

In Jesus Christ is God's Word of Ultimate Divine Reason

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[0 : 00] Isaiah promised that God himself would intervene one day to restore all things, that his own arm would bring salvation.

And that was the repeated message of the prophets through all the ancient days. But at last, the time came when all this was fulfilled.

Listen to this last brief reading from the beginning of the New Testament letter to Hebrew Christians. And it speaks majestically of God's ultimate word to this world in Jesus Christ. Long ago, at 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 he also 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.

[1 : 09] After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Of the Son, he says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

The message of Christmas, you see, is that at last, in Jesus Christ, we have the ultimate light of divine revelation of God forever and ever.

Out of darkness, we have light. And that's why, on Christmas night, all Christians sing. And before we think for a few minutes about these words, we've just read.

In the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is one of the French Impressionist Paul Gauguin's most famous paintings.

[2 : 14] It's a picture of life in Tahiti. And it portrays each stage of human existence, from the cradle to the grave. And the title is inscribed just in the top left corner.

D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? Where do we come from? What are we? And where are we going? He's asking, isn't he, the great questions of life that define what it means to be human.

Animals don't ask those questions. But we do. I might have 99.9% of my DNA in common with a dog, but a dog has never asked that question about the meaning of life.

We had a family dog when I was growing up, and it never once asked us at Christmas, tell me, what does all this mean? Actually, one Christmas, when we were out at a Christmas Eve service, the dog got up to the table and ate the entire Christmas cake, and then vomited it all over the house.

But afterwards, it never once sat up and asked, I wonder why that happened. And let me tell you, it would have done the same again the next day if it possibly could. But human beings do ask, don't they?

[3 : 26] We ask why. Why is there anything at all? Where do we come from? What actually are we? And perhaps above all, where are we going to go when we die?

They're big questions. They're vital questions to answer if we're going to make any sense at all of our lives. And friends, I want to persuade you that only the Christian faith can give you the real answers to those questions.

Because the definitive answers to these supremely existential questions, they can come only from outside of ourselves. just as the definitive answer to the meaning and the message of a play doesn't just come from our impression, but from the author's clear statement.

This is why I wrote it. This is what I'm saying. And God, you see, the creator of all things, God has spoken definitively in his word of ultimate reason, in one place, indeed in one person alone, in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

God has spoken to us by his Son, says Hebrews chapter 1, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. And he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

[4 : 46] Jesus, he says, is the source of this universe and everything in it. He's the goal of this whole world. And he upholds it right now by the word of his power.

He is the answer to where we've come from, to what we are, and to where we're going. And if you reject that revelation from God, that word of ultimate reason and explanation of life, of the universe, of everything, then you will end up living in a world of great uncertainty.

And we'll be faced only with a universe of implacable absurdity. Of course, in our Western societies, largely, that is what we've done. And friends, that's what explains our world.

Our so-called enlightenment has actually only led us into darkness, into the fog of ignorance, into a great, great deal of misery. And that is because we have willfully rejected reality.

That's what the Bible means by the word sin, by the way. Just rejecting the reality of God and rebelling against the rule of God.

[6 : 03] That's what sin is. Not sex or drugs. Not socialism, if you read the Daily Mail. It's not fossil fuels or wearing fur, if you read the Guardian. It's a reckless rejection of reality and reason.

the reason and the reality that God has placed before us. And it is choosing, instead, the absurdity of a world without God. And you see, if you abandon reality, you will end in disaster.

Our politicians will surely discover that again with all their promises that they can't keep, with all their promises of reckless spending, with money from the magic money tree. But what happens to our human experience when we abandon God's reality?

When we abandon God's answers to the great questions of life? Well, I want to speak a little tonight about these verses from that last reading from Hebrews chapter 1 because they tell us that Jesus Christ is the answer to all the inescapable questioning of the human mind because He is God's word of ultimate reason for this world.

And I want to just take three statements from these verses in turn. First of all, Jesus is the source of the whole universe, us included. God has spoken to us in His Son through whom He created the world.

[7 : 29] Now, of course, most people around us today in our world, in our society, have said, we reject that. We don't believe that. We won't have that kind of explanation anymore. We've listened, haven't we, to the philosophers like Bertrand Russell.

He says that, well, we are just, quote, an accidental collocation of atoms. We've listened to fanatical anti-religious zealots like Richard Dawkins who says, there is no design, there's no purpose in the universe, there is nothing, he says, but, quote, blind, pitiless indifference.

