

If you have your Bibles, let's go to Colossians 3. We're going to pick it up in verse 22. Most would skip over this, but I think my commitment when you hired me is to not skip verses. So let's go. "Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality." He continues in Colossians 4:1. "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." Now I want to stop and frame this, and then I want to deal with this issue in regards to history and in regards to the Scriptures.

I have always enjoyed the company of the skeptics, probably because of my own history and my own wiring. I'll tell you why. There is something about that fringe element that I find a bit more honest than I find people who have been in church too long. For whatever reason, people who have been in church for an extended period of time begin to pretend or play like all is well when maybe it's not. When I've found that the skeptic doesn't tend to do that. He tends to be a lot more honest about where he is in life when asked a direct question. I'll give you an illustration. I could sit down with a man in the church and ask him how he's doing, and he's going to tell me he's fine and things are going good, he's going to admit that he's not perfect and he's probably never going to broach the subject that maybe his wife hates him. . . and maybe he hates her back. He's not going to say that. Why? Because that's not very Christian, is it? So he begins to hide underneath this facade of holiness that honestly isn't reality, nor is it even biblical to create that facade, because the cross is a constant screaming reminder that we're all screw ups and in need of grace. And so, if you go and talk to someone on the fringes and ask them a real direct question about how their marriage is, I have found you're much apt to get, "I hate her. I've thought about killing her. I don't know how to do it and not get caught. Because I've actually started to make plans, and then I watched a deal on CNN where somebody already tried that and got caught. And here's the thing, Matt. I think she might be trying to kill me. When I come home and there is dinner, I give it to the dog first." So I have found that there tends to be a rugged honesty among the skeptics that somehow, over a period of time, is removed from the ordinary church goer. So in my time with the skeptic, in my time with those who aren't believers in Jesus Christ and maybe have no desire to be believers in Jesus Christ, I have found that they tend to hang their beliefs on one of two arguments.

The first one, I don't know is a big problem, and the second one can get complex and time consuming. The first one is always about how hypocritical Christians are. So if you've ever tried to share your faith with any of them or if you've ever tried to get to that point where you're talking about Jesus, one of the things that always comes out is how they know people who go to church who are no better than them and they're just hypocrites. I honestly don't think that's real difficult to address. I always want to go one of two angles, and I'll let the Spirit kind of lead which one I take. I almost always want to go, "That's because most people who go to church aren't actually Christians." That tends to be the one I want to play. If you've got history here, you know that I don't think you're automatically saved. I think when you were seven-years-old, you went to RA camp where they did a scary skit about hell, I terrified you and so you repeated prayer, and despite that fact that you're not in your twenties or thirties and have no love for Jesus Christ and have had no transformation in how you live your life, you bank your eternal soul on your fear when you were seven at RA camp converting you to Jesus Christ. So what I want to say is that I don't think most people who go to church actually really love the Lord or have any intention of following Him whatsoever. I think they go to church because it's some sort of

socio-cultural idea here in the South that this is what we do. They think they're Christians because their parents were, they think they're Christians because they're Texans, they think they're Christians because they're Americans and they think they're Christians because their parents dragged them to church for as far back as they can remember. It does not mean that they are. Someone saying that they're a Christian doesn't mean that they are one. So although I don't do that one the most, I tend to take it more to the positive. I just try to go, "Yeah, they really are hypocrites. I pastor a church. They are a screwy bunch of hypocrites. How insane is it that God loves and serves and pursues that screwy bunch of mess-ups. He loves them and forgives them and continues to lavish grace upon them." So I don't think the hypocrisy argument really is solid enough to last.

