The history of warfare makes us recognize man’s inhumanity to man. We experience real, genuine happiness, and face the cold chilling prospect of death. These are not games, pipe dreams, or imaginations. It is truly tragic anytime a person takes their own life; but the fact that the vast majority of people do not commit suicide testifies to the fact that we believe life is something; that we are experiencing something real—not to be taken lightly. People might do all sorts of kind gestures in ways that are actually advantageous to themselves (like giving a dollar to a homeless man in order to feel generous). But how do we explain the enlisted army private who jumps on a grenade, exchanging his life for theirs? How do we explain it...unless we agree that our deepest assumptions tell us that life is real? When the philosopher Descartes wished to

separate fact from fiction, he imagined the possibility that everything was a lie. Pick anything you think to be real. “Ah”, says Descartes, “there could be a demon whispering into my ear, telling me that is real.” But there was one irreducible minimum from which Descartes could not escape. “I think”, said Descartes, “therefore...I am.”

If you are still skeptical about my claim that deep down, we all long for something real, consider the thought experiment known as the “experience machine” invented by Robert Nozick. Imagine if there was a machine that, once you were hooked up, would immediately send you into a deep sleep in which you could experience anything you wish! If your highest dream is to write that great American novel, you will experience being a great American novelist. Doubt your own creativity? From inside the dream, you can consult the greatest libraries to compare everyone’s ideas of true happiness, and experience any or all of them. Now here is the catch: if you enter the experience machine, you must stay there the rest of your life. You will not ‘know’ that you are in the machine, of course. So there will be no pain or regret or sense of loss, since all your family and friends (or the one’s you wish to retain!) will be in your dream life. Would you do it? Would you enter the machine for the rest of your life?

As Nozick points out, (and as one survey reported 80% agreement), most all of us would say “no.” And why is that? Because, says Nozick, what we want is not merely to take pleasure in our experiences; we want them to be so.¹ We don’t want the sustained sensation of happiness that is manufactured—no matter how real it might *feel* from the inside. Our periods of sadness when a loved one dies are part of the shared experience of life, and brings meaning to our own. Reality matters, even more than happiness. There are religions—just as there are philosophies—that are intended to take you into dream worlds and visionary states, to help you escape reality to feel better about it all. But deep down, we all long for something real. Even in our most skeptical moments...we know it. The writer of Ecclesiastes says “A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it” (Ecc 7:18 MSG). How does Johnny Cash begin his cover of the Nine Inch Nails song “hurt” (2002)?

*I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel
I focus on the pain
The only thing that’s real*

¹ Joachim I Krueger, “Real Happiness: Real Life is the topper, happiness a garnish.” *Psychology Today* (Jan 5, 2015). <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/one-among-many/201501/real-happiness>

We don't want to live in a dream world. Even if it's painful, we want to experience reality, and we want a worldview that makes sense of that reality. And Jesus says, “I am.” Reality exists. God is no pipe dream or a wish fulfillment. The God we meet in Jesus will not deny or run from reality, but rather make sense of it.

JUSTICE AND OBJECTIVITY

In a world full of atrocities and unfairness, we long for proper rules of fairness and procedure—a standard of right by which to judge all things. In short, we long for Justice—and Jesus says, “I am the way.”

For most of our lifetime (I'd say from the 60's to the turn of the century), we were being told that universals are mundane and impersonal; literary scholars celebrated what they described as the “death of the metanarrative,” by which they meant that we no longer have to live with the antiquated notion of what is right for you is also right for me. Such a view holds back the creative spirit, they claim, and belongs to a bygone era before we came to realize how beautifully diverse our world is. Our culture's movement toward denying objectivity, denouncing universals, and raising the value of perspective and circumstance over shared values and agreed-upon rules led to more hung juries, and generations increasingly incapable of making moral distinctions. This was because, as Oxford philosopher J. L. Mackie explained in his book on *Ethics* subtitled “Inventing Right and Wrong,” since science can't prove that objective moral facts exist, they don't!—or at least, we shouldn't go around believing any do.

