

Jesus: The Word of Ultimate Reason

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[0 : 00] The message of Christmas is that in the coming of Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, that in his coming God has spoken his ultimate word to mankind.

Listen to these opening words from the epistle to the Hebrews. Long ago, many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

He is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. It's God's word of ultimate revelation of himself, and therefore Jesus is the one who answers all the yearnings of our human hearts.

And it's also God's word of ultimate reason. Jesus, therefore, is the answer to the deepest questionings of the human minds. In the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is one of the most famous paintings by the French impressionist Paul Gauguin.

[1 : 23] It's a painting of life in Tahiti, and it seeks to portray every single stage of human life from cradle to grave. And up in the top left-hand corner, very clearly and provocatively, is painted the title.

D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? They're the great questions of life, aren't they?

It's asking these questions that defines what it means to be human beings, isn't it? Animals don't ask those questions, do they? But we do. I might share 99% of my DNA with a dog, but a dog has never asked me the meaning of life.

I used to have a dog. Never once asked me that. Never asked me once to explain the Christmas message. Once ate the whole Christmas cake right enough when we were at a Christmas Eve service, and then was sick all over the house.

But having done that, it never sat up and said, Why did I do that? And given half a chance, it would have done the same thing all over again. But human beings do ask. They ask, Why?

[2 : 32] Why is there anything at all? Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going? They're big questions. They're important questions. They're vital questions, aren't they, if we're to have any sense at all of what life is really all about.

And let me suggest this to you. The Christian faith, and only the Christian faith, can truly give you the answer to those questions. Because the definitive answers to those supremely existential questions, they can only come, can't they, from outside of ourselves.

Just as, well, the definitive answer to the meaning, for example, of a play that you see, can't just come from your first impression, or even your last impression. Comes, doesn't it, from the author's clear statement.

When you interview him, and he says, This is why I wrote this. This is what it's about. This is what I was saying. And God, the creator of all things, has thus spoken.

He's spoken his ultimate word of reason and purpose in one place. Indeed, in one person. In Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. God has spoken to us by his Son, says Hebrews 1, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

[3 : 50] And he upholds the universe by the power of his word. Jesus, he's saying, is the source of the universe and everything in it.

And he's the goal of the whole universe and everything in it. And he upholds the universe and everything in it by the word of his power. That means he is the answer to where we've come from and where we're going and what we are at this precise moment.

And if we reject that revelation from God, that word of ultimate reason and explanation of life and the universe and everything, if we reject that, then we're going to end up living in a world of total uncertainty, aren't we?

Faced only with a universe of implacable absurdity. But of course, by and large, in our Western cultures, that is what we've done, isn't it? And that's what explains our world.

The so-called enlightenment that we've had has actually only led into deep darkness, into a fog of ignorance, into a great deal of misery. All because we have willfully rejected reality.

[5 : 00] But that's what the Bible means by sin. Rejecting the reality of God and rebelling against the rule of God. That's what sin is. Much more fundamental than just the sex and drugs or driving gas guzzlers or whatever it is to you, depending on, I suppose, whether your paper is the guardian or the Daily Mail.

But reckless rejection of reality, the reason and the reality that God has placed before us, and choosing the absurdity of a world without God, that's what the Bible means by sin.

And of course, when you abandon reality, sooner or later, it always ends in disaster, doesn't it? Just ask the bankers today. Just ask the politicians. They've discovered that, haven't they, about reality. If you abandon reality and act as if money grows on trees and there's no tomorrow, well, one day, the day of reckoning comes, and there's an almighty thud, isn't there? And we're discovering it, the fallout touching everybody.

Well, what happens to our human experience when we abandon God's reality, when we abandon God's answers to the great questions of life? Let's just take those three statements in the first verses of Hebrews in turn.

[6 : 12] First, God tells us that Jesus is the source of the whole universe, us included. God has spoken to us by his Son through whom he created the world.

But, of course, we've said we don't want that. We reject that. We don't believe that. We won't have that explanation anymore. And we've listened to clever philosophers like Bertrand Russell who said that we're all just the result of an accidental collision of atoms.

Or people like Richard Dawkins, the anti-religious zealot that he is, shouting that there's no design, no purpose in the universe, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference, we're all just dancing to the tune of our DNA, he says.