The other game they want to play is they want to undermine the Scriptures. Because if they can undermine the Scriptures and prove that the Scriptures are not God's self-disclosure of Himself to us, then we don't have to obey it, and we can create our own God. If you can get rid of the Scriptures, then God whoever you say He is. And that is a far more arrogant position than humbling ourselves to the God as He has revealed Himself to man for thousands and thousands of years. I have no idea how we became the arrogant ones for saying, "I want to submit my life and submit my heart to thousands of years of religious understanding and submission to God Almighty," and the person that goes, "God is whoever I say he is," is not the arrogant one. Just watch the debates on television. Watch the guy who wants to submit his life to history and thousands of years of proven life and life change is viewed as some sort of backwoods idiot and the guy who says, "God is whoever I say he is right now," is somehow not arrogant. So what they do is go to the Scriptures and find some subject that culturally has shifted or changed, and they'll use that as this post in the ground and use hypocrisy to build the tower around it and then hide away in that tower. So they'll go, "Well, in the Bible, God condones slavery. So how can you trust the Bible when the Bible condones slavery." So now they've got their pole, and then they go, "Look at all these hypocrites. Look at how they lived their lives." And that to them becomes the strong tower to which they run in order to not consider, not think and not submit their lives to the Lord. And this is a game that gets played over and over and over again. And here's my promise. If you'll tune into it, you'll hear it in every debate concerning our faith. You'll hear it in any conversation about any cultural issue when it comes to the Christian faith. "Look at what the Bible says around this issue, look at all the hypocrisy built into Christians' lives. And that's where we'll go to negate the God of the Scriptures."

Now it has been my experience that the lot of people have no desire for that to be deconstructed, none. So they don't really want to know if that's true or not. They don't really want to see whether or not what they think about the Bible is true or not. They simply want that as the safe tower in which to run and go, "I don't have to think about God. I can do what I want, I can say what I want and I can go where I want. I don't have to submit to anybody but me." But here's my hope. For whatever reason, God has drawn a bunch of you here who are skeptics, and then others of you are here in what Joan Ball, former atheist who converted to Christianity, calls in her book, *Flirting With Faith*, "the dark night of the senses." Not the dark night of the soul, but the dark night of the senses. There are things and questions that can arise in the Christian's heart that they don't know how to deal with and they don't know how to answer them. And so all of a sudden, what they were once confident in, they're not as confident in anymore. And they don't see as well as they once saw, they don't hear as well as they once heard and they begin to doubt. And if you combine that with the fact we like to pretend we're okay when we're not, you have some serious issues when it comes to a vibrant faith in the God of the universe.

So my hope is to try to dismantle the slavery argument in front of you and then show you that, regardless of your concerns are, if you're serious and you're not just angry and bitter about something else and trying to take that out on God, if you're seriously desiring to find truth, truth can be had. The difference is coming to the Scriptures and saying, "Let me learn about the God of the universe," instead of coming to the Scriptures and going, "Let me disprove this God." Because what you'll end up doing is proof-texting. You'll pull a verse completely out of its context, completely out of the book that it's in to prove your point. So you'll yank Leviticus 22 out of 66 books of the Bible. It would be a lot like ripping

one chapter out of any book that you read and going, "It's trash," without any idea of how it begins, any idea of how it ends, without any idea of the actual story that is occurring. And I think this is where a lot of us fall.

So let me be as honest as I can. Nowhere in the Scriptures does the Bible universally condemn slavery. There is not one verse in all of the Bible that says, "Slavery is evil and should not be practiced." So if someone says that to you, they're not lying. So don't go saying, "Yes it does," and start looking. You will look forever. It's not there. Let me give you some other weighty texts here. Human beings are considered to be property. This is found in Exodus 12:44, Exodus 21:20-21 and Leviticus 22. Foreign slaves in Israel did not experience the seven year release. We'll talk about that more in a while. That's Leviticus 25. Slaves within Israel were used to produce offspring for their infertile owners. You'll see that in Genesis 16, Genesis 30 and also in Genesis 35. Sexual violation, rape of an engaged slave was punished by the the man accused of rape having to make payment to who was raped and her fiancé, whereas if the same occurred in the free woman, the perpetrator was to be stoned to death. So you can begin to see that there is a system being built that is what we would call unjust and unequal. Slave owners were permitted to beat their slaves without any penalty, provided that the slave survived. That's in the Bible, Exodus 21. Biblical legislation contains inequality in the value placed on a slave's life compared to a free man's life. You can see that in what I've already mentioned. So all those things are in the Bible, every one of them.

