

Alpha and Omega

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 01] Welcome again. Good morning to you all, especially if you're here for the first time. I'm really glad that you're here and hope to have a chance to meet you after our time of worship. I'm sure most of you are familiar with the current concerns around the problem of fake news and the spread of misinformation and how damaging that can be to a society.

And one of the main ways that fake news is spread is when a photo or a video is taken in its entirety and it's cropped.

And so you crop the photo or you crop the video and you cut out all the context. And you give a very ambiguous image to the internet and you watch chaos ensue.

Because people make all kinds of meaning out of this image that has no context. So a more benign example would be a photo that looks like somebody is hanging from a cliff thousands of feet in the air.

Right? That's the cropped photo. If you step out and look at the entire photo, you realize that that person is only a few feet off the ground. Right? That's a benign example. But there are many more harmful examples out there.

[1 : 15] Examples of cropped photos and videos that have been done so intentionally by people with an agenda who are wanting to sow division and anger and mistrust in our society.

And we all recognize that this is a major problem. The point I'm trying to make is that context is everything. If you have the context, you know how to make sense of the thing that you're looking at. If you don't have the context, then people are going to make whatever meaning they choose. And many of the ways that we make meaning of those things may not be at all accurate.

Now the reason I'm telling you this is because three times in the book of Revelation, which is what we've been looking at for the past several months, three times, in the beginning and the end, Jesus refers to himself with this strange title.

He says, I am the Alpha and the Omega. So in Revelation 21, which is this beautiful passage that Mark just read, we're going to be looking at this for the next two weeks.

[2 : 17] But first, before we dive into the whole passage, I wanted to take a week and look at this specific phrase, Alpha and Omega, because anytime the Bible repeats something three times, I think we need to pay attention.

And so in Revelation 21, 6, Jesus says, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And I think this is very important because what this really means, what it's really saying, is that Jesus is the context.

Jesus is the frame of reference. Jesus is the context through which we make sense of reality itself. And so the only way to see things as they truly are in this world is to recognize that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega.

If we crop Jesus out, then we cannot see the whole picture. And we're essentially dealing with fake news.

And so what we're going to do is to look at some examples of how this actually plays out when it comes to some of life's most important questions. So we're going to look at the question of meaning, the question of identity, and the question of hope.

[3 : 30] The question of meaning. Why are we here? What is life all about? What is the meaning of life? The question of identity. What does it mean to be a human being? And then the question of hope.

What reason is there? Is there a real reason for hope in the world or not? So let's pray, and then we're going to get started. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the freedom and the joy of gathering together as your people.

We thank you for this neighborhood. We thank you for the extraordinary beauty of the world that you've made. We thank you most of all that we can open this book and that our hope doesn't rest in human wisdom or ideas, but that you're actually a God who can speak through your word, that your Holy Spirit can speak to each of us as we most need to hear from you.

So we pray that you would illuminate your word for us. We also pray that you would bring us face-to-face with your living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, the question of meaning.

What happens when we crop Jesus out and we can't see the whole picture when it comes to making meaning out of life? And quite simply, what happens is this. When we crop Jesus out, life essentially becomes meaningless.

[4 : 47] In the early 20th century, more and more people in academia and at a popular level had begun to do away with the idea of God. They had begun to crop God out of the photo, so to speak.

And yet many philosophers around the turn of the century wanted to essentially have their cake and eat it too. They wanted to be able to do away with the idea of God, but they wanted to be able to hold on to the idea that life has meaning, that there is a purpose, that there are such things as a priori values, universal values.

And in 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre gave what was essentially a career-defining lecture called Existentialism is a Humanism. This is what launched him into the stratosphere of fame.

And he essentially makes this point. He says, listen, if there is a God, and that God created the world and us, what that means is that there is divine intentionality behind our existence.

God made us for a purpose, and because there is a purpose, there is meaning. And because there is purpose and meaning, we can assume that there are certain a priori universal values, ways that we live in alignment with that purpose, or ways that we depart from that purpose.

[6 : 08] He says, okay, if you believe in God, then you can believe in all of that. But here's the rub. He says, if you do away with the idea of God, then you have to do away with the idea that there is any meaning in the world.

Because if there's no creator, and there's no purpose for creation, and all of this is just random, then there can't really be any meaning. The only meaning that exists is the meaning that we fabricate, but there's no universal meaning.