Not sure why we believe these men. Perhaps it's because they keep convincing us how clever they are themselves. I don't know. But the real question to ask is where has that kind of thinking got us? Well, in terms of personal life, if you've read any of the biographies of Bertrand Russell, you'll realize that his own personal life was hardly a great example of his creed, his multiple marriages, his affairs, his disastrous family life led a trail of destruction.

[7 : 28] You can read it in his biographies. But where as a society has the rejection of the reason of God got us? Well, the result is we don't know where we come from.

We don't know who we are. We don't know where we're going. So not surprisingly, then, we have a society as we'd expect that's increasingly confused about our identity, who we are, what we really are here for.

Increasingly rootless. More and more people without any sense of anchor, any sense of belonging. 21st century Britain is a very, very lonely place, isn't it, for a lot of people. A lot more lonely even than when the Beatles sang Look at all the lonely people.

Forty years ago, isn't it? We know, don't we, that knowing about our origins is very important. It's vital to our sense of identity, to who we are, to our sense of belonging, to know where we've come from.

That's why people who grow up, maybe not knowing their real parents, why they have a great urge to find out who they were so that they can know where they came from. It's part of their identity. It's part of knowing who they are.

[8 : 37] Well, so it is for the human race, just the same. And yet, we've rejected the truth that this universe can only be explained by knowing the source, by knowing God himself, by knowing the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

But we still do, deep down, want to know what it's all about, the answer to these questions. And so we're always looking, aren't we, as human beings, for other explanations. That's why that Hadron Collider near Geneva has been set up at the cost of billions of pounds, isn't it?

To find the answer to the explanation of life. But you're not going to find the answer there, even if they do find the so-called Higgs boson particle, or whatever it's called, the thing that tells us why matter has mass.

Because there's still the question, isn't there? Well, why is there a Higgs boson particle? And what's it for? Why did it come in the first place? Anyway, I was reading about that the other day, that when they switched on the zillion dollar machine, all the magnets heated up and it broke down.

It's going to cost 20 million pounds for more magnets. You might think it'd be better to give the money to the Bank of Scotland, wouldn't you? I think they probably need it more these days.

Anyway, if we reject the truth about where we really come from, no surprise, is it, that we find ourselves singing with Eleanor Rigby, all the lonely people, where do they all come from?

[9 : 58] All the lonely people, where do they all belong? Well, they don't know. And they can't know. So long as they suppress the truth that Jesus is the source.

And they're therefore the reason for absolutely everything. The second word in Hebrews 1 is this. He's not just the source. Jesus is the goal of the whole universe.

He has been appointed heir of all things, it says. But again, we've rejected that, haven't we? But you see, when you reject reality, when you reject God's revealed reason, you don't somehow become more enlightened.

You just lose light and meaning completely. St. Paul says in Romans chapter 1 that when you exchange the truth of God for a lie, you become futile in your thinking.

And society descends, he says, into envy, I'm quoting, murder, strife, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, insolence, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, foolishness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness.

[11 : 01] Or read your morning paper. See, we've rejected God's reality of what the goal of creation is and therefore we just don't know where we're going.

And when that's so, well, there's no hope, is there? No hope for the future and very little sense of meaning for the present. And the symptoms of that are all around us, aren't they?

We can't avoid them. Think of those awful stories that we've had in the news this year about all these suicides in that town in South Wales. Nineteen, I think, so far. In a town of just forty thousand people.

Isn't that a sign of hopelessness? Suicide is the greatest killer of young men in this country. Isn't that staggering? Think of the inner city estates with a great sense of hopelessness everywhere.

These things that have been flagged up in our news just in recent weeks with Baby P and Shannon Matthews and other things like that. It's not just the desperate hopelessness of social deprivation and drugs and violence and gangs, is it?

[12 : 09] This hopeless search for meaning and purpose is just as evident in the world of arts and culture and intelligent thought. Because no matter who you are, you see, rejecting the truth of God cannot be done with total success.

And the truth remains true nonetheless. that we are made for God. And by denying that we become guilty in God's sight. And you see, guilt is a destructive thing in the human world.

It brings great conflict into our experience. It's not something that can be resolved away by therapy either because it's not a misplaced feeling of guilt. It's real. Something that needs to be forgiven by God.