Now, we need to cover some things historically, and we need to cover some thing biblically. I usually do them biblically first and then historically, but I don't think it will make sense that way. So I'm going to have to compare and contrast two different ideas of slavery. For you and me, our idea of slavery is built around European colonialism. What we think of when we think of slavery is the Africans being abducted or traded for in Africa and then brought over to work the cotton fields where they were mistreated and oppressed and beaten. That is our framework for slavery. It is accurate. But historically, the British were the last ones to get involved in the slave trade. It was deplorable to them. The first historical record of the British being involved in the slave trade was actually an act of piracy in 1540. A man hijacked a slave ship and, instead of setting the slaves free, he sailed it to the Caribbean and sold the slaves. Queen Elizabeth was furious. She said that that's something that those Catholics do, not us. She was referencing Portugal and Spain. So in the end, they are furious and against it. But here's the progression of events. The British overthrow Spain and Portugal in the Caribbean. Do you know what the Caribbean has that Europe doesn't? Sugar. They only had honey. Everything they sweetened, they sweetened with honey, not sugar. So they take over the Caribbean and now they have all these sugar cane fields. So the English are so opposed to the slave trade that they send the Irish down to work the fields. Now what's the problem with a bunch of Irish people working the fields in the Caribbean? How white are the Irish? I'm a white dude, but the Irish are whiter than white. So those guys were bursting into flames. And so over a period of about 100 years, England learns that the Irish can't do the work there because of climate, because of temperatures and because of the rigors of working the fields. So slowly but surely, they begin to utilize and use the Africans for their sugar. Now it's important to know that really at no point does slavery really take root in England. It's always distant from them; it's always far off from them. So it's easy to justify it because you don't see the horrors of it. That's going on in the Caribbean, and you've got sugar for your tea, you've got cakes and icing, you've got all you need to handle that sweet tooth. In fact, a great theologian poet Machen wrote a poem about the slave trade. In it, he was like, "Oh that we should set them free, but then how would we get our sweets with our tea?" It was satire. So the slave trade wasn't built on cotton; it was built on sugar. Now when it comes to the colonization of the New World, what we now know as the United States of America, specifically in the South you've got cotton and tobacco. And what the British had learned in the Caribbean is that the Africans were legitimate workers. So they began to really build up the New World with slaves.

So that's our framework. Unfortunately it doesn't help us at all with how slavery was viewed in the Scriptures. So let me just give you a couple of differences between colonial slavery and what the Scriptures are speaking to when they address slaves. And I acknowledge out of the gate that the Bible is clear that one human being can own another human

being. But there are some pieces that help us process this and watch the line of redemption. So let's go. An enslaved person generally could not be identified by clothing, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, whereas in colonial America, the slaves were Africans, they were blacks. If you saw a black in South Carolina in the 1600's, he wasn't in business. He was a slave. Slavery was marked by an ethnic group. That is not the case in the ancient Near East. Anybody could be a slave. You'll see that more as we work through.

The cultural and religious traditions of slaves were usually that of their masters or owners. So the Africans, until the gospel really began to penetrate and move through, had a completely different religious cultural structure than their white owners. They had a completely different way of living, a completely different way of eating, a completely different way of interacting with God Almighty. They were just completely different. That usually wasn't the case in the ancient world.

Now let me give you a huge difference. In the ancient Near East, education of slaves was seen as smart business practice. So slaves were educated by their masters, most times to the point where they are smarter than and more educated than their owners. Let me give you two examples of where this plays out in the Bible itself. Joseph was a slave who ended up being second in power to Pharaoh in Egypt. Daniel was a slave who ended up second in power to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. These were slaves who were so educated and so trained and so smart in how they did things that there was an acknowledgment among their owners that, "This is an extremely gifted individual. Let's let him rise all the way up to the top if they can." You're not going to see that in colonial America. There is no black man who is a congressman in the 1700's. In fact, we're late into the 1900's before that occurs. But in the ancient Near East, it's not uncommon to see a slave rise to an unbelievable amount of power to be able to own land himself and even have slaves that work for him. You had the ability to save your own money, purchase yourself out from slavery and then run the business with the slaves that you had purchased, whom you are educating.

Because slaves were owned by persons across a range of economic levels, they developed no conscious awareness of being a class or a group of people. So in colonial America, they are black men and women. There are elements of Chinese men and women who were enslaved in those early centuries of American history, but primarily they were black men and black women who were dressed similarly, they began to develop their own culture, they began to develop their own class and they began to see and look around and go, "We are an oppressed people." Like Israel in Egypt, they began to sense the heavy hand of their master as a group. That is not the case in the ancient Near East, because you could be a millionaire and have a slave as your neighbor living in a house nicer than yours and not even be able to tell by how they dressed, where they lived, how they walked or how they talked that they were a slave.

