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## Chapter 8: Intellectual Obstacles to Wisdom

By Chip Lamca

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, the obstacles of absolute truth and moral absolutes were addressed. An examined life includes the reason and experience; both bearing testimony that there are some things we can know for sure. In the area of morals, certainly, there are personal moral decisions. Cultural morals exist in the sense that what may be considered right in one society could be considered unacceptable in another. However, there are also universal truths and that standard of truth begs for a standard maker. In this chapter, the focus shifts to the intellectual obstacles of Jesus as the only way to salvation, faith and what it is and is not, and the ever-troubling problem of doubt as a Christian.

There are a number of reasons that a person might not adopt a Christian worldview. The Christian worldview puts God at the center of life, and culture seemingly wants to push him to the periphery. For some, the reticence to prioritize God is emotional, or cultural, while for others, the obstacle is intellectual. Wisdom, in the context of this book, is the art of living successfully, and putting God at the center of one's worldview will lead to successful living. This chapter is entitled "Intellectual Obstacles to Wisdom," but let it be clear that these are not insurmountable obstacles. Generations of learned and reasonable men and women have considered the claims of the Christian worldview and found them to be more than satisfactory.

The Christian assertion that Jesus is the one true way to salvation is the first obstacle addressed in this chapter. The second obstacle examined here is the idea of faith and what might be a misconception of what faith is or is not. The third obstacle is doubt, which is related to faith. How does one overcome doubt or, perhaps more pointedly, can someone claiming to have faith, also have doubts about certain teachings of the Christian worldview?

### The One Way to Salvation

For those who come from a Western mindset and even a culturally Christian worldview—that is to say, a worldview that has been heavily influenced by the Christian worldview—there can be a struggle when approaching the idea that Jesus Christ might be the one way to salvation. There exists a sensitivity, or an anxiety in the concept that Jesus or any religion, system, or person, for that matter, could be the only way. If Jesus is the only way, it follows that no other person or system can be the way. In a post-9/11 context, the desire of many is to find a way to coexist, get along, and live at peace with others, and the claim for any one person, religion, or system seems to fly in the face of those ideals.

When this text has spoken of salvation, the emphasis has not been on destination, but location. In other words, it is not about how one gets to heaven, but how one can receive forgiveness, fellowship, and restoration with the Holy Triune God from whom humanity has been estranged since the fall of Adam. Certainly, this volume affirms the destination of heaven and eternal life; however, it also holds that eternal life begins here on earth as individuals give their lives to Christ and are forgiven of their sins. Some have made the case that Christianity not just proclaims Jesus as the only way to salvation, but it is the only faith that is offering salvation (Migliore, 2004). Hinduism offers liberation from the death and life cycle; Islam, the hope of obtaining the mercy of Allah through submission to his will; whereas Buddhism's goal is the emptying of self. Christianity, among the major religions, is unique in suggesting that one can be brought back into right relationship with the God of the universe (Migliore, 2004, p. 318).

### Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is the concept that there are many ways to God, that one's own religion probably is not the whole story, and that other religions add to the full understanding. Religious pluralism will also hold that differing religions, when considered carefully, are not really all that different. It is based on a belief that two or more opposing beliefs can be compatible at the same time in the same way. According to this view, ultimately, all religions say the same things or at least offer a piece of reality.

Pluralism is expressed contemporarily more as a strategy toward interreligious peace than as a statement of belief about a particular religion. It is based upon a desire for harmony, absence of conflict, and an underlying, and historically unsustainable, belief that all or most wars are the outgrowth of religious disagreement. Christianity and the Bible are certainly for peace; however, it is a distortion of

the Christian message to think that peace is of greater importance than truth. Throughout the Old Testament, for example, there was a repeatedly failed practice of bringing in other gods and other beliefs so that people and governments would be appeased, and time and again, the strategy failed.

## Christian Exclusivism

**Christian exclusivism** is the concept that there is only one way to God or to pleasing God. This is sometimes referred to as a restrictivist, or essentialist, view. It should be noted that the religious exclusivist phrase was coined in derision to the belief that there is only one way to salvation. It would be too general a statement to say that all religions are exclusivist, but it would be fair to say that most religions are going to believe themselves right, or they would simply not exist. Christianity, historically and overwhelmingly, has held this view. Christians, during the time of the Roman Empire, for example, were accused of being atheists because they believed in one Triune God, but did not believe in Caesar as a god. They held an exclusivist view, even if this view would lead to their persecution or death.

