



Webs Not Walls

Week 7: Jesus is Lord

Brian Mattson - 09/27/2026

The summer after my junior year of high school, and the ensuing senior year, hold some of my favorite memories. My core group of friends had really gelled by that point and we spent so much time together. Almost every weekday that summer, we went bowling together, and many times after that ate lunch and then went swimming. Once school started, we rooted for each other at sporting events. We took our girlfriends to dinners and school dances in groups. We stayed up all night laughing and joking, probably causing more mischief than our parents knew about, because cell phones were for playing Snake and making phone calls. They were not for tracking location or sending texts back in the early 2000s, thanks be to God. And then we graduated and everything changed.

A few of my buddies were staying in town to go to SMS, soon to be MSU. Another went to Drury. Two ventured to Los Angeles, and I was heading up to Columbia to go to Mizzou. Life comes at you fast. All my closest friends were quickly scattered over a couple months in the summer of 2003. All the inside jokes, stories, and relationships would have to be newly created. I did know a few others who were up in Columbia, but they were all pledging fraternities or sororities. I was not. I was moving into a dorm with an assigned roommate named Bill from Dixon, Missouri, who didn't even show up until the day before classes started.

It's a strange experience to meet someone for the very first time, and then a few hours later sleep in the same room on bunk beds. To make matters less comfortable it was mid-August and our room was at the top, the 7th floor, of Hudson Hall and we did not have air conditioning. To those of you about 10-15 years younger than me, saying that all out loud must be similar to how it sounded when my parents told me about black and white television, or when Ronn Crandall tells me he used to ride the city bus around town by himself when he was eight years old. It sounds unbelievable, but it's true. Anyway, back to the uncomfortable first night in the hot dorm room.

As I was laying there sweating, trying to fall asleep while Bill tossed and turned on the top bunk, my mind was racing. It wasn't because of the awkwardness of my new living situation, or the nervousness of starting college. It was because of the first thing Bill's mom said to me when we met. Before any introductions, she blurted out, "Are you a believer?"

I was slightly taken aback by how forward and personal the question was. I knew what she meant, and what she was really asking, but I wondered how off-putting that would've been to someone who was not a "believer?" What if I had been an atheist or agnostic? What about a different spiritual background, like Judaism or Islam? What if I wasn't the same kind of *believer* she was?

The question she posed, in my estimation, came from a place of fear. It came from a mindset molded by our modern culture. Her faith was built like a wall. It was constructed, not only as a place of strength and protection, but something, in essence, to defend. And by asking the question *Are you a believer?* she was determining if she needed to be defensive or friendly. I'm not sure what would've happened if I answered her question differently. In today's culture, the answers we expect from that question are generally one of three: Yes, no, or I don't know. Author Merdith Miller says this question is a product of our current times, but would have been odd in the ancient near-East.

In the ancient world, no one would have framed the question as “Do you believe in God or not?” Instead, the question was, “Which gods do you worship, and what are they like?”

- Meredith Miller

Belief in a deity or deities in those ancient times was a given. There were gods for, and because of, everything. Rain, seasons, kingdoms, territories, rulers, fertility. But Yahweh was different from the other gods. That’s the story we have in scripture—of a people learning to trust in a holy God. A God set apart from the other gods of the times. Yahweh transcends boundaries. Yahweh offers life instead of death, freedom instead of slavery, compassion instead of judgment. That’s what we’ve been talking about these last several weeks: our faith in God is made whole and secure when we anchor it to those truths. When we find our identity rooted in God’s joy, justice, and presence—and there are many more—our faith looks more like a web instead of a wall.

Believing in those truths about God is still a choice for all of us to make today. We may feel like we are much more sophisticated and educated than our ancient ancestors, who were encouraged to denounce the plethora of gods in their day, but we all still struggle with it. Our gods have just taken on different names. Idolatry was a big deal in the days of Moses, and even though we aren’t normally praying to wood or metal figurines, we still place our trust in other things to protect and provide. Miller says:

We have gods called “good education,” “retirement plan,” “personal network,” and “health.” Any of these, and more, can be an idol when they complete this sentence: Whatever happens will be okay because...

- Meredith Miller

I’m sure most of you could complete that sentence in any variety of ways. I could, too. My morals, my family, my work ethic, my skills. And these things

on their own are good and worthy of time, attention, and care. The problem is when they, or other idols we have elevated, usurp what scripture continually reminds us to place our trust and faith in—the God we read about from Genesis to Revelation. Because when we place our trust in manmade things, chances are we will be disappointed. Let down. Meredith Miller notes that the idols we chase after have been similar for all of humanity: money, power, sex, status, family, violence, or nationalism. But she says there are other idols pretending to be the true version of Yahweh. These idols twist the truth about who God really is, and then use *their* interpretation of scripture to prove their point.

Miller has several names for these idols. There's "Old Testament God," who is angry and vengeful when we don't follow the rules. There's the shame-filled God who is continually disappointed when we screw things up with our wrong decisions. She calls one the "Contractual Moralism God," who shows up to protect us and provide for us as long as we are good little boys and girls. She calls one the "neo-Calvinist reformed God," who is mostly concerned with having the precise doctrine, and if you don't, then you are wrong and out of the club.

These are all incomplete or shallow understandings of the nature of God at best. At worst, they are idols of our own making to replace the true way of life set forth in scripture. Rather than relying on our own interpretations of Old Testament scripture to learn how we are supposed to live and what faith looks like, we are lucky to have the best example. Another person we can model our lives after. Someone, whom we believe, the Hebrew scriptures were always pointing towards.

Jesus was very obviously a powerful teacher and guide for his disciples. Convincing, reassuring, and challenging. Still, even his inner circle was confused at times about how exactly they were supposed to *follow* him, given that he was getting ready to leave. In the Gospel of John, as Jesus was preparing them for his departure, the disciples wondered how to carry on.