In contrast to New World slavery, ancient owners did not regard their adult slaves paternalistically. You'll find littered through our shameful history this idea that the black man and woman are so ignorant that we, as the white master, would need to parent them, lest they destroy themselves. And some of even Christianity's brightest minds bought into this nonsense. George Whitfield, one of the greatest evangelists of the modern Christian era, saw thousands and thousands of men and women become believers in Christ. But he believed and was instrumental in the slave trade and slaves being brought into Georgia. And he would rail against the mistreatment of those slaves and would build these compounds where those slaves could be educated and trained and given a trade, but they still were slaves. He justified slavery by saying, "We have to protect these people from themselves." That simply is not the case in the ancient Near East. Just to contrast it, Aristotle was the first one in the ancient world who began to say, "It looks as though there are certain people who do labor better than others." Nobody bought in to that and they thought he was a buffoon for that idea. So when Aristotle was being called a moron, you know that the ancient Near East is not buying in to this idea that certain people are made out for slavery and certain people are not. These are two vastly different ideas.

Now let me give you one more here. Persons not infrequently sold themselves into slavery to pay debt or to avoid poverty. So on the socioeconomic scale, the slave was not the bottom level, the day laborer was. So the guy who has to wake up every morning and go, "How am I going to eat today? I need to do some task, I need to do some work, I need to get something done so I can feed my family," he's at the bottom rung. The slave could be the prince of Persia. He could be sitting on a throne next to Nebuchadnezzar. The slave might be working at the left hand of Caesar himself, whereas the day laborer is forced every day to try to find something to do to make money to feed his family. So that bottom rung would often offer themselves up to slavery in the hopes that they might be educated, trained and then released in the year of Jubilee, which we will cover later. Or if they owed debts, they would offer up themselves to work off those debts. They weren't kidnapped from another land and forced into labor. They sold themselves into slavery to cover debt or to learn a trade and make a better life for themselves. No African did that. No African went, "I'd like to try to survive a long six weeks at sea in the hopes that I would be forced into an ungodly amount of labor until I died. I would like that as opposed to running free in the beautiful, lush jungle." I don't know that there is any historical record of an African going, "I'll take slavery in the New World."

Now that we know that there is a difference between the grid by which we see slavery and how slavery is viewed in the Scriptures, let me just go through a couple of biblical insight for you regarding slavery. And this will begin to show us the trajectory of God eliminating once and for all the injustice of particularly one people group, one ethnicity suppressing and relegating as lesser than other ethnicities. Notice in the creation narrative when it's not good for man to be alone and man has a lot of work to do, God doesn't give the man slaves; He gives man a wife and says, "Have babies. Fill the earth, subdue it. It's going to be a lot of work. You're going to need some babies." So men, grow up, get a skill, find a wife, have babies, fill the earth and subdue it. It's not, "Here are seven brothers to help you." That's not what happened. So you begin to see God in the theocracy use Israel as an agent of His righteous wrath against some people in the ancient world. If you'll remember the slaughter of the Canaanites, God says, "It's because of their wickedness, not because of your goodness, that I uses you to destroy them." So you'll see God, in His righteous wrath, use Israel as a tool in His hands to judge other nations.

But then let me give you some differences between the ancient Near East's functioning of slavery even as we outlined above and the biblical commands. He holidays for festivals and the weekly Sabbath rest were extended to slaves in Israel. That was not true in other cultures. If you'll remember the passages in Leviticus that begin to unpack the Sabbath and the New Moon Festivals and the Festivals of New Grain and Wine, it was commanded in all those festivals that the Israelites weren't allowed to shut it down and party while the slaves continued to work. He said, "Everybody parties or I kill everybody." So on the Sabbath, the slave gets off too. On the New Moon, the slave is off too. In the Grain and Wine Festival, they're shutting down the field, they're putting down the oxen and nobody works. They all celebrate.

In both Old and New Testament, provisions are made for the slave to be a part of religious festivals and rituals. This is completely different than how even Rome viewed it, where Rome viewed that the presence of a slave in a religious ceremony somehow made the ceremony unclean. So they were good enough to run the empire; they just weren't good enough to participate in the religious practices. But God tells Israel, "No, they're coming in to the temple and they are worshiping Me."

No interest loans within Israel were an attempt by God to reduce the amount of slave debt. So if I owed you \$100 grand and I came and said, "I can't pay \$100 grand. Please don't send me to prison. Please don't have me arrested. Let me work off my debt," you could not biblically go, "Okay, but at 20% interest per year." You were not allowed to put interest on my debt if I put myself into slavery under you to work off a debt. That was also not heard of in the ancient Near East.