A Christian exclusivist view continues to be the norm as some two billion of the world's seven billion people identify themselves as Christians (Pew-Templeton, n.d.). These people identify themselves as Christians, and in so doing, identify themselves as not something else. They judge themselves to be followers or adherents of Jesus of Nazareth. Like the followers of Christ nearly 2,000 years ago, many present day Christians face death for believing that God demands their exclusive devotion.

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the care of orphans and widows (James 1:26-27).  
th Christ, but, nonetheless, it is religion.

## Christian Inclusivism

Inclusivism is also considered a Christian viewpoint, but it is plagued by some serious problems. **Christian inclusivism** contends that while pluralism is to be rejected, so too should exclusivism. Inclusivism posits that one could be saved by grace while never knowing that Jesus is the means of grace through his sacrifice for sins, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. Despite what would appear to be an overlooking of scriptural passages that would indicate exclusivism, inclusivism can be very appealing to Christians because it seemingly meets a need to remain true to the gospel message while giving answers to the difficult questions about those who have never heard the gospel (Morgan & Peterson, 2008). Christian inclusivism, however, falls short of being a satisfactory answer when faced with the biblical record that says that salvation requires calling on the name of the Lord (Romans 10 English Standard Version).

## A Look at the Scriptures

The heart of what a person should believe about God is neither the political climate of the day, nor the designs of philosophy, but is rooted in what God has revealed in Scripture. With that in mind, what are the key areas of Scripture that have helped to form the idea that Jesus is the only way? Most often, an exclusivist position will be drawn from John 14, Acts 4, and Acts 17. Although this is far from an exhaustive list, these passages do provide solid ground on which to explore for the purposes of this brief treatment.

### *The Way, the Truth, the Life*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus was comforting his followers. He discussed the afterlife and gave a description of what it would be like to live with God. In the midst of this, one of his disciples confessed that he neither knew where Jesus was going, nor how to get there. In response to that, Jesus said to him:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him (John 14:6-7).

Had he only stopped with the first phrase, the door might have been open for broader interpretation. One might then have concluded that Jesus is the way, but he never said that he was the only way, however, in the next sentence, he declared that there is no coming to God, the Father, except through himself, the Son. "John 14:6 is one of those verses that are difficult not because we do not understand them but because we understand them all too well" (Kaiser et al., 1996, p. 500). In other words, it is not difficult to understand what it means, but it seems controversial to a society that wants to include everyone. The disposition of this text is that the Bible is God-breathed. It is authoritative and as such, must be taken seriously. One attempts to understand it because a follower of Christ will need to follow his direction, even if it is uncomfortable at times.

### **No Other Name**

Another significant passage is found in Acts 4. In this chapter, Peter and John are on trial before the Sanhedrin, a religious court, and, in the first question of the trial, Peter and John were asked by whose authority were they speaking, teaching, and healing. Peter responded by saying that they were under the authority of Jesus and that, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Once again, there is little room given for other teachers. Peter was speaking to a Jewish court and might have talked about being children of Abraham or followers of Moses, but he pointed to the authority of Jesus as the only one by whom men and women might find salvation.

Jesus Christ's unique ability to save has been likened to that of a firefighter's ability to rescue victims from a fire (Kaiser, 1996). Christ, like the firefighter, has the unique capabilities to rescue from disaster. Those who are being rescued from the fire may not like the idea that they are helpless to save themselves. Similarly, victims in the fire may not like being unable to choose who will bring them to safety as well as being unable to choose how they will be brought to safety. Still, Christ, in one's spiritual disaster, is like the firefighter, who is uniquely available, willing, and capable to free a person from his or her demise (Kaiser, 1996).

### **Struggling with God's Purpose**

A common concern that is expressed regarding Jesus as the only way to salvation is the question about those who have never heard the gospel. In what might look like an inclusivist position, 1 Timothy 2:4 states that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." But the very next sentence in this chapter is a claim to exclusivity: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). God's desire is expressed in that he "wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

If a person were to stop reading at this point, they might wrongly conclude that Paul was illogically proposing that salvation is both inclusive and exclusive in the same sense. In fact, God desires to include all, but he desires to include them exclusively through Christ. As one reads on, Paul indicates that the means of sharing the gospel for the purpose of salvation is one appointed to humans: "and for this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle ..." (1 Timothy 2:7a). This would seem to eliminate an inclusivist position and provides insight into the missionary question of what happens with those who have not heard the news that Christ has come to save them.

