

The Reason for Our Hope

by George Verwer

The Christian faith is unique because it presents a God of immense majesty and intimate love, and it offers a remedy for the sin problem through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Duration: 39:40

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:3, Romans 8:1-2, Romans 8:4, 1 Timothy 2:3-6

Topics: "Hope"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher tells a story about a young boy who fell into a deep pit and was unable to get out. Along the road, a Hindu religious leader and a Mohammedan pass by, but instead of helping the boy, they offer advice from their respective religions. The preacher then contrasts the Christian view of man with that of non-Christians, emphasizing the concept of total depravity and man's inability to reach God on his own. He refers to Romans 8:5-8 to support this point. The sermon concludes with the message that Christianity offers a unique and urgent message of salvation through Christ, and the need to share this message with others.

Transcript

A few verses tonight from Romans chapter 8. Romans chapter 8, we're just going to read the first 8 verses of the chapter. Romans chapter 8, verse 1, by reading from the New International Version of the Bible. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

What the law was powerless to do, in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature, but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature, have their minds set on what that nature desires.

Those who live in accordance with the Spirit, have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. Because the sinful mind is hostile to God, it does not submit to God's laws, nor can it do so.

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. May God give us understanding of those words. Evangelical Christianity is against its exclusiveness and its dogmatism.

There are many ways to God and Jesus is one of them, is a very popular idea in our country. And we evangelicals who say there is only one way to God, and we are on it by God's grace, are looked upon by many to be exceedingly dogmatic. Following on from this idea that there are many ways to God, many people go one step further and say that therefore everyone will one day get to God.

Everyone will one day get to heaven. And so we have the idea of universalism, universal salvation abroad in the world today. Such a view is propounded by many interesting people.

The Bishop of Guildford, who is a leading light in the Nationwide Initiative on Evangelism, a group which many evangelicals are linked with, recently wrote the following, I find it difficult to define precisely what salvation is. When he was questioned on that statement, he accepted that his contribution to his booklet entitled Evangelism, Convergence and Divergence was correctly understood to mean universalism. He said, I mean by that the view that everyone will be saved in the end.

That's the idea of a leading Anglican clergyman of our generation. Now Michael Green in his book You Must Be Joking explains why such views are so popular. Writing concerning the assumption that all religions lead to God, he says the following, such a view has of course immense attractions.

It avoids the black and white choice, seeing everything as a shade of grey. It is essentially tolerant, and tolerance is a very fashionable virtue. It is modest of course, and does not make strong pretensions for your own particular religion.

So the question tonight is, are we evangelicals intolerant bigots? Are the thousands of missionaries around the world preaching to Muslims and to Hindus and to Buddhists, are they all wasting their time? Will all these people eventually find their way to God? Or is Christianity unique? I have three simple points to make. The first is the exclusiveness of biblical Christianity. The classic statement is of course the words of our Lord himself in John chapter 14 and verse 6. Jesus answers, I am the way.

I am the truth. I am the life. Then that phrase which should be an enormous challenge to every Christian.

No one, says Jesus, comes to the Father except through me. No one to the Father except through Christ. No Hindu to the Father except through Christ.

No Buddhist to the Father except through Christ. None of your unsaved relatives and friends will come to the Father except through Christ. Jesus could hardly be more clear.

But he makes many similar claims. For example, in John chapter 10 verses 7 to 9, he says, I tell you the truth. I am the gate for the sheep.

And all who ever came before me were just thieves and robbers. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep.

And my sheep know me. In John chapter 8 and verse 24, Jesus is even more clear. If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, says Jesus, you will all die in your sins.

Now you can't be more clear than that. If you don't believe that the Christ is who he claims to be, there is no hope. You will die in your sins.

And the apostles took up this exclusiveness in their preaching. Again, that classic statement is found in Acts 4 and verse 12. Where Peter preaches, salvation is found in no one else.

For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. The apostle Paul carries on the same theme. In 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 3 of that chapter, he speaks of God our Saviour who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

But then he adds in verse 5, there is one God and one mediator between God and men. That man is not Buddha or Mohammed. That man is Christ Jesus.

So this is the first point we must make. And I don't think anyone can honestly read their Bible without coming to the simple conclusion that if we want our Christianity to be a biblical Christianity, then it must have this element of exclusiveness within it. The gospel is available to all men, to all who will come to Christ in repentance.

But that is the only gospel. Paul in Galatians 1 verse 8 says, if anybody else preaches another gospel, be it even an angel from heaven, let him be eternally condemned. So that's our first point, the exclusiveness of the Christianity of the Bible.