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” In essence, Thomas was saying that without a leader they were aimless. Furthermore, to continue doing what Jesus had started was to be an enemy of the empire. This group of Jewish men began their lives following the Law and Yahweh, and left that behind to follow Jesus. *Who should they follow now?* was their new question. Jesus answers with one of his most famous sayings:

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 know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

- John 14:6-7

Phillip, still a little confused, cuts through fog and plainly asks Jesus, “Can you please just show us the Father, then we’ll be satisfied.” Phillip and Thomas, like us most times, are stuck in this binary, literal way of thinking. Rather, Jesus is speaking symbolically and spiritually.

You’ve been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don’t understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act. Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, believe what you see—the works themselves.

- John 14:9-11 MSG

This is the linchpin connecting the Hebrew scriptures with the New Testament. Jesus affirms that he and God are one and the same. The love, joy, justice, presence, and compassion we read about in the person of Jesus are really the embodiment of God’s character in human form. The claims of

the Old Testament might be summarized as trust in Yahweh. In the New Testament, the claim is that Jesus is Lord. Not separate characters, but one and the same. Jesus *is* Yahweh. This is another anchor point for our faith. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith, and therefore we model his example. And his example shows us the true character of God.

The repeating themes of Jesus in the four gospel accounts tell us many things. First, besides the aforementioned divine nature, we read about Jesus' royalty, though his kingdom was not of this world. In fact, it was quite the opposite of any previous king. Jesus was a servant king. A humble king. A sacrificial king. What does that mean for us today to follow this kind of royalty?

Second, Jesus brought life out of death. The gospel accounts bear this out in both physical ways—the raising of Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus—but also in spiritual ways. Jesus had a long conversation that sent Nicodemus on a journey to try to understand how one can be born again. Through his death, Jesus proclaimed a resurrection would occur—new life. “Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up,” he told the people. So what does new life look like for us today?

Lastly, the story and way of Jesus are for everyone. An abundant life, an eternal life, a Godly life is meant for all people, just as was God's plan from the beginning. When Abraham was called in the desert thousands of years earlier, part of his commission was to be a blessing to all people, way back in Genesis 12. Over time, the Israelites narrowed the scope through rules and injustices, but Jesus came to remind them that everyone is invited into the kingdom. The tax collectors, liars, cheats, sinners, religious authorities, and selfish politicians all get the same gift—grace.

You know, it's interesting that after the Old Testament and the gospels—the narrative story of God's love for humanity—we get a bunch of letters. After the book of Acts, we are reading someone else's mail. Just one side of the

communication. It wasn't that after Jesus' resurrection, the early church had this stuff all figured out. Even the writings of Paul, Peter, and other authors, though they shared similar themes, do not come to one conclusion on just what, precisely, it looks like to live like *Jesus Is Lord*. One clear instruction is that all the other stuff in our lives—our wealth, our kids' grades, our social circles—are not what shape us and provide direction. Those are simply idols that we choose to lean on when we become fearful. But the truth about the epistles—these New Testament letters—is that they were written to specific churches and communities. Some were written to be shared, but others dealt with relational and situational contexts, specific to certain early churches. I find hope in this understanding, because even though we are so far removed from that time and place, I get the sense that the writers were encouraging those early Christians to weave a web of faith rather than a wall.

If they wanted to, they could've written down the exact steps to take to be the perfect believer, as if there is such a thing. They didn't though, and that's a beautiful thing. Because having everyone do and say the same thing is not something I read about in scripture. Humans do not come into being on a conveyor belt. We're messy. We're fearful. We are selfish. But we're all invited to weave our own web, anchored to those characteristics of God we know to be true. If we forget, we look at Jesus to remember. And we will forget. Because the world is hard. The world isn't perfect. Meredith Miller writes:

This is where we find kinship with the people in the world of the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testaments. It often did not seem to be that God was reigning and the world would be right. So they lamented and raged, wondered and wept. All this, and more, was met by God with tenderness, and still is, because Jesus our Lord is infinitely tender to the reality of being human.

If your web has become untethered, or perhaps you're thinking about deconstructing your wall, I want to encourage you. Jesus is infinitely tender with us. Maybe you thought faith should look one way, but now you aren't so

sure. So how do you rebuild, and where should you begin? I suppose the best place to start is where you are right now, with who is right around you. And the question we are all trying to answer is not *Are you a believer?* The question is how is *my* life shaped and changed by the truths I know of God, and the life lived by Jesus.

I used to be a brick layer. I was a mason, troweling mortar and placing brick after brick, higher and higher up the wall. If someone questioned whether I was a believer, I could point to the bricks and say, “See. Look at this wall. Of course I’m a believer. I followed the steps. The rows are level, the corners are square, and the walls are plumb.” As I got older and had more questions, experiences, and relationships, some of those bricks crumbled a bit. The rows bowed and bent. It was easier to just dismiss these inconsistencies than actually repair the wall, or better yet, build something completely new. Maybe you’ve experienced that. Maybe you are looking to rebuild your faith, but you don’t want to follow the blueprints you were given as a child. That’s good, because blueprints are for walls and buildings, not people. I love what Meredith Miller says near the end of her book: **“When it comes to faith, there are no guarantees, magic bullets, or surefire formulas. But God doesn’t want us to follow a formula. Perhaps God dreams of [us] weaving webs all [our] own, each one uniquely adapted to the people who share it.”**

I will give you a hint. The first step as you learn to be a different kind of builder—a spider even—is to trust. That’s God’s first message to the people. And as we learn to trust with our whole selves, our web of faith will begin to take its own unique shape and be better suited to withstand real life, flexing and bending—but not breaking—as we anchor ourselves to the God who loves us.