So essentially, his lecture amounts to be intellectually consistent. If you do away with God, you have to accept what Richard Dawkins says, where he says, life has no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

And so the point is essentially this. Without Jesus, we can't see the whole picture. You know, we're told, and I think this is very popular, like if you look at books, if you look at movies, if you look at a lot of the songs that are out there, we are told that we are free to create whatever meaning we want. And we're told that this is a great freedom that we should celebrate. But the reality is, it's like we're looking at a cropped photo. And this person makes this meaning out of it, and this person makes this meaning out of it, and there are as many different meanings as there are people to make them, and we have no way of knowing whether our sense of meaning is the right one or not, because we have no context.

[7 : 41] And you compare that with Colossians 1, which says this about Jesus. It says, all things were created through him and for him. In other words, it's one of the many ways the Bible says Jesus is the alpha and the omega.

He's the beginning and the end. He's the context. And when you recognize that, you realize that's how we look at the big picture. That is the uncropped photo.

Reality with Jesus is the alpha and the omega. And this has a lot of implications. We don't have time to get into all of them, but as we think, well, so what? What does this matter?

Well, contrary to popular opinion, you will never find the meaning of life by looking within. Right? This is a very popular idea, but the truth is you're never going to figure out what life is all about by looking inside yourself.

Because quite simply, you didn't make yourself. And because you didn't make yourself, you can't tell yourself why you were made, why you're here.

[8 : 45] Only the one who made you can actually tell you what your purpose is. And if we keep living like all of this, that our lives are all about us, if you keep assuming that this is all about you, your life is never going to make sense.

You're going to be confused and baffled and frustrated. You're going to be constantly disappointed. Because the truth is, if your life is anything like mine, our lives rarely look how we want them to look. Right? Very rarely in your life are you looking around and thinking, this is exactly what I thought it would be. Well, you know, I'm about to turn 40, I turned 42 on Monday.

And this is what you think when you're turning 42. You think, you know, you look at your life and you're like, when I was, you know, 20 and somebody asked me what would life be like at 42? And then I look at what my life is like at 42.

There's very little similarity. It's two completely different plot lines, right? Many of the characters that I thought were going to figure prominently are gone. Many of the issues that I thought were going to matter to me are irrelevant now.

[9 : 52] And I've got a whole new set of people in my life and a whole new set of issues to worry about. And I love my life and I'm thankful for my life, but this is not what I would have planned for myself. You know, it took me 30 years to become remotely comfortable with the idea that I would be a pastor.

My wife is still adjusting to the idea. It's only been a decade. So our lives are rarely going to look like we want them to look, which is a clear sign that we're not in charge.

Right? So if we think that we are, we're going to be constantly disappointed. We have to look at the whole picture. So if Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, this means that all of this was made by Him and for Him, which means not for me, not for you.

So life is about much more than just being happy or successful. You know, your job, your money, your marriage, you know, your successes and failures, all that, it's not for you.

All these things exist for Him. They were made for Him. And so we recognize that Jesus directs our lives according to His purposes, not our own. And so you look at the ways that you're flourishing and excited and happy in your life.

[11 : 02] You look at the ways that you're struggling and suffering and facing despair in your life. and you recognize my purposes are not driving the ship here. There's a God who is unfathomably more intelligent than I am, who is unfathomably wiser than I am.

And His purposes are driving the ship. And the more you accept that, the more your life is going to start to make sense. And the less you're going to be prone to think when life isn't going your way that God has just forgotten you or abandoned you.

You're going to recognize, oh, I made the mistake of thinking I was in charge. But God is doing something way bigger. That's what it means to look at the whole picture, to see reality and your life in context.

Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega. So let's look at another question. That's the question of meaning. But what about identity? What does it mean to think of Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega of human identity?

And what happens when we crop Jesus out of the photo? Well, in this case, if you crop Jesus out, if you lose the context, it leads to an identity crisis. And I think human beings are in the midst of a massive identity crisis.

[12 : 09] I think kids, you know, you go to college students today. I was, you know, hearing from a university professor who's been teaching for 20 years and said, you know, the first 15 years, kids were more or less the same. Things changed, but not really.

The last five years, he says, kids are completely different. And many of the sources of confusion and many of the questions and much of the anxiety is coming out of this sense of I have no idea who I am.

Right? How do we figure out who we are? Because there are a lot of voices out there that are trying to tell us who we are. Culture tells us that our feelings define us.

That's how to figure out who you really are. Advertisers, I'll let you in on a secret, they want their products to define your identity. In other words, they want you to feel that you're not whole until you have their product.

The best advertisers know how to do that really well. This will make you fully human. Politicians want their ideologies to define you.

[13 : 12] They want you to identify with them, not just intellectual support, but feel like you belong to that family. Those are your people. That's about identity. And then there are all socially constructed labels out there.