And we're all just blindly dancing to the music of our DNA. And many people accept these things just because, well, these are very clever men who are speaking. But the question is, friends, where has that thinking really got us?

In terms of personal life, Bertrand Russell's example is pretty solitary in itself. Read his biographies. Read of his multiple marriage failures and affairs.

Read of the bruised and battered personalities he left all around him. It's a pretty sad story. But where has that rejection of reality got us as a society? Well, if we don't know where we come from, if we don't know why we're here at all, then not surprisingly, we will be a society increasingly confused about our identity, who we are and what we really are.

[8 : 50] Increasingly rootless. More and more are people without any sense of anchor, without any sense of belonging. Well, 21st century Britain is a very lonely place for lots of people.

Actually, not long ago, a government minister was appointed as the minister for loneliness because the problem has reached such epidemic proportions. A fifth of our population, a third of under 25, is reported in a huge survey being nearly always or often lonely.

Isn't that sad? But it's not just sad, it's actually dangerous. Studies have shown that loneliness vastly increased the risk of, well, depression and suicide, yes, dementia in old age, but also, you know this, the risk of high blood pressure, the risk of heart disease and strokes.

In fact, loneliness is as big a risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It increases the likelihood of premature death by over a quarter. Isn't that staggering?

Over 50 years ago, the Beatles sang that song, didn't they? Look at all the lonely people. Well, there's a lot more of them today and confused people.

[10:00] Some people so confused about who they are and what they really are that increasingly, they seem to be wanting to mutilate their bodies with drugs and even with surgery to try and find themselves by changing their sex.

And we all know, don't we, that knowing about our origin is really, really important. It's vital to our sense of identity, to who we really are. That's why people who grow up not knowing their real parents often have a deep, deep urge to find out who they were, where they come from as part of knowing who they really are.

Well, friends, that is the way it is for the whole of the human race. And yet, we have repeatedly rejected the truth that this universe can only be explained by knowing its source, by knowing God himself in ultimate clarity through Jesus Christ.

We've rejected that, but still, we want to know the answers. And so we search for other explanations. We'll spend billions of pounds on the Hadron Collider trying to find the explanation for life, the Higgs boson particle.

But even if we find that, there'll still be a question, won't there? Well, why is there a Higgs boson particle? Or we delve deeply into the genetic information in our DNA to try and find the answers.

[11:22] But again, that just raises more questions. Why is all that vast intelligent information stored there? And how could it possibly have got there by sheer chance in an absurd universe without any design at all?

You see, when you reject the truth about where we've really come from, that shouldn't surprise us, should it, that we find ourselves singing along with Eleanor Rigby, all the lonely people.

Where do they all come from? All the lonely people. Where do they all belong? Well, they don't know. And they can't know as long as they suppress the truth that Jesus is the source and therefore He is the reason for everything in this world.

The second word, though, in Hebrews is that Jesus is not only the source, it tells us He's the goal of the whole universe. He has been appointed heir of all things.

Now, again, people reject that. But when you reject reality, when you reject God's revealed reason, you don't somehow become more enlightened about the meaning of life. You lose the light of that meaning almost completely.

[12:32] That's what Paul says in Romans chapter 1 that we read. When you exchange the truth of God for a lie, you become debased and futile in your thinking. And human society forgets what it is and what it's for and descends, as the apostle says, I'll quote again, into envy and murder and strife and maliciousness and gossip and slander, hatred, insolence, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, foolishness, heartlessness, ruthlessness.

Well, pick up any paper and have a read of it. We've rejected God's reality about what the goal of creation is. And that means, friends, that as a society we just don't know where we're going.

And when that is so, people have no hope. They have no hope for the future. And that means very often they don't have any sense of meaning for the present.

And the symptoms of that are all around us, aren't they? You know, you've seen in the news, Scotland has the highest drug deaths in Europe and Glasgow is the worst in Scotland.

And despite all the Scottish government's best efforts, some might say it's because of their mistaken efforts. Things have just got steadily worse. But UK-wide, the biggest killer of young men in our society is suicide.

[13:58] Think of some of the desperate estates that have that great sense of hopelessness pervading them. But, you know, it's not just the hopelessness of social deprivation.

It's not just the drugs, the violence, the gangs. That hopeless search for meaning and for purpose is just as evident in the world of art, in the world of culture, in the world of intelligent thought because it doesn't matter who you are, rejecting the truth cannot be done with total success.