And the only real source of forgiveness is a God that we are denying. And that's why there's a sense of conflict. That's why deep down we have a real problem that's needing a solution but we're determined to deny both the reality of the problem and the reality of the one who can bring the solution.

And that's what explains so much of the restlessness and anxiety and longing for satisfaction and true meaning that's a distinctive mark of our world. And it comes out so often in the world of culture and the arts.

[13 : 22] One artist who betrays that often with great humour actually is Woody Allen. Life he said is full of misery loneliness and suffering and it's all over much too soon.

Well it's funny isn't it? It's clever. But there's a serious point too isn't there? I think there's something more sober from Woody Allen quoted by the writer Francis Schaeffer. Woody Allen says this alienation loneliness and emptiness verging on madness.

The fundamental thing behind all motivation and activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless.

It's not only that the individual dies or that man as a whole dies but you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then you realise that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time. Until those issues are resolved within each person religiously or psychologically or existentially the social and political issues will never be resolved. Francis Schaeffer comments if there is no personal God nothing beyond what our eyes can see and our hands can touch then Woody Allen is right.

[14 : 35] Life is both meaningless and terrifying. And pretty depressing too isn't it? Shakespeare All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players they have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts his acts being seven ages at first the infant mewling and puking in the nurse's arms and then the wiling school boy with his satchel and shiny morning face creeping like a snail unwillingly to school and then the lover sighing like furnace with a woeful ballad made to his mistress eyebrow then a soldier full of strange oaths and bearded like the par jealous in honour sudden and quick in quarrel seeking in bubble reputation even in cannon's mouth and then the justice in fair round belly with good cape on line with eyes severe and beard of formal cut full of wise saws and modern instances and so he plays his part the sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloon with spectacles on nose and pouch on side his youthful hose well saved a world too wide for his shrunk shank and his big manly voice turning again towards childish treble pipes and whistled in his sound the last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history his second childishness and mere oblivion sans teeth sans eyes sans taste sans everything well I reckon

I'm already at stage five the belly certainly isn't as flat as it once was but is that it is it justice he makes Macbeth say in another place life's but a walking shadow a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more the tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing is that true well if we don't know where we're going if we don't know what it's all for then there isn't much more is there no wonder we live in a world of ever increasing escapism flight from reality into virtual reality I came across something that John Gray the professor of European thought at the London School of Economics says in one of his essays listen each day he says we may encounter a filthy environment dysfunctional public services but in the virtual world conjured up by interactive TV and the internet we're all only a moment away from wealth and freedom for many people this fantasy world is more real than their disjointed everyday actions and perceptions that's true isn't it you see if you reject reality you'll end up seeking refuge in fantasy does it work of course it doesn't work all it does is ruin reality even more you read the other week about that case of a woman who was divorcing her husband because in a virtual world he had a virtual affair with somebody else and they had wrecked their real life what an absurd world we're living in now don't you think we just don't know what we're doing because we don't know where we're going and we don't know what it's all for and that's because we've closed our minds to the truth that Jesus

Christ is the goal of all things that he created the world and he is its goal he's its heir for you and me and your life and my life just as for everything in this universe universe and that means that you can't find what it means to be fully human unless you find the goal of what being fully human is all about finding fellowship with God through Jesus Christ his son this is eternal life said Jesus that they know you the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you've sent he is the source of all true life and he's the goal of all true life the final word in Hebrews 1 about Jesus is this he is the guide of the whole universe he upholds the universe at the word of his power that's the truth about this cosmos Jesus is in control of this planet he really does have the whole world in his hands because we deny that don't we we deny the possibility of a sovereign

God in control of everything and commanding everything that happens in this world we've thrown off that burden some yoke that repressive idea to find blissful liberation and joy haven't we as John Lennon sang remember imagine there's no God only sky above us well do we see what he sang about all the people living life in peace is that our world you tell me of course it isn't that is an imaginary world no you see we've said God certainly isn't in control of this world but the result is we don't know who is in control of this world and the one thing we therefore don't have is peace ours is a world full of the very opposite isn't it it's a world full of anxiety and fear and uncertainty and

foreboding especially at the moment the newspapers are full of it what's going to happen in 2009 how deep will the recession be how low is the pound going to sink when will the housing market recover what's going to happen to my business my job wonder what the next disaster is going to be 50 billion disappeared off the face of the earth just this week gone extraordinary isn't it a couple of weeks ago my daughter left a purse on the underground and lost 10 pounds and I was pretty cross but the next day the RBS lost 700 million so it kind of put it in perspective didn't it a world of peace or the other one we live in a world of existential angst so great is that that it's made fortunes for the drug companies pumping out anxiolytics and antidepressants like there's no tomorrow because tomorrow is a fearful fearful thought for so many people in our world because we've rejected the truth that