Secondly, I want to say this belief that there are many ways to God is not only unbiblical, but it's utterly illogical and it's completely impossible. It's a lovely sentimental idea, of course, to suppose that all religions are basically one and that they all represent variations on a common theme. But unfortunately, such a view flies in the face of all the evidence.

How can all religions lead to God when they're so utterly different? The God of Hinduism is plural and impersonal. You cannot know the God of the Hindu. The God of Islam, the religion of the Mohammedans, on the contrary, is singular and personal.

The God of Christianity is the creator of the world. But the divine in Buddhism is neither personal nor creative. You can scarcely have a greater contrast than that.

Christianity teaches that God both forgives a man and gives to him supernatural aid. But in forgiveness, in Buddhism, sorry, there is no forgiveness and there is no supernatural aid whatsoever. The goal of all existence in Christianity is to know God and to enjoy God on this earth.

The goal of all existence in Buddhism is what they call nirvana or extinction. And this, we're told, was attained by the great Buddha after no less than 547 reincarnations. Now, it's just as foolish to say that all religions lead to God as it is to say that all roads from Manchester lead to London.

They don't. And it's not in the least bit helpful to pretend that they do. You see, the trouble with today's tolerance is that it's reached the point where it's no longer a virtue.

It is a vice. It is a cruel casualness to truth. It's no kindness to anyone if we tell everyone that their views are just as true as anyone else's.

We're simply displaying our cynicism. It's just like saying to a blind man sitting on the edge of a precipice, it doesn't matter which way you move. All paths lead to the same goal.

Whether Christianity is true or not, whether it's real or not, people must decide for themselves. But one thing is certain. It's utterly illogical and impossible to say that all religions lead to God.

The third point I want to make, and of course it's this third point which I want us to spend time on tonight, is the uniqueness of the Christian faith. If all religions don't lead to God, what is so special about

Christianity? What distinguishes our faith from all the other religions and countless philosophies of the world? What was it in our message which filled those early apostles with such definite conviction that they had something special, they had something which was worth dying for, they had something which every man on the earth must hear? Well, first of all, I think we have to show that Christianity is a totally different message. There are many similarities between Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on.

Christianity is totally different. What does the word religion mean? Well, a dictionary definition of the word religion would be man's search for God. When you take that definition, you can immediately see how different Christianity is from all religion.

If religion is man's search for God, then the Bible says that man does not need a religion. In fact, the Bible says that religion, if that's what religion is, will lead man into unutterable bondage. The Bible says that it is impossible for a man to find God.

In Job chapter 11 and verse 7, the question is posed, can you, by searching, find out God? Can you understand the Almighty to perfection? And then comes the answer. It's higher than the heights of heaven. What can you know? It's deeper than the depths of the grave.

Its measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea. The declaration of the Bible is that man does not need a religion which sets him searching for that which is impossible. He needs a revelation, not a religion.

He needs this revelation that rather than him searching for God, God has come searching for man. Unlike every other religious book, this book does not tell you of man's search for God. It is a revelation of God coming to man.

And that is what is so essentially and fundamentally different from Christianity with all other religions. When I was out in India, I heard a story, which the missionaries tell out there, which may well help us to understand, in illustrative language, this essential difference. They tell the story of a young boy who fell into a very deep pit.

Of course, he was trying to cumber out of the pit, but he found it impossible to do so. Along the road came a Hindu religious leader. He heard his cries and looked down into the pit and said, young man, next time you walk this road, you must be much more careful.

And if you read the religious writings of the Hindus, you will find much excellent advice for living. Secondly, along the road came a Mohammedan. The Mohammedan was very devout.

He was desperate to help this young man. So he got down onto his stomach and he reached down into the pit and he said, young man, just reach up. Our fingers will meet and I'll pull you to safety.

And the man reached down and the boy reached up and there were inches between their outstretched hands. The Mohammed is desperate to help. But he is totally unable.

There is no power within his religious dogma which will release man from his position. Thirdly, along the road came Jesus Christ. And on hearing the cries of the young man, he went across to the pit and he got down into the pit.

And he said, young man, stand on my shoulders and walk to freedom. Now there's the difference. All the religions of the world are saying to man, clamber out of your own predicament.

We will help you. We will show you this teaching. Jesus doesn't say that at all.

He comes down right to where we are. And he says to us, not by your own energy, not by your own strength, but by my power within you, you will be delivered from the miry clay and your feet will be set upon the rock. There is the essential difference between Christianity and every other world religion.