The truth remains true nonetheless that we are made for God and that by denying that we have become guilty in God's sight. And friends, guilt is a very destructive thing that brings great conflict into our experience.

And it's not something that can just be resolved by therapy because these are not just misplaced feelings of guilt. This is real guilt which needs to be forgiven.

And the only source of real forgiveness is the God whose existence we're denying. And so there's conflict in people's hearts.

[15 : 08] Deep down they have a real problem needing a real solution. But they're determined to deny the reality of the problem and therefore the only solution.

And that's the fact. That's what explains the restlessness, the anxiety, the longing for satisfaction, for true meaning that is such a distinctive mark of our human world. And it comes out so often in the world of culture, in the world of the creative arts, this is what one writer says, this sense of conflict, the sense of groping vainly in a dark room for a door that it's felt must be there.

It's often urgent and acute. Whether it's in the tragic pathos of romantic music such as Tchaikovsky's or Rachmaninoff's or the despairing intellectual brilliance of Sibelius, the aching longing of the romantic poets like Keats or Wordsworth or the gloomy fatalism of Arnold or Thomas Hardy, the aberrations of Cubist and surrealist art, the near pathological distortions of Van Gogh, the great question mark over the whole of human existence is more tragically and sensitively evident in the world of culture than anywhere else.

One artist, actually, who betrays that often with great humor is the film director Woody Allen. Life, he says, is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering and it's all over much too soon.

Well, that's funny, isn't it? And it's clever. But there's a very serious point in there. Listen to a more sober comment from him quoted by the writer Francis Schaeffer. Alienation, loneliness, and emptiness verging on madness.

[16 : 49] The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terrors, says Woody Allen.

And it renders everyone's accomplishments meaningless. Not only that the individual dies or that man as a whole dies, but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then you realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time.

And he says, until those issues are resolved in each person, religiously, psychologically, existentially, the social and political issues will never be solved except in a slapdash way.

And Francis Schaeffer comments and says, if there is no personal God, nothing beyond what our eyes can see and our hands can touch, then Woody Allen is right. Life is both meaningless and terrifying.

And we might add pretty depressing too. You may know these words from William Shakespeare. All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances.

[17 : 58] And one man in his time plays many parts, his act being seven ages. At first, the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel and shining, mourning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school.

And then the lover, sighing like a furnace with a woeful ballad made to his mistress eyebrow. Then a soldier, full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth.

And then the justice, fair round belly with good cape unlined, with eyes severe and beard of formal cut, full of wise saws in modern instances.

And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloone 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 whistles in his sound. Last scene of all that ends this strange event for history is second childishness and mere oblivion.

[19 : 23] Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. Is that it? Our life and all it means?

Is life, as Shakespeare makes Macbeth say, but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.

A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Is that true?

Well, if we don't know where it's all going, we don't know what it's all for, there isn't much more, is there? No wonder that we live in a world of increasing escapism, a flight from reality now into virtual reality, searching for something more.

Here's something John Gray, the professor of European thought at the LSE, says in one of his essays. Each day, he says, we may encounter a filthy environment and dysfunctional public services, but in the virtual world, we're all only a moment away from wealth and freedom.

[20 : 32] For many people, this fantasy world is more real than their disjointed everyday actions and perceptions. You see, if you reject reality, you will end up seeking refuge in fantasy, won't you? But does it work? Of course not. But it can further ruin reality. I've read of cases, perhaps you have too, of marriage breakups that have happened because of people having a virtual affair in the virtual world, not even with a real person.

What an absurd world we find ourselves living in now. We just don't know what we're doing because we don't know where we're going and what it's all for.

We've closed our minds to the truth. That Jesus Christ is the goal of all things. That He created the world. That He is the heir of the world. That He's the goal of all things, including you, including your life.

And you can't find what it means to be truly human unless you find the goal of what being human is all about. Finding fellowship with God, our Creator, through Jesus Christ, His Son.

[21 : 45] This is eternal life, said Jesus, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent. He is the source of all life.

He's the goal of all true life. And the final word in Hebrews 1 about Jesus is this. Jesus is the guide of the whole universe. He upholds the universe by the word of His power.

That's the truth about this cosmos. Jesus is the guide of the present. He really does have the whole world in His hands. But our society has rejected that too.