Christians historically and overwhelmingly believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that has led to a remarkable effort to reach those who have never heard the message of salvation. For hundreds of years, the churches of Europe and North America have sent missionaries to minister both at home and in foreign lands. Today, the churches of the developing world have joined in and Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians are going and sharing the message of salvation. God's primary means of sharing this message of reconciliation continues to be those who are his followers (2 Corinthians 5:18).

in church? In fact, it bothers Christians, as well. Indeed, "I intentionally try to get to know new people I know are Missing Something, 2013).

he might have faith that is capable of moving g away his earthly goods, but without love, these ith that, however, the early church leader James have works, is dead" (James 2:17). James talks in re without proper clothing or hungry and makes it ng over them (James 2:18-26). Loving faith

ings in the name of religion, but there are many faith. When disasters strike, churches organize and that churches or denominations often founded churches that quietly house groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, shelters for abused women and children, and so often missionaries and other church-sponsored disaster strikes, and local Christian believers come to common activities and programs, from drilling wells so humanity flourish and live well because humans

## Faith

The vast majority of the world's population identifies themselves as having a faith of one sort or another. Only in recent times have any significant numbers of people begun to view life from a worldview that is devoid of any kind of deity. Yet, faith is often misunderstood as blind, simplistic, or an escape from reality. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, attitudes about faith have swung from being generally positive, or at least unobjectionable, to concerns that people of faith should be viewed with suspicion.

There are religious people who are **hypocrites**. Well, of course, Matthew will identify 13 times when Jesus talks about it. It should not surprise one, then, to find hypocrites in a church is rightly a hospital for the healing of sins. Individuals looking for perfect people should not be wanting to find people who have been through just about anything. They may find that their healing and flourishing will take

### The Textures of Faith

It could be tempting to take Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," as a definition of faith. What the passage does is frame and introduce a gallery of people who lived by faith and who saw their faith rewarded by God. The exploits of the persons portrayed would have been familiar to the original readers of the first century when the book was written. Those named in Hebrews 11 range from Abraham, a spiritual giant for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to Rahab the prostitute, a woman known for her role in helping to hide the spies sent to assess the strength of Jericho. Faith is multifaceted and vibrant and that is evidenced in this chapter of Scripture.

Faith, at its essence, is a transfer of trust from one entity to some other entity. One might move their trust from church to science, for example, or from an idea of a god-force to the God seen in the Bible. Most often in the churches of the United States, one sees faith move from a dependence on one's self to dependence on God—from selfishness to selflessness.

### Steadfastness

More than two billion people around the world profess to have faith in God through Jesus Christ. International Christian Concern (n.d), however, estimates that almost a tenth of all Christians are under persecution. Sadly, the words of a refugee Syrian Christian could be repeated in many other parts of the world, "Where we live, 10 churches have been burned down. They started to threaten Christians in the town we live. When the local priest was executed, we decided to leave" (International Christian Concern, 2013). For the majority of the world, Christian faith has come at little personal cost. Generally, Christianity is respected and people are free to worship and to practice their faith, with virtually unlimited access to the Scriptures and biblical studies.

It is natural then, that it is difficult to identify fully with the original audience of the book of Hebrews. In the chapter that precedes the aforementioned and often-quoted single verse in Hebrews 11, nearly an entire chapter is devoted to the steadfastness of faith. The writer addressed people who had been ridiculed, people who had been imprisoned, and people who had their property confiscated (Hebrews 10:33-34). To these people, the author of Hebrews offered encouragement to live by faith and to continue proclaiming their hope in God.

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Hebrews 10:36-39).

There is a beauty in these verses that echoes through the centuries. On the one hand, they are being encouraged that deliverance is on the way, and the author was fighting the same battles. On the other hand, there is a tough challenge here, as well, reminding the reader that eternity is on the line. In Hebrews 11, there are numerous examples given showing that God can be trusted to keep his promises. The recipients of Hebrews, originally written as a letter, were not the first who had suffered, and they could have the hope that God, who has brought his followers through impossible situations in the past, could do the same for them.

### ***Evidence or Evidences?***

The Bible starts with the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Although there are great arguments for the existence of God, Moses, the author of Genesis, does not appear nearly as concerned about explaining God's existence as those who are trying to make sense of God centuries later. The Bible's beginning presupposed God, simply stating what he did and not trying to convince the reader, and the rest of the Bible continues in a similar way. In today's modern and moving to post-modern age, people desire evidence along the lines of the television show, *CSI*.

What Christians have, though, are evidences rather than *CSI*-type evidence, which include things such as:

- Portions of the Bible that date to within 30 years of the lives of the Apostles
- More portions of Scripture than any other ancient work
- Archeological ruins that correlate to descriptions in the Bible
- References from the writings of other cultures that verify the existence of people like King David
- Affirmations by people such as the historian Josephus of the historic existence of Jesus

These evidences are certainly not ironclad *CSI*-type exhibits that cause one to cry out that he or she believes, but a reasonable person should be willing to at least consider the evidences and conclude that they are pointing in a direction, perhaps.