Labels like race labels or sexual orientation labels or gender labels. Now the problem with socially constructed ideas about identity is that they change. They constantly change. They're constantly in flux. And so you can have three different people who are 15 or 20 years apart from one another and they can use the same words and they're going to mean three different things because they change.

There are lots of voices from our childhood that try to tell us who we are. Lies that come to define us right? So maybe some of you grew up and maybe you grew up thinking and it was maybe parents conveyed this or teachers conveyed this and maybe not intentionally but maybe somehow you internalize the idea that you have to be perfect and if you're not perfect and if you don't have your life together you're a failure and it's all or none.

Maybe some of us grew up sort of internalizing the lie that on my own my feelings my opinions don't really matter and if I assert myself too much I'm going to make people angry and I'm not going to have any friends and so the best thing I can do is just put myself aside and merge with the stronger personalities in my life.

[14 : 49] Right? Maybe you grew up thinking that in order to guarantee that you will be loved you have to make sure you're meeting other people's needs. You have to earn that love and if you're not useful and helpful to people nobody's going to love you or care about you.

Yeah, maybe you grew up thinking that you cannot handle the negative feelings in your life. Maybe you grew up in a family that just would not allow negative feelings to be expressed and so you learned the best way to deal with my sadness my depression my anxiety my despair is to run. And you have no idea as a 30 year old how to be sad. You don't know how to lament because you're terrified of it, right? Now we grew up with these ideas we grew up with well-intentioned parents who are human well-intentioned teachers who are human well-intentioned coaches who are human and we internalize these lies and they come to define us and then your entire personality can be built around lies.

Right? There's an enormous amount of contradiction out there when it comes to identity you know and so when you compare your feelings with the lies inside with the voices that you're hearing from the outside you know I mean where do you even begin?

It's no wonder people are deeply confused about identity. You know one of my favorite contradictions comes in the form of a commercial it was a Super Bowl commercial from Alfa Romeo and it's this commercial about a car but has nothing to do with a car it's all about human identity and in the same commercial back to back it says this it says staying true to ourselves is all that matters staying true to ourselves is all that matters and then it says right after that the ability to reinvent ourselves is the most human trait of all and I love that because it's like if I reinvent myself I'm not being true to myself right?

[16 : 38] So which is it? You know? And these contradictions are everywhere so again the point is this without Jesus we can't see the whole picture of who we are as human beings but with the context of Jesus it all begins to make sense you know one of the best places to see how this works is to look at Paul's letter to the Galatians Galatians is all about identity it's all about identity the church was divided along ethnic and cultural lines because the Jews were defining themselves by their Jewishness which was a socio-cultural religious identity and the Gentiles by their non-Jewishness and here's what Paul says in Galatians 2.20 he says I've been crucified with Christ he's talking about his own identity my identity I've been crucified with Christ it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and what he's trying to convince them of is that your true self is not defined by your Jewishness or your non-Jewishness your true identity your true self is not going to be found by looking at your culture or listening to the to the voices that you grew up with or listening to your feelings your true self is going to be found when you give yourself away to Jesus when it is as though you have been crucified with him and then you allow him to define you from the ground up so Jesus shows us what human beings were supposed to be like you know when you look at Jesus you're seeing here's what human beings were supposed to be like and you're seeing here's what human beings will be like one day when God's work is completed in us

Jesus is a picture of human identity as it will one day be so again the point is this without Jesus you're going to be pulled in every direction possible when it comes to defining a sense of identity for yourself some of them are going to be inside you some of them are going to be outside you but they're all going to try to tell you who you are and if you've cropped Jesus out there is no objective standard by which to determine what is true and what is not is that lie I grew up with is it true well

does it feel true yeah it feels true in fact there are a lot of things that feel true but I'm not sure they are true I feel like I have to prove myself to you every day or you're going to hate me and reject me that's how that feels true to me how are you going to know whether it is true how are you going to know those times that you need to take your feelings and recognize them for what they are like what Jeremiah says the heart is deceitful above all things right if Jesus is the alpha and the omega it means you're not defined by your feelings or your failures or your family or whatever labels you apply to yourself