Jesus Christ the Son of God upholds this universe by the word of his power the power that created the universe in the beginning and so we deprive ourselves of that great present peace that true knowledge of that really brings we do that because we're proud you see we can't understand God's ways we can't understand how it could be that God really could be in control of this world and how he could be the omnipotent good God and yet evil and bad things still can happen we can't understand that we can't grasp it well of course we can't grasp it because by very definition we're finite and God is infinite but we don't like that we can't grasp it and our proud intellects would generally speaking rather reject the truth that is beyond us and above us and has to be revealed to us than have to humbly admit inferiority to God and humbly admit that yes God does have to reveal truth to us because it's bigger than us and so we reject the fact of God's sovereign control and we imagine that there's no God we imagine with John

[22 : 19] Lennon that above us is only sky but it doesn't bring peace it brings anxiety and worry and fear because we don't know who's in control but Christian people know that Jesus Christ is in control that he upholds the universe by the word of his power and that's why they have peace last year on this very night on Christmas Eve just about now one of our finest young lads in the congregation here age 16 was knocked down and he was crossing the road by a car and a few days later he died and it was a terrible tragedy for family for us as a congregation our very first service of this year was his funeral here right in this room the whole building was packed people were standing everywhere downstairs upstairs on the stairs and as you can imagine for his family this year has been one of great great grief terrible pain and we'll be remembering them very especially today and this week in our prayers but I can tell you this because I've spent many hours with them over this year in the midst of that terrible pain and grief there has been evidence of extraordinary peace because they know that

Jesus is in control of this universe that he was then last Christmas Eve and that he is today they can't understand it fully but they know him and they trust him and they can entrust themselves to him and so they do have peace even in the midst of the darkness of reality there's no need to flee from reality into a fantasy world because they know the greater reality that Jesus Christ is in control of this world and that you can entrust your life to him because he does know what he's doing just this week one of my Christmas letters contained similar sadness from my good friend Ralph Davis who is a pastor in America who preached here just a few months ago and in their letter they told us that just three weeks ago their youngest grandson aged 19 months died in his sleep and here's what Ralph says in his letter it was particularly sad at the funeral to gaze at that lonely little casket resting on a stand at the front of the church yet appropriately it was situated in front of the communion table where we regularly remember the death of another

Jordan's death is hard but what if we had to face it without Jesus' death so we sorrow but not as others who have no hope friends life is hard and death is very very hard that's reality but what if you had to face it without Jesus without knowing where you've really come from or where you're going to or who's in control of you and your life and the world right now not knowing where you really belong or what your life really means or who you can really trust to take care of your life now and forever I think that would be sheer living hell but why would anybody want to reject reality to endure that awful fantasy the message of Christmas is that you don't have to the message of Christmas says come back to reality listen to God's ultimate word of reason in Jesus Christ he is the source and he is the guide and he is the goal of everything everything and that includes you and your life and mine don't reject the Lord Jesus Christ God's ultimate word of revelation and of reason to us he came that your life could be explained and have meaning and therefore have hope well let's pray gracious God our heavenly father we thank you that in these last days you have spoken to

us by your son showing us the radiance of your glory the exact imprint of your nature and we praise you that he is indeed the answer to every question of our minds may that answer be gloriously revealed to us evermore this Christmas time we pray for we ask it in Jesus name amen our final carol speaks of the story of Christmas from eternity through to eternity again in the coming of our Lord

Jesus Christ through us keep on out of the Lord who The world has expressed, To every endless eye of Him, the day of all His own.

[28 : 25] To the nations of His faithfulness, He's filled at His own.

E.E. calls from Hison a young Next day, and I call of Him.

And He wrote in 2000's faithfulness, And of all His actions.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[30 : 24] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Amen. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Amen.