The release of Hebrew debt slaves after a certain number of years compared with the rest of the ancient world was completely unique outside of maybe some obscure parts of the Codes of Hammurabi. In the end, you got the year of Jubilee. If you go look at some of the old negro spirituals, they would sing about the year of Jubilee, because biblically the year of Jubilee was the year when everyone was set free. If you were a Hebrew slave, you were set free from someone else's ownership of you. In addition to that, in Deuteronomy 15, the owner of that slave, upon setting him free, was required by God to give material assistance to the man or woman that he was releasing so the man didn't go right back into slavery. So once again, this is vastly different. You're beginning to watch God whittle away at and chisel away at the foundational ideas of slavery.

Limitations were placed upon the severity of beatings, and freedom was granted to any slave who was permanently damaged. So if you snapped and beat your slave to the point where he didn't heal, walked with a limp or you hurt him in a way that he or she did not recover, then they were free and material assistance would be required of you. You would have to enable them, help them begin a new life.

Masters are repeatedly admonished to turn away from harshness and to show genuine care for their slaves, transforming this slave/master relationship into more of a brother type of relationship. Scripture strongly denounces foreign countries (in particular Gaza and Tyre) from kidnapping from other countries and forcing people into slavery. So although there is not text in the Bible that universally condemns slavery as a whole, colonial slavery and the modern day sex slavery that you're beginning to see specials on and Christian groups are beginning to fight against is explicitly condemned in the Scriptures repeatedly. The idea of stealing someone from this country or kidnapping someone from this place and forcing them into slavery was viewed as wicked, and God used the nation of Israel to punish those countries and, even in some cases, destroy those countries outright.

There's one last one that I want to mention here. In a radical departure from the prevalent views of the day, Israel became a safety zone for runaway slaves. So if you escaped Gaza, if you escaped Tyre, if you escaped any of the neighboring countries and made it into Israel, Israel had not extradition treaties with any of those countries. If you made it into Israel, you were a free man or woman. They would not send you back to your master, and they would not enslave you when you got in. What you'll see over and over again in the Old and New Testaments is the command put on God's people to serve, to feed, to love and to embrace the alien stranger and sojourner. This is the slave that escapes oppression and lands in Israel. So think of the redemptive themes that are already being the redemptive seeds that are being sown when God says, "If you make it into Israel, you're free. If you make it into My people, you are free." This is a shadow of what is to come.

Now if we continue to follow this progression into the New Testament, you're going to see the foundation completely ripped out from beneath it by the apostle Paul as he begins to write, particularly the book of Philemon. In the book of Philemon, you have Paul who has converted what most theologians agree is a runaway slave. There is no real evidence that he's a runaway slave, but we just know that Paul converts the slave to Jesus Christ and is sending him back to Philemon. But in Philemon 1:16, Paul says, "I send him not back to you as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord, not temporarily, but forever." So in that book of Philemon, you begin to see all the seeds taking root in this idea that he's not sending him back as a slave. That relationship between the two has been forever changed because the slave had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. So now they don't have a slave/master relationship; they have a brotherly relationship. And how is a brother commanded in the Scriptures to walk with another brother? He is to outdo that brother in honor. He is to consider that brother better than himself. He is to serve, he is to love, he is to help and he is to protect. All of the slave/master relationship, both in the old on through modern notions of slavery, are destroyed in the gospel of Jesus Christ when Paul says, "I send him back to you, not as a slave, but as a brother, and I'm sending him back

to you forever, which means you're both going to die and you're both going to stand before God and you're both going to worship God forever, together." This is that redemptive flow that we see happening in the Scriptures when it comes to slavery.

Now most people don't want to do that work. Most people don't want to really wrestle with it. They just want to use this as an excuse and then build around that excuse with the hypocrisy of people they know and then go, "See? God can't be trusted. The Bible can't be trusted." But in reality, if we're honest, you're lazy and watch the Discovery Channel too much.