And yet...our experience always told us otherwise. In the late 1970's, the famous atheist Anthony Flew met Christian philosopher Thomas Warren for a debate on the existence of God.² Before the debate, Warren offered Flew three questions. The first question was simply this: “Are there universal truths, objective moral values, rights and wrongs that apply to all people, in all places, at all times?” Being a good (and consistent) atheist, Flew answered, “no.” Second question: “When the Nazi's put little children in boxcars, coated with quicklime, so they would not only die, but die slowly and agonizingly... was that wrong?” Now Anthony Flew fought in the Royal Air Force. He saw the atrocities first-hand, which led him to answer the question with integrity. “Yes”, replied Flew. This left one final question. “What law did they violate?” Think about that one for a moment. If I drive on the right side of the road—in England, I will get a fine. It would be of no use to argue that I was following American law; the law of the land in England is to drive on the left-hand side of the road. In the early 1940's, to obey the Fuhrer was the law of the land in Germany. Germans are not held accountable to American or

² The Warren-Flew Debate (Sep, 1976). See <http://www.thebible.net/video/warrenflewdebate/>

British sensibilities. So...what law did they violate? Warren gave several options. Flew chose none of them. He checked the box labeled “other” and then wrote “International Law. See Nuremburg.” Nuremburg was the scene for the Nazi war trials, where an international criminal court declared them guilty of their heinous crimes against humanity. But Warren looked out at the crowd and cited the words of American Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, who served as the prosecuting attorney at Nuremburg. His closing argument which won the day was an appeal to a higher sense of law that ‘rises above the provincial and transient’—that is, a law that is not bound by place and time. Nuremburg only works—it only makes sense, it only serves as real, meaningful justice—if we believe in an objective moral law that applies across the board.

The message must have gotten through...at least part of it. Our cultural moment has shifted. Some have said “post modernism” (where your truth is just as good as my truth) is over. Perhaps you have seen signs that “relativism” is no longer the order of the day. Instead, a new strident fundamentalism is in place, in which the non-religious have created their own morality code and your disagreement or disapproval of their list marks you as evil. Rooted in freedom and dignity, they rightly point out that abuse should not be tolerated. Then they go on to define any cramping of one’s personal choices falls in the same category. But what in the world can justify any of the sacred “truths” to which they cling—whether human equality, or personal autonomy, or the language of rights to which any other person is obligated to respect? What we are seeing in our world today is proof positive that we don’t just want moral awareness, we long for a sense of moral duty—that you must do as I believe you ought to do. That’s the only way we can live! To break any of the new morality code is not just disagreement, it is “unjust.” There you have it – our longing for justice just won’t allow relativism to stand. There can’t just be my way or your way. There must be “the” way. And in that, I think we find agreement. Ecclesiastes bemoans the same thing: “And I saw something else under the sun: in the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there” (Ecc 3:16 NIV). The only problem, is that while atheists and agnostics can be very moral people—often more moral than some Christians I know—their philosophy of life offers no basis for moral obligation, nothing that can ever create a foundation for something like justice.

Our deepest sensibilities longs for justice, and we want to know what is the real meaning of it all. The God we see in Jesus proclaims that he is that test of justice, that standard of righteousness. The God we see in Jesus is...the way. Not just “a” way. THE way.

TRUTH

In a world full of lies and make-believe fairy tales, we long for truth. And Jesus says, “I am the truth.”

Nietzsche didn’t think so. He said that truth is dead; all that is left is my perspective vs. your perspective, coupled with the “will to power” among competing interests. We speak of rights and claims, and begin to conceive of the world as a place where “justice” is determined by who barks the loudest, or who can appeal to the personal sensitivities of the jury. The idea that there is fundamental truth—that one side just may be right, regardless of how emotionally charged the appeals to the contrary—is thrown out of court. The explosion of technology in the last century, and the invention of the internet even more recently has exponentially increased our awareness of options: our shopping basket can now hold not only a myriad of competing cereals, but competing faiths. According to Peter Berger, modern people are “conversion prone”—always thinking of the one they could have chosen, rather than relishing the one they did choose.