And it is that, fundamentally, which makes our faith unique. But let's be a little more particular. I've pointed out four major differences between Christianity and every other religion.

First of all, we have a different view of God. I've already said how the message of so many other religions is this encouragement, this exhortation to reach out for God. The Bible, on the contrary, says that man is separated from God and there is nothing he can do about it.

Paul, in 1 Timothy 6, 16, speaks of our God as the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen and whom no one can see. Habakkuk was quite right to say in chapter 1 and verse 3 of his little prophecy that our God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. And Isaiah was right to say that our sins have separated us from God and our iniquities have hidden the face of God from us.

The Christian's God is majestic. He is a God to be feared. He is a God to be revered.

And yet, in an amazing way, he is a God of unutterable love, a God who in the person of his all-incarnate Son has come right down to where man is. The cross is a marvellous demonstration of the character of our God, that place where his righteousness and his love meet together and kiss each other, the cross of Calvary. There is no other religion in the world which presents to us such a God as this, a God of immense majesty, a God of intimate love.

Secondly, the Christian's view of man is entirely different. Once again, rather than encouraging man by his own efforts, his own endeavours to reach God, the Bible speaks, particularly here in Romans 8, of man's total depravity and inability. I want you to turn with me to Romans chapter 8, and look at this very, very important passage, verses 5 to 8 of this chapter.

In this little paragraph, Paul is presenting a contrast, a contrast between the Christian and the non-Christian. And tonight I want you to look at what Paul says about the non-Christian. He says six things about him.

Number one, verse 5, he says his mind is set on what his nature desires. Secondly, he says his mind is death, verse 6. That word death means separated from God. The mind of the non-Christian is utterly separated from God.

Thirdly, verse 7, he says his mind is hostile to God. Now never forget that about the non-Christian. The non-Christian you meet at your work, your next door neighbour, that person, if they're not a Christian, is hostile to God.

Now you may not like this idea. I've heard many people who say, now listen, they're not Christians, but they're not hostile to God. They're interested in God.

Not so long ago I was driving down the motorway early in the morning, heading for London, four o'clock in the morning, I stopped at a service station just outside Birmingham. There on the mat, as I went into the service station, was a Muslim with his prayer mat. Four o'clock in the morning, in front of everyone in the cafe, there weren't too many people in there at that hour, but in front of those who were there, he was on his knees, facing Mecca, going through his religious devotion.

And yet Paul says, that man is hostile to God. Now what does he mean? Well your next door neighbour, who says to you, I'm not a Christian, but I'm not really a terrible sinner, you start describing to them, the God of the Bible. You tell them that the God of the Bible is a God of love, and they'll say, yes, yes, that's my God.

That's my God. I'm interested in such a God. Then you go on to say that the God of the Bible is righteous.

The God of the Bible is just. The God of the Bible is a God of wrath, who can be angry with sin, and who has prepared a place called hell, with all who refuse his gospel. And what will you find? You will find even with your most respectable next door neighbour, a sense of hostility, and anger, that is not my God.

I do not believe in a God of wrath, and a place called hell. You will find that what Paul here says, is perfectly true. The mind of the man who does not know God, however respectable they may appear on the outside, is hostile to the God of the Bible.

They may not be hostile to their own view of God, but they're certainly hostile to the God of the Bible. Then fourthly, Paul says their mind does not submit to God's law, verse 7. And then fifthly, and this is so important, he goes on to say again in verse 7, that their mind cannot, cannot, submit to God's law, verse 8. Such people cannot please God. Never ever forget that, about man without Christ.

He cannot submit to the law of God. He cannot please God. He is utterly unable to do so.

Can you see the utter desperation and delusion which the religions of the world put man into? They tell them, seek to please God. Seek to obey his laws. Do your very utmost to satisfy your God.

But the Christian alone admits that man is depraved. That man is utterly lost. That man can do nothing at all to please his maker.

Paul sums it all up in Romans 3. There is no one righteous. Not even one. There is no one who understands.

No one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have become worthless.

There is no one who does good. What other world religion do you find anything even similar to the cross of Calvary? Calvary sums up the uniqueness of the Christian faith. 2 Corinthians 5.21 God made Jesus sin who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He has a unique message. Michael Green expresses it like this. Where else in the religions of the world do you hear of a God... Please turn the cassette over now.

Do not fast wind it in either direction. Michael Green expresses it like this. Where else in the religions of the world do you hear of a God who undertakes salvation for his people by personally bearing responsibility for their wickedness and allowing that wickedness to crush him? Because of this glorious work of Jesus Christ the Christian faith is based on the truth of justification by faith alone.