### ***Reason***

From the very beginning of this text, it has been pointed out that faith is at the basis of all worldviews. While this is most evident in religion, it is clearly part of the other sciences, as well. In the field of biology, there is an underlying faith assumption that systems will work in a predictable way. Engineers design bridges with the faith that a particular set of calculations will always be true given atmospheric variables and that the tensile strength of the steel used in the project will tolerate the loads. A worldview, even if secular, is based upon faith in what has been observed.

Students often begin a Christian worldview class with the mistaken idea that they are going to be forced to become Christians or receive a low grade if they do not parrot Christian ideas. Some students, upon starting this text, may have expected a constant refrain of, "because the Bible says so; that's why" as a response to any number of questions. While it would be safe to say that the contributors to this text believe the Bible is God's Word, thinking that the big questions about life have not been put together with the use of God's Word and reason would be naive.

The ideas presented in this and other chapters are not original nor are they new. They have been hammered out, debated, and borrowed. If something is true, it is true, and a Christian should be glad to work through elements that are difficult. C.S. Lewis said, "Now Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods" (Lewis, 1952, p. 140). A Christian worldview relishes reason and reasoned conversation. That does not mean that some Christians will not feel inadequate to the task of working out some of the big questions of life, but there is reason behind the fundamentals of Christian belief.

### ***The Object of Faith***

From the Christian worldview, faith is based upon God's nature and past activity. That is to say, faith is based less on the practitioner of faith and more upon the object of faith. Hebrews 11 presents faith as something more concrete than what the popular concept allows, and it points to people who have lived by faith as an example of faith realized. The first verse calls faith, both the "assurance of things hoped for," and, "the conviction of things not seen." So from where does this assurance and confidence come?

There are 17 times in the Bible in which God is described as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Why would he be identified as such? It identifies God for what he has done. Just as people might present themselves by where they have worked and what they have done, God is identified as the God of three

important people to whom mankind can relate. Abraham was a convert from polytheism who trusted God. Isaac was Abraham's son and a person of faith who was himself the result of God's faithfulness. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, son of Isaac, and serves as an example of how even bad character can be transformed by God's supernatural activity. God continues to work in the lives of people. A common refrain from Christians is that they know God is real because of what he has done in their lives. Reformer John Calvin describes the Bible as a self-authenticating book because as one steadfastly, consistently attempts to live it out and to follow what God has presented over time, it changes one's life (Calvin, 1599/1845). Faith is anything but blind. History has seen God at work, and believers have seen him at work in their lives.

eral, and of the Christian faith in particular, is that belief is to look at the lifestyle of the believers. It is to come up with people who claim to be Christian or other less media-drawing ways. God does not , and the word Jesus used for it was hypocrisy. detrimental to the faith of those around them (1 believers, they should be seen in the context that or would be follower.

hen a person claims to be a follower of Jesus but t to object of faith is wrong. Rather, it is an is either a hypocrite, or not yet mature in what they ately, do not negate the object of faith.

## Doubt

People who study the Christian worldview are a diverse lot. Some begin the study as firm believers in God, while others are culturally aware of the Christian faith and willingly call themselves Christians. Others, who begin to investigate the Christian faith, have never seriously considered Christianity or, perhaps, are opposed for some reason. Regardless of the starting point, it is clear that there will be varying responses to the message.

Along the way, as faith is moved from a self-focused worldview to a God-focused worldview, there will be questions. Perhaps it is over a six-day creation, a worldwide flood, or a Jesus being raised from the dead. Whatever the place of difficulty, it seems that a God who has done the things he has claimed would be up to an honest challenge.

Luke 1 presents two accounts of people who seemingly make statements of doubt, to whom God responds in very different ways. First, when John the Baptist's birth is foretold, his father Zechariah, who in Luke 1:6 is called a "righteous" man, responds that because of the advanced age of he and his wife, he could not be sure that the angel was correct. He was struck mute until eight days after his son's birth. The second case is with Mary when the birth of Jesus is foretold. She asked, "How will this be ... since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34) but there was no punishment. God was not being inconsistent. Both made statements that could be understood as doubt, but Zechariah's response reveals that he did not believe, while Mary was asking in wonderment. Unlike Zechariah, who did not really believe John was going to be born, Mary did not question whether God could do what he claimed he was going to do. She merely asked how God would do it. One further recognizes that even in Zechariah's case, his temporary muteness led to even further glory being given to God (Luke 1:67-79).

