

Way, Truth, and Life
John 14:1-14
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Let's cut to the chase. The verse in the middle of this passage is both elegant and tough: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

No one. Except through Jesus. That's what it says.

On the strength of this passage crusades have been fought, inquisitions empowered, witches burned, continents colonized, and millions of babies have been woken as door-to-door evangelists knock as hard as they can.

No one gets to heaven without Jesus.

This isn't the only place that sentiment shows up in the New Testament. Nowhere else is it quite as clear or concise as this, but it's there. If you believe in your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord, then you will be saved. For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, so that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

No one—not the Dalai Lama, not Ghandi, not the sweet Japanese Shinto follower who lived down the hall your first year of college, not the atheist you grew up with in youth group, not your Jewish neighbor—no one gets to the Father, to God, to heaven, to eternal life, to enlightenment or divinity, or wherever it is that we're going—no one gets there without Jesus.

Is this the Christian claim? You can't get to God without Jesus?

On the face of it, the answer is simple. Yes. That's the Christian claim. Jesus is essential.

But when you get closer, the answer gets murkier.

In what way is Jesus essential?

Some Christians say that you have to say out loud that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Without the verbal, conscious confession, it doesn't count.

Others say that sounds an awful lot like you've turned a profession of faith into a magic spell. Abracadabra-one-two-three-I-believe-in-Jesus-good-for-me.

Some say you don't have to make a verbal confession, but you do have to be claimed in the waters of baptism. Others say that again gets awfully close to a ritualistic spell of sorts.

Some would say it's really not up to us. The verbal profession is important. Baptism is important. But ultimately, we're saved by God through Jesus. Our actions and words can't save or un-save us.

Some contemporary Catholics have the idea of anonymous Christians—they're anonymous even to themselves. God saves them through Jesus even without them knowing.

It begins to feel like we're arguing about angels on the head of a pin. What does it even matter? Why don't we just live and let live? But then we have verses like this, which in their apparent simplicity have been the cause of too much violence, too much harassment, too much strife.

So, let's go back to the text. What does it actually say? What's the context? Because I think the context is essential to understanding this text. We treat this as a memory verse, as if it stands on its own. But, of course, it doesn't. It, like all of scripture, was said in a particular time and place by a specific voice to a specific people.

It is Jesus' last night with his disciples. That's maybe counter-intuitive given that we're in the season of Easter, post-resurrection. But this text comes before all that. It's the last night before Jesus dies. The disciples don't know how it's all going to end, but they know things are about to get bad.

One preacher (Fred Craddock) likens it to a scene where kids are playing when all of a sudden, they look up and see their parents putting on their coats and heading out the door. Where are you going?! What about us?

These are the very questions the disciples raise.

What about us? All this talk of room for everyone is nice, Jesus, but *where* are you going? How will we get there?

They are scared, and Jesus seeks to reassure them. That's the tone of our text. It's our first clue about it. These words aren't shouted at opponents, or used to argue with those who disagree, or proclaimed to great crowds of the unconvinced. They're spoken softly at an intimate dinner. These are words of love and reassurance specifically for friends of Jesus who are already followers.

At this point Jesus is talking to those who are already at the table with him, who are scared, who are facing suffering, who are not sure they are going to be able to cope.

We are always so quick to look over into the other person's lane. What about them?

That's not the question Jesus is answering here. He's answering the middle of the night fear, what about *me*? How am I going to make it? What am I going to do? I am so scared, because life is so uncertain, and terrible things happen all the time, and I don't know how to go on.

And to that question, Jesus says, keep your eye on me. When you are scared, weary, and worn, follow my way, learn the truth that I teach, live the life that I live, and you will find rest for your souls and life abundant.

Jesus doesn't answer the question, "what about them?" here. Thomas doesn't ask it. And it's a misunderstanding of this passage to think Jesus answers it. That's simply not what this passage is about and to use it to make 21st century judgements about people's salvation in a profoundly pluralistic world is a misuse.

There are responses that deal more directly with people outside of the Jewish or Jesus-following traditions elsewhere in the New Testament. They don't all line up. I find the most convincing and glorious to be Paul's insistence later that the sweep of God's renewal will be so great as to catch up and transform *all* creation. The rocks and the trees, the lizards and lilies, the farthest galaxies and the smallest viruses, and all people will be gathered up, gathered in, counted among that number when Christ, the Word before creation, the glory of all time, Love made flesh is all in all.

That's what Paul says. Paul says grace is relentless in its pursuit of each and every last one of us.

But that's later. That's a different day, and a different group, and a different speaker.

This night Jesus sat at table with his friends. As they faced fear, sorrow, and death, Jesus leaned close and said, don't be afraid. Come what may, and much will come, keep your eyes on me and your heart fixed on this: love broken—like this bread, love poured out—like this wine. In the end that's all there really is.

This is the Christ-shaped confession: in the way of Jesus, which is the way of love being poured out, we find our way. In the truth of Jesus, which is the truth of limitless love, we find our truth. In the life of Jesus, crucified and risen, we find the shape of our own lives. This is our way and our truth and our life. May we follow faithfully.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023