Complete righteousness for man through the righteous life and vicarious death of Jesus Christ. This is a totally unique remedy for the sin problem which every man faces. And then fourthly we have a power which no other religion offers.

As we've seen the desperate predicament that other religions leave men in is that they show a standard of life and they say to man live up to that standard and you will find life. You should read the Koran, the book of the Mohammedans. It's the most interesting writing.

There is much valuable advice for living in that book. And they give these books to the young Mohammedan children and the devout young Mohammedans you all meet them on the streets of Karachi and on the streets of Dhaka and on the streets of many of the eastern cities sitting cross-legged at the roadside learning the Koran about the size of your New Testament off by heart. Many of the 16 year old holy men of Islam can say it verbatim the size of your New Testament.

Immensely devout young people desperately trying to live up to the high standards for living of that book but without any power to do so. Why? Because Mohammed is dead. Because Buddha is dead.

But as we saw last night Jesus uniquely amongst all world religious leaders is alive today and with this promise of entering mankind not only delivering him from the guilt of sin but lifting him out of the power of sin setting him free to live a new life. Now here we reach a very important point. I think it's tremendously important for every Christian communicator be it gospel preacher, Sunday school teacher or personal witness in the street to realize the gospel which is the Christian gospel.

I want to ask you a question and I want you to answer the question honestly in your own mind. Why did Christ die? Why did he die? What's your answer? I would guarantee because I've carried out certain censuses that a vast majority of you would say to save us from our sins and you would be right but what do you mean by that? Many people merely mean to save us from the guilt of sin. We are no longer condemned.

We will be in heaven. We will not be in hell. And certainly that's one reason why Jesus died but it's not the only reason.

Jesus died not only to save us from the guilt of our sin but he saved us from the power of our sin today. And as Christian communicators we must not forget that. Our message is not all about tomorrow.

It's not all about heaven rather than hell. It's all about today. It's all about life on this earth now.

It's all about breaking free from the chains of sin to live a new life of freedom. That's what Paul is saying here in Romans 8, 1 and 2. There is therefore now no condemnation. The word condemnation is a bad translation says Professor Bruce.

He says it should read there is therefore now no penal servitude for those who are in Christ Jesus. What does he mean? Before Christ died before you enjoyed the benefits of his death you and I were servants of sin. But there's now no longer any penal servitude.

We don't need to bow under the dominion of sin. As chapter 6 of the same epistle shows we've been set free. Going on to verse 2 he says that through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life has set us free from what J.B. Phillips calls the vicious circle of sin which leads to death.

Now you go out into the streets of Whitehaven and tell people that. Christ died to set us free from the vicious circle which so many people are living in. Sin which leads to death.

Sin which leads to death. They cannot break out of it. They try.

Their New Year's resolutions. They want to make us new start. They want to turn over a new leaf.

There's a whole vocabulary built up to describe their efforts. But they cannot break out of that vicious circle of sin which leads to death. Here is the uniqueness of the Christian message.

Jesus did not only die to set us free from the guilt of our sin. He set us free from its power. And right now in 1981 we have a message of freedom for humanity.

There is no other world religion which makes such claims. So that's the third point and the first part of it. The uniqueness of the Christian faith.

We have a totally different message to preach. Different in every sense. Finally and very briefly I want to say that Christianity is unique because it makes a totally different impact on people.

You know sometimes Christians in the Western world and particularly in Britain get rather depressed, don't they? I wonder if I'm talking to any depressed Christians tonight. You're in some struggling assembly or some struggling local church and you're seeing very little happening and you just wonder whether the Christian message really is the message of life and liberty. We're going through hard times in the Western world but the impact of Christianity worldwide is immense.

It would be very interesting to have you all write down on a piece of paper how many people you think are becoming Christians around the world every day. I wonder what your estimate would be. You make a mental estimate.

How many every day around the world are becoming Christians? Well of course we don't know the exact number but there's a computer in America. There are computers for everything now. And every major denomination of the church and every missionary society is feeding its statistics back to this vast computer in the city of Chicago.

And they have come out with the following figure. Around the world, and we are estimating conservatively, 55,000 people are becoming Christians every day. And something which can be more accurately accounted for, 1,400 new churches are being opened around the world every week.

Victory saving, go ahead. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth its successive journeys run. One great concern of mine as I've travelled around recently for assemblies in the United Kingdom is that we might not miss out on what God is doing around the world in our generation.