Now what we're going to see play out as history progresses is there are certain ones who get this early on and there are certain ones who take a while for this to sink in. So really you've got Britain getting very involved in the slave trade until William Wilberforce and John Newton begin to see these things and say, "Uh uh." They have a fifty year fight against the slave trade that cost them money, energy, political power and persuasion, but it ended the slave trade and ended slavery altogether by year 70. Here is one of the big ironies for me about people who go, "Oh, the Bible condones slavery" as an excuse not to look in the face of the God of the universe and submit their lives to Him. At every point along the way, it was a battle that was fought by godly, ferocious men who, at great peril to their own lives and personal safety, preached the truths of Scripture, to not only end slavery altogether, but end segregation, to end oppression and begin to create an environment in which equality under the gospel of Jesus Christ is a norm and not an exception. So for all the ranting and raving over this topic in particular, in reality, from Wilberforce to Martin Luther King Jr., it is men who have submitted to the Scriptures. Neither one of them were perfect, and both of them would probably be put under church discipline at the Village to be honest. But at any case, they both fight ferociously for the equality of all men based on the Scriptures. "Well, there were guys out there using the Bible to justify it." Yeah, and David Koresh used the Bible to tell people he was Jesus. You're using the Bible to make an argument that's not valid. You're guilty of the same thing. You're making accusations for others to be guilty of. Do you see it's somewhat of an ironic twist?

Now let me try to close out with this. I think the reason I've always been drawn towards those who have a lot of questions about our faith is because I need to know people want this to be false. You should want with everything in you, even if you're the most hardened atheist imaginable and you have a poster of Christopher Hitchens above your bed, even if you're that guy, you should want the message of the Scriptures to be true. It begins to make sense of the reality that things have gone wrong. And nobody would say that they haven't. Everybody knows that something has gone wrong. The Bible gives us a framework for what it is. "This is why marriage is hard. . .this is why children rebel. . .this is why we're prone to addiction. . .this is why we're prone to violence. . .this is why we're prone to idolatry. . .this is why we're prone to depression. . .this is why we have rage in our hearts. . .this is why we \_\_\_\_." On and on we could go, it gives us the framework for what has gone wrong. And then it gives us the hope that grace pays the bill, that Christ has made right what we cannot do, that God has fixed what we can't fix despite all our effort. You should want that to be true. Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

For me the picture of "life abundantly" was drawn that if you didn't love Jesus and you didn't go to church, you were this bitter, angry person who was eventually going to kill yourself or someone else. You must be all strung out on Jack Daniels, waiting to die. And here's what happened as I began to interact with people who weren't Christians. I just simply haven't found that to be true. Now some of that I have found, both inside and outside of the church. But in reality, I can speak very honestly about some of my neighbors who are not interested in Jesus Christ at all and they love their wives well. In fact, there have been some scenes that have just been nasty. They're sixty-years-old, and I've been looking out the window and there is pinching going on and kissing going on. I'm just like, "That's awesome, but please take it inside." They love their wives, they love their children, they manage their money well and they are not slaves to any type of addiction. They seem genuinely happy. And so when you're told that everyone outside of the church is a baby killer and you end up finding out that there are some really good people who love their wives and love their children and do

life well, you begin to go, "What else was I lied to about?" Here's the truth of the Scriptures. Outside of Jesus Christ, you can't experience the fullness of anything. Can you enjoy things? Absolutely. It's called "common grace." You can enjoy your wife, you can enjoy your children, you can enjoy vacation, you can enjoy good food and you can enjoy good wine. You can enjoy all those things. It's common grace. But the reality is those things are all a shadow of a deeper and more profound reality. And if you don't know Jesus Christ, you cannot enjoy that deeper reality. So you are always at a surface level of your enjoyment, even when it comes to good food, good wine, good friends, good vacations and beautiful parts of the planet. I don't know anyone who lays on the beach in some tropical, spectacular location and goes, "Man, I'm glad there's just a giant ball of gas up there that is burning that has made this longitude and latitude so perfect." Maybe you do. Maybe science nerds do that. Maybe they go, "Thank God for hydrogen." But in reality, if you're aware of the Creator God of the universe, then all of a sudden there is something to be praised, there is something to be exalted, there is something to be made much of in your food, in your wine, in your friends, in your vacation, in the beauty of nature. All of it screams that there is something behind all of it. Why would you not want to believe that? Why would you not want to embrace that?