The British Indi Pop band Bastille recorded a song in 2019 called “Doom days” in which they sing:

*Let’s pick the truth that we believe in
Like a bad religion...
So many questionable choices
We love the sound that our voice makes
Man, this echo chamber’s getting loud.*

“Pick the truth that we believe in?” Your truth is just as good as my truth? Our experience tells us otherwise. Contrary to the claims of some, we simply can’t live this way. Os Guinness, in an excellent sermon titled “True Truth” offers a compelling response.³ Without truth, everything reduces to power games and manipulation. We can speak all we want about human rights, but pay attention carefully enough and you’ll find that Nietzsche’s predictions are right: you will find constant competing claims against any ‘human’ right that clashes with my particular group identity’s right. Do you know what this means? Followed to its conclusion, this means “there is no such thing as an ‘inalienable right’ – only power games.” An echo chamber, if you will. There are lots of charters all over the world declaring and demanding human rights and human equality. The very first line of the International Declaration of Human Rights says “we believe all humans are born free and equal in dignity.” It’s beautiful. But what in the world makes that true? Because we say so? You can poke at the Founding Fathers of America all you wish. They weren’t perfect. And they didn’t always act in ways consistent with Christian ideals. But it’s not a coincidence when they cited certain

³ Os Guinness, “True Truth.” (2014) <https://www.bethinking.org/truth/francis-schaeffers-true-truth>

“inalienable rights” like life and liberty, they grounded it in right given to us “by our Creator.” We only have your claims vs my claims, no rights at all unless they are grounded in something that holds universally true high and above us all. Second, Guinness makes a positive argument: “freedom requires truth.” It is ironic that the ‘death of truth’ is offered in defense of increasing personal freedom. For freedom is not simply freedom from something (like addictions and oppression), but freedom *for* something—freedom to be “yourself” implies there is a true “you” to which you are entitled. G. K. Chesterton says that we may seek to liberate animals from their cages, but we do not ‘liberate’ the camel from his hump, or the tiger from her stripes. This would be to manipulate their identity, rather than to free them. “Freedom assumes and requires truth! And without truth, there is no freedom.”

Let’s engage in another thought experiment; we’ll call it the “Maury Povich experiment.” Suppose you are happily married and I handed you an envelope. “In this envelope,” I say to you, “is absolute, 100% proof whether your spouse has ever cheated on you.” Remember, you are happily married, and not knowing of any unfaithfulness (or, assuming faithfulness) has been a major component in your happiness. Here is the question: would you open the envelope? When I ask my students, 4 out of 5 say “yes.” No amount of pleasure will satisfy our deepest longings. We still stand cold, naked, and alone—face to face with the nagging feeling that what we find pleasing can never measure up to what we find to be true. And Jesus says, “I am the truth.”

MEANING

In a shallow culture that takes pride in glamorizing senseless activities, we long for meaning—and Jesus says, “I am...life.” It’s perhaps the most famous question around: “what is the meaning of life?” But to even ask that question assumes that meaning and value are sensible topics.

When I wanted to study philosophy at the Ivy-league level, I was given a list of highly recommended books, the first one on the list was Thomas Nagel’s *What Does It All Mean?* And in that book, Nagel says to even ask about the meaning of life (with a capital M) is really just taking ourselves too seriously. After all, he writes, “the grave” is our only goal. So why make things miserable trying to find some ultimate purpose?⁴ Bertrand Russell, the great Cambridge philosopher, laid out the ultimate conclusion that must result from a worldview devoid of meaning. After laying out his case for a “purposeless” existence completely “devoid of meaning,” Russell sums up with these

⁴ Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p. 101.

words: “Only within the scaffolding of these truths, **only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair**, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”⁵ Cling, says Russell, to the firm foundation of unyielding despair. I mean, what’s the point? As Kansas sang in 1977, “all we are is dust in the wind.” He was borrowing from Ecclesiastes (Ecc 1:2, 14; 12:8).

But our experience says otherwise. First, we don’t *want* to live that way. In survey after survey, when asked “do you ever think about the meaning or purpose of life?”, 75% of people across the globe said “yes, I do.” Second, we *don’t* live that way. In a recent book, a doctor tells of how one nursing home brought in a number of animals—dogs, cats, parakeets, rabbits, and hens—for the residents to care for. And what a difference it made. He writes:

The residents began to wake up and come to life. People who we had believed weren’t able to speak started speaking . . . People who had been completely withdrawn and nonambulatory started coming to nurses’ station and saying, ‘I’ll take the dog for a walk.’ All the parakeets were adopted and named by the residents.”