Denying the possibility of a sovereign God who can be in control of all things and guiding all things and commanding everything that happens in this world. We've thrown off that burdensome, repressive idea for blissful liberation.

for joy. Isn't that right? We've done what John Lennon sang about. We've imagined that there's no heaven, that above us is only sky. And so what do we see? All around us, all the people living life in peace.

[22 : 50] Is that what we see? Is that our world? You tell me. That's the world that truly is imaginary. You see, we've said God certainly isn't in control, but the result is we don't know who's in control.

And so the one thing we do not have is peace. Our world is full of the opposite, isn't it? Anxiety, fear, uncertainty, foreboding.

Especially right at the moment. What's going to happen in 2020? A new government, Brexit, the pound, trade tariffs, trade wars. That's what the markets are fretting about.

Our jobs, house prices, mortgage rates, and all of these things. That's what normal people are worrying about. What about Iran and North Korea and Syria and Turkey and Russia and all of these things?

Are all the people living life in peace? Oh, the other one. We live in a world of existential angst that is so great that it has made vast fortunes for the big drug companies pumping out anxiolytics and antidepressants like there's no tomorrow because tomorrow is such a fearful thought for so many people because, friends, we've rejected God's truth that Jesus Christ upholds this universe by the word of his power, a power that created the world in the beginning.

[24 : 22] That's the word depriving ourselves of the present peace which only that true knowledge can bring. And we do that because we're proud because we can't understand God's ways, how he could control the whole world, how he could be truly God and omnipotent and yet why evil things and bad things still happen.

We can't grasp that. Well, of course not. By definition, we are finite creatures and God is infinite. How could we? He's beyond us.

But, you see, we hate the fact that something is beyond us. And our proud intellect would rather reject the truth that's beyond us and above us and has to be revealed to us.

We'd rather do that than admit that we're actually inferior to God. So we like instead to imagine that there's no God above us, 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, friends, Christian people, they know that Jesus Christ is in control, that he upholds this whole universe by the word of his power.

[25 : 34] And that is why they do have peace even in the midst of a world of turmoil, of tragedy, and of great pain that they suffer along with everyone else. Last night, just like every year at Christmas, I spent time with a dear couple in our church who lost their 16-year-old son.

He was knocked down by a car on Christmas Eve 12 years ago now. But you can imagine that's forever blighted the whole season of Christmas for them.

And over the last year, many in our congregation have had to deal with great sadnesses too, some real tragedies in life, life-threatening sicknesses, premature deaths of loved ones, even tiny newborn babies.

I can tell you in the midst of that real pain and real suffering, in all these cases there has also been great peace because they know that Jesus is in control.

They can't understand everything fully, but they know that he upholds this whole universe by the word of his power. And he's in control of all of that and of all of their personal lives too.

[26 : 44] And they know him and they trust him and they entrust themselves therefore to him. And so they have peace even amid the darkness of reality, peace that transcends any mere human understanding.

They don't have to flee away from reality into the pretense of virtual reality because they know the greater reality that Jesus Christ is in control of this world and you can trust him because he knows what he's doing.

Some years ago in the Christmas letter of a friend of mine, a pastor from America, it shared the great sadness that they lost a young grandson aged just one and a half just before Christmas. But here's what his letter said.

It was particularly sad at the funeral to gaze at that lovely little casket resting on a stand at the front of the church. Yet appropriately, it was situated right in front of the communion table where we regularly remember the death of another.

Our grandson'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.

[28 : 02] Friends, life is hard and death is really hard. That's reality. But what if you have to face that without Jesus Christ?

Without knowing where you're really from? Without knowing where you're really going to? Without knowing who is in control now in the whole world over everything that surrounds your life?

Not knowing where you really belong or what your life really means or who you can really trust to take care of your life? That would be sheer living hell.

But why would anyone want to reject reality in order to endure that awful fantasy? The Christian message of Christmas is that you don't have to.

The message of Christmas is simply this. It's God saying come back to a reality. Listen to God's word of ultimate reason in Jesus Christ that answers all the inescapable questionings of the human mind.

[29 : 08] because Jesus Christ is the source and the guide and the goal of everything. Everything. Including you and your life.

Don't reject him when he wants to hold you and everything that's yours in his hands forever and ever. that's his message to the world and to you this Christmas.

Let's pray. Blessed Lord who caused all scripture to be written for our learning grant that we may so hear them read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and the comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen. Well our closing carol reminds us that the message of Christmas is the fulfilment of God's unshakable plan from all eternity which can now be reality for all of us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.