He's doing so much. And we must be open to all that God is doing in our day. But a remarkable thing about Christianity's impact is its worldwide impact.

People from every culture, from every strata of society are becoming Christians. It's the only truly worldwide religion. From the tribes of New Guinea to the university students of the Western world, people are bowing the knee to Jesus Christ.

I spend the majority of my time in universities. And it's just amazing to see what God is doing in British universities. Of course you hear all the bad news about our universities.

I want to tell you the good news. Every Saturday night in the University of Cambridge, a university with a population of 10,000 young people, there are over 1,000 studying the Bible. I was at Oxford University for their Saturday night Bible reading just a few months ago.

550 young people, students from this university of 9,500 people sat down to listen to one hour's exposition of the scriptures and do so every Saturday night, every Sunday night, and many of them meet at 6.30 every morning for prayer before their studies. What is the largest society on the university campus of Oxford? Of course if you listen to the news media you'd expect the answer to be Marxist or Communist. It's not at all.

The largest society, and it's at least five times the size of these societies, is the Christian Union. All over the world, God is moving by his Spirit, bringing people to his Son, in this only truly worldwide religion, the Christian faith. Finally, it's important to realize that the impact which Jesus Christ makes on a life is so different from the impact which the other religions make.

The world religions can sometimes bring outward reformation to a person's life. They can change his outward actions. But the Gospel of Christ alone brings inward transformation.

I think you can see this very clearly in Paul's life. To the Philippian church he testified in chapter 3 verse 6 that as far as legalistic righteousness was concerned, he was faultless. Judaism had certainly altered the Apostle Paul.

He kept all the outward codes and he kept all the outward laws. It changed him as a man. But then he was confronted by Jesus Christ.

In Romans chapter 7 verse 22, he speaks of delighting in God's law in his inner being. There's the difference. His outward actions had been altered by Judaism, but his heart remained the same.

Confronted by Jesus Christ, his heart was transformed. His inner being became new. Truly, as he said to the Corinthians, he became a new man in Christ.

Let me sum up this whole matter with a quotation from the book *Is There Really Only One Way?* A book by Dick Hillis. This is how he describes the differences. Religion is man-made.

The Gospel is God-given. Religion is what man does for God. The Gospel is God's search for man.

Religion is good views. The Gospel is good news. Religion is good advice.

The Gospel is a glorious announcement. Religion takes man and leaves him as he is. The Gospel takes a man as he is and makes him what he ought to be.

Religion ends in an outward reformation. The Gospel in an inner transformation. Religion whitewashes.

The Gospel washes white. Religion places the prime emphasis upon doing. The Gospel places the emphasis on a person.

You can take Buddhism out of, Buddha, sorry, out of Buddhism and Buddhism still remains with its four noble truths and its eightfold path. You can take Mohammed out of Islam and Islam is still intact with its five pillars of action and its six articles of belief. But if you take Christ out of the Gospel, there's nothing left because the Gospel is Christ.

That's the difference. Christianity is the life of Christ implanted in the heart of man. Christianity is unique in that it alone has a living author.

No religion claims such a distinction. I trust we're going to go away from this series of four messages. I trust we're going to go away with a desire to present this unique message with a new urgency and fervency on the basis of God's impenetrable will which we looked together at on Thursday evening.

What do we do? On the basis of that word, we preach Christ, the eternal Son of God crucified. We don't stop there. As we saw last night, we present Christ not only crucified but risen and reigning.

And if we will go and preach that message, we will preach something which is absolutely unique in this world. May God give us the grace to do so. Let's close by singing 606.

606. Oh, Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end. Be Thou forever near me, my master and my friend.

Father, as we've looked together at this subject tonight, we've recognized again our entire dependence upon Yourself. Man is dead in trespasses and sins, unable to help himself. He cannot please You.

Lord, we call men to repentance, but what can they do? Lord, unless You give life, unless You give sight to the blind, unless You give hearing to those who are deaf, there is no hope. Father, by Your Spirit we pray that You might descend upon this area again and give to men a sense of need that conviction of sin which we just cannot produce by human methods. Oh, God, by Your Spirit, give to men a desire to be saved, we pray.

Give life to the dead, give sight to the blind. Use us, we pray, to present this unique message of a righteous, loving God being bruised himself for man's sin. Lord, give us the strength to go on to the end as we've sung in this closing hymn, presenting that message faithfully to those whom we come into contact with.

Thank You for our fellowship together these past few days. Part us now with Your blessing, we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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