And then it solves the great fear of what happens when we die. Please get past the ethereal sitting on a cloud and playing a harp for billions and billions of years. We are resurrected, according to 1 Corinthians 15, in actual bodies. There will be a new heaven and new earth. We reign and rule with God. We no longer need the hydrogen gas in the sky because God will be our light. He will dwell among us. We will not have to wonder about Him; He will be there. And we will reign and rule with Him forever. Ephesians says that it will take the coming ages, millenniums, for you to grasp how deep and wide and profound His love and joy is for you in Christ. And that's what we've got coming for us, which is why 1 Corinthians 15, in reference to that day he says, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" I'm always a bit bothered when that text is used not to talk about resurrection at a funeral. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" I'm always like, "Everyone is crying in here and there is a casket up front. Right here would be the sting of death." Now, one day it has no more sting. One day it has no victory. You and I live in the "already, not yet" tension, where Christ has paid for in full and now we wait for Him to usher it in to completion at His return.

So if you're in a dark night of the senses, if you're just walking in a season of doubt, it's okay. Let's just not pretend that that's not happening. Seek out answers and be honest. If it was just all you could do to drag yourself here today because God feels so far from you and you feel like you're in such a dark spot and you're just being owned by your doubts right now, and somebody you know has just been peppering you with question or you read a book that you weren't prepared for and it's got you in a spiral, it's okay. Just don't pretend that's not where you are. Be honest. Go, "Man, I don't know how to answer these questions. They really bother me. They are removing my joy from the Lord, and I don't know what to do." Confess that and be honest about that. And let's walk and try to answer those questions. There are hard, hard texts in the Bible. The Bible says that the Bible is hard. Peter, in 1 Peter, says, "Some of you guys have been reading Paul's letters. I've read them myself, and I don't know what he's talking about." That's a paraphrase, but in the end, the Bible acknowledges that the Bible is hard. We don't have to lie. Can you imagine what we could be if we would simply go, "I'm not in a good spot right now. Here's what my doubts are. Here's what my fears are. I feel far from Him"? Because if we don't do that and we're not that kind of place, then slowly but surely you just fade, for one reason or another. You may get a new hobby. All of a sudden you pick up golf and want to get better at golf. Then all of a sudden, church isn't so important. Or you pick up some other hobby. You slowly but surely begin to walk away and get farther and farther away until one day it's just gone and you don't believe anymore. And when you're asked, "What happened? Why don't you believe anymore?" it's hard to even trace what it was, so you say something like, "I just got out of the habit of going." When all of that could have been avoided if we just wouldn't pretend. I've been here for eight years, and we continually come back to this idea that if you can't be honest, we've got nowhere to go. If you're honest, we've got a chance. But if you're going to lie to yourself and lie to everyone else around you and pretend that you're fine when you're not, we've got no chance at ever breaking out of these spiritual ruts that we're in. It's in confession and repentance that the soul

is healed, not in you cleaning yourself up to make yourself presentable to church folk. Church folk are like Camelot. It looks really beautiful on the outside, but once you get inside you see Lancelot sleeping with the queen and civil war is about to break out. So forget Camelot and let's cling to the cross.

So if you're a skeptic, if you're maybe not a believer at all, at least have the intellectual integrity to doubt your doubts with the same ferocity that you doubt the claims of God in Scripture. At least do the hard work of seeing who this God is and how He has revealed Himself to man. Don't just go, "Let me find a verse to go into the ground to then build my hypocrisy argument around." Because if you'll start down that path of honestly trying to find out what God says about Himself, it will only be a matter of time before we call each other brothers. Because that's how He got me. Then I was like, "Oh no, He got me."

Let's pray. "Jesus, I thank You for truth. I thank You that You pursue us with that truth. And I want us as a congregation to acknowledge that there are parts of our heart and parts of our mind that still hold some bigotry. There are some parts of us who still stereotype, almost as an automatic response to certain races. So we ask for Your forgiveness. I thank You for how slowly but surely the Village has become more and more and more of a blended environment. I pray for more of this. I pray for more black men and women to feel at home here, more Hispanic men and women to feel at home here, more mixed couples to feel at home here and the beautiful babies that they create to have a home here. God help us. Some of us have come in here banged up and skeptical. Some of us are in deep need to confess that we're walking in a lot of doubt right now, and we're in desperate need of You to intervene and desperate need of us to just be honest about where we are confused, where we are doubting and where we feel far from You. And so help us in these things, Spirit, as we move into a time of singing songs unto You and worshipping You through those songs. We celebrate the fact that there is truth to be had and that truth will set us free. So Holy Spirit, manifest Yourself in a powerful way. We love You and it's for Your beautiful name. Amen."