The use of drugs fell 35% and the rate of deaths fell 15%. And when asked “why did this change result in the way it did,” the doctor who persuaded the nursing home to try it out in the first place gave this explanation: “I believe that the difference in death rates can be traced to the fundamental human need for a reason to live. . . We all seek a cause beyond ourselves.”⁶ A life devoid of meaning. We don’t want to live that way. We don’t live that way. And, according to Viktor Frankl, we *can’t* live that way. Frankl was a neurologist and psychiatrist, but also a Holocaust survivor. In his book *Man’s Search For Meaning*, Frankl shares this penetrating insight which led him to invent logotherapy. What allows us to survive even in the most barren circumstances depends on whether we can find meaning in all aspects of our experience. It’s meaning that gives us a reason to continue living. And before we imagine any number of hypothetical and fanciful tales we might tell ourselves in order to make it through the difficult times, we must remember that at some point, we will long not just for a temporary purpose, but a real one. After all, we can’t even define “good” and “evil” without a clear sense of purpose. We long for meaning. . . and not just any kind; real, genuine meaning. And Jesus says, “I am. . . life.” You want to understand what life is? What life means? The God we find in Jesus invites us to discover meaning in Him.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship” (1903). <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>

⁶ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), p. 112. Cited in Keller, *Making Sense of God*, pp. 58-59.

And not just for this life. When Peggy Lee comes to the final verse of her song, she writes:

*I know what you must be saying to yourselves
If that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all?
Oh, no, not me, I'm not ready for that final disappointment
Because I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you
That when that final moment comes and I'm
Breathing my last breath, I'll be saying to myself
Is that all there is?*

What do you think? Will you hold to the firm foundation of unyielding despair, looking forward only to that final disappointment? Or will you consider the possibility that something real, true, just and meaningful is available now, and is waiting for you at the end—because what we all long for but can't seem to find anywhere...can be found in the person of Jesus Christ?

CONSIDER THE CLAIM

Maybe that's why the book of Ecclesiastes—recognizing no meaning under the sun and no real justice under the sun—still longs for what is real and what is true. So, he ends his book by giving this sage piece of advice: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.” And here is the conclusion of the whole matter (my final piece of advice): Fear God and do what he tells you. In other words, to borrow a line from Father Cavanaugh in the movie Rudy: “Son, in 35 years of religious study, I have only come up with two hard incontrovertible facts: there is a God, and I'm not him.”

Perhaps you have been told that Christianity is a non-thinking leap-in-the-dark means of escaping reality—inventing your own meaning and believing fairy tale lies about a God disconnected from any serious concerns of life. Nothing could be further from the truth. The claim being made is that the God we see in Jesus is the antidote to such things.

I start with the claim of Jesus for a very good reason. I can point out vagaries and longings of the heart; I can identify puzzle pieces and suggest that they fit together. But the whole project remains a guessing game until someone reveals the image on which the puzzle pieces are meant to be superimposed.

That cover, says Christianity, is the ONE thing—one uniting story, one fundamental principle which is itself true, transcendent, and the quintessential definition of beauty, freedom, and love.

Consider the God I see in Christ as the foundation of all reality, the source of all meaning, the root of justice, the ground of objectivity, and the definition of truth. Science will continue to probe and question, and people will continue to construct our own realities. But Christianity gives language to the realities we create. What we call “problems”, God calls “sin.” What we call “self-help,” God calls “seeking salvation.” What Alcoholics Anonymous has found rewarding in seeking a “higher power,” Christianity calls “finding the Living God.”

Christianity suggests that the very source of reality, meaning, justice, objectivity, and truth is not some cold impersonal abstraction in the sky. He is a living, loving God who meets us in the person of Jesus Christ. A God who became one of us, lived among us, died for us, and rose to provide a way toward ultimate happiness grounded in real, genuine, meaningful truth.