Jesus Christ is the one who can define you right so we've talked about meaning we've talked about identity what about hope last question we'll consider today what about hope you know I think more now than ever many people struggle to have hope and I think there's a lot of good reasons for that some people struggle with depression I know some of you many of you I have in the past struggle with depression and people who struggle with depression tend to dwell in the past you know they struggle with guilt they struggle with regret they struggle over feeling like they made decisions once and for all that they can't unmake that they struggle with a sense of shame over experiences and disappointments and failures I know a lot of people who struggle with anxiety and anxiety tends to pull us into the future you know we're looking down the road and it's dark and we can't see anything that's coming down the road or make sense of anything that's coming down the road we can't anticipate what's going to happen with our jobs or our desire to be married or our fraught marriages or our kids we have no idea what's coming and that causes tremendous anxiety because we have no control over the future and so we're looking into the darkness and we feel tremendous anxiety because we can't control it and every day seems to bring more and more news of catastrophe all around the world some of the recent news being you know random shootings on the highway and you read that kind of stuff day in and day out and it makes you feel like a massive tragedy is just around the corner in your life stokes tremendous anxiety and so you have mass shootings environmental degradation violence injustice it's overwhelming and you know so if you crop Jesus out of the photo everything looks pretty hopeless

I mean it looks hopeless it looks like the world has gone off the rails I think historically if we compare this era to other eras it's not quite as bad as we think that's my personal opinion but I think it seems awful but in Revelation 21:5 Jesus says behold I'm making all things new also he said write this down for these words are trustworthy and true and he said to me it is done I am the alpha and the omega the beginning and the end and you need to understand when Jesus says it is done it means all of his purposes have been accomplished in creation all of his purposes have been accomplished and part of what this means is that Jesus has done everything necessary to deal with our past and to deal with our future and to secure an eternal future with him for us right so this is the thing that sets Christianity apart from other religions other religions say here's how salvation works now get to work you have to accomplish this for yourself if you don't you will have no hope if you do you will have every reason to hope but it all hinges on you right if you're morally excellent as a person if you are disciplined if you are intelligent then you've got a good shot at eternity or wherever you hope to go if you're morally bankrupt if you're undisciplined if you come from such brokenness that you're just trying to stay afloat right if you've been so wounded and hurt in your life that you can't even fathom anything beyond just surviving then there's not much hope for you if your salvation hinges on you some people just don't have the resources or the intelligence or the discipline to accomplish anything on behalf of themselves the good news of the gospel and only the gospel says this Jesus is the alpha and the omega of our salvation Jesus is the one who created the plan for the rescue mission he wrote that plan when the world fell apart when human beings rebelled against God Jesus is the one who initiated the cosmic rescue mission and then Jesus is the one who fulfilled it Jesus says here's the plan of salvation and then he doesn't say get to work he gets to work and he fulfills everything that is required right he lives the life that we should have lived then he dies the death that we deserve to die because we didn't live the life that we should have lived and then he rises from death and then he judges and ultimately does away with death and then he turns to us not with a challenge to get to work but with an invitation come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest come to me because I've accomplished everything necessary on your behalf come to me because it is finished and when you recognize that when you recognize what that means for us you recognize that if you are in Christ when you are tempted to look into your past and to reflect on the deep regrets and the shame and the failures and the things that you can't undo the decisions that you can't unmake when you look at all of that stuff you also see Jesus dying on the cross and you recognize he is dying to set you free from all of those things

and when you are tempted to look into the future and to fret and to wring your hands and to try to peer into the darkness and to try to anticipate what is coming you also see Jesus saying it is finished behold I am making all things new whatever you are facing now however bad you think it is going to get the end of the story is Jesus making all things new and us joining him in that secured eternal renewed future and so we recognize that Jesus is the alpha he is in the past he is the omega he is in the future he has done everything necessary on our behalf and so as we think about these questions as we think about Jesus as the alpha and the omega if we want to kind of bring all of this together here is the point if we crop Jesus out we cannot see the whole picture we cannot see reality as it truly is and however we go about trying to answer the questions of meaning or the question of identity or the question of hope however we go about trying to do that it is all going to be fake news it is just one person's interpretation held up against another person's interpretation if we recognize that Jesus is the alpha and the omega then we can begin to see the whole picture we can see that we were made by him and for him and that's what life is about we can see that we can only find our true selves in him and we can see that all of our hopes will one day ultimately be fulfilled by him let's pray

[27 : 11] Lord we thank you we thank you because we're talking about this as though we can even begin to fully understand what it means for you to be an alpha and omega the alpha and omega but Lord we know what we're intended to see in this and that is tremendous comfort Lord tremendous comfort and we know who to go to when we wonder what life is all about we know who to go to when we have no idea who we are or why we're here we know who to go to when we feel utterly hopeless or overwhelmed with fear Lord so we pray that even as we continue in our singing and in our prayers and as we come to your table that you would make these intellectual realities flesh and blood in our hearts that you would build these truths into us wire them into our souls Lord so that we would be grounded in you and so that we would be hoping in you for your glory and it's in your son's name that we pray Amen

Amen Amen Links in tetoflowing moody