A helpful way of thinking about doubt is that it allows individuals to find one or two things they can really trust—not as an endpoint, but as a launching pad, which allows a thinking person with the desire to embrace belief in a rational God to move from unbelief to belief. When Paul spoke to the most learned people of the ancient world in Athens, the conclusion was mixed (Acts 16:22-34). He had laid out a case for God, and it dealt with some of the great philosophical questions of the day, confronting the different schools of thought. In the end, some mocked him, others believed, and still others committed to hearing him again and keeping an open mind. People in the third group, perhaps, should not think of themselves as not believing, but not believing yet.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the subjects discussed in the chapter are obstacles to many. The first obstacle covered dealt with the question of Jesus being the only way to salvation and is embedded in the truthfulness of the statement, and not in the concern that it is impolite to say that Jesus is the only way. The second obstacle regarding faith, is best understood when approached from the biblical viewpoint of assurance

and substance (Hebrews 11:1), rather than a blind hope or wishful thinking. Faith, properly understood, is based upon the work of God through centuries. The third point was that doubt is a part of the Christian's life, but it is not the end of a relationship with God, rather, it is an opportunity to continue to investigate and seek the truth.

In the next chapter, the problem of suffering will be examined and it is an area of great difficulty at the emotional level, as much as the intellectual. These are obstacles, certainly, but no reader of this text is the first to ever seek to overcome them. Many have and will struggle with these concepts, but as the writer of Hebrews 12:1 and 2 says, no one runs the race alone.

## Chapter Review

### Main Ideas

- There is a strong biblical claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation.
- Among the religions of the world, Christianity alone offers reconciliation between God and mankind.
- Faith, while it can be as simple and pure as that of a child, is rich and vibrant.
- Faith is the transfer of trust from one person or object to another.
- Faith carries with it an element of steadfastness or endurance.
- Evidences for faith are many and varied, but are not to be confused with proof of God's existence or the veracity of the Bible; ultimately, trust is needed.
- Reason is an essential element of faith, as in a Christian worldview, God is approached with all of the tools available.
- It is not the fervor of faith, nor the passion of faith, but the object of faith that is most significant.
- Doubt is a common factor for both those who are outside of Christianity and those who call themselves believers.
- Doubt should never be considered the end of an encounter of faith, but rather, as the launching pad.

### Key Terms

- **Christian Exclusivism:** The historical concept that Jesus is the only way.
- **Christian Inclusivism:** The view that holds that one can be saved by Jesus Christ while perhaps never knowing that it was he who saved him or her.
- **Hypocrisy:** In terms of the Christian worldview, a dichotomy between one's faith and one's actions.
- **Religious Pluralism:** A view that holds that all religions hold a piece of the puzzle.

### Application of Knowledge

- Students looking for the smoking gun that proves once and for all that God is real, the Bible is true, and heaven is waiting will be disappointed in this chapter. This chapter deals with obstacles to wisdom—the art of living successfully—as very normal concerns in the course of one's life. To illustrate, imagine that a person is on a journey. Obstacles would not deter most people who have a real interest in arriving at a particular destination. A tree that has fallen across the path, for example, may be formidable. It may cause a few scrapes, and might require some creative ways to get around or go over. It would not likely cause a serious person to turn around and abandon the journey. It is the same with the obstacles in this chapter; there may be concerns about the exclusive claims of Jesus, the nature of faith, or questions of doubt, but in the end, there are answers for those who do not easily turn back.
- Faith, while it can be as simple and pure as that of a child, is rich and vibrant. It is the transfer of trust from one person or object to another. Today, it is more often than not a transfer of trust in oneself to God. Faith carries with it an element of steadfastness or endurance. This has been seen throughout the history of the church, including to the present day, as people in various parts of the world are faced with persecution. Evidences for faith are many and varied, but are not to be confused with proof of God's existence or the veracity of the Bible; ultimately, trust is needed.
- Doubt is a common factor for both those who are outside of Christianity and those who call themselves believers. Doubt could be unbelief, as in the case of Zechariah, or it could be a case that the person, like Mary, is in awe of how some amazing thing could come to pass. Doubt should never be considered the end of an encounter of faith, but as the launching pad.

### Questions for Reflection

1. How can a person believe in Jesus as the only way to salvation and still be tolerant of other worldviews?
2. Is faith real even if I am not emotional about my faith?
3. Can a person have doubts about the Christian worldview and still be a Christian?

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