

If “Easter” isn’t in the Bible, why do we celebrate it?

TRANSCRIPT

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[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome back to the Denison Forum podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum, sitting down again with founder and CEO of Denison Ministries, our cultural apologist, Dr. Jim Denison. Jim, good to see you today.

[00:00:16] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Thank you, Mark. So glad to be back with you. I appreciate the conversation as always.

[00:00:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Don't say so until we have the conversation. You never know if you're going to appreciate it or not,

[00:00:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** point.

[00:00:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** but we are almost to the end of Lent. We can see the celebration of Jesus's death and resurrection coming around the corner on March the 31st. And we hope that people are anticipating that with great joy, with great excitement, so we're going to talk about.

The significance of Easter today and hopefully bring some fresh insight. It's one of those things that if you've been a Christian for a while, or just in the culture for a while, you may think that you kind of know all that you need to know about what Easter is, but I really wanted to just start.

With that word I think words, you know, you and I were taught in many ways that words are highly important. Imagination is fueled by words and by the things that we can imagine in our minds. But it's interesting. We commonly refer to the celebration that we're coming to as Easter. Although that word is never found in the Bible.

Can you give us a little background of where this word comes from? Why do we use it in reference to Jesus's death and resurrection? Is there a different word that we ought to be using to try to be more winsome and clear in the culture that we're trying to reach with the message of Jesus? What do you think?

[00:01:39] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, you might make a case for a different word these days. You really might. I saw just the other day that 63 percent of Americans say that they are Christians. 81 percent plan to celebrate Easter. And so if that's the highest, holiest day of the Christian year, and yet if you do the numbers, that's around 60 million people aren't going to be celebrating, don't claim that they're Christians.

And yet they're, they're going to be celebrating Easter. What is it they're celebrating? Becomes your question. 43 percent are going to go to church, but 83 percent say that they're celebrating Easter. And so they're obviously not celebrating what we're celebrating when we think of Easter itself. And so maybe there is a case here to be thinking about some language.

That's a little more specific about how we look at this. And then when you know the etymology of the word that even adds, I think a little more fuel to that fire the word *Austra* itself, it's a German word. And it actually, we think it's not clear, but we think it's associated with a goddess who was related to springtime. We think that might have been the name of this goddess. O E S T R E, or O E S T E R, are different ways of spelling. That's not definitive, but there's a lot of, of early indication that that might actually be the case, that

[00:02:46] **Dr. Mark Turman:** getting, I'm getting nervous. I'm getting nervous already.

[00:02:49] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Exactly. Yeah, it is kind of frightening when you think about it, that, you know, and then you add Easter bunnies to all of this, and you get into some pretty pagan sort of ideas pretty quickly here.

But I don't think we have to go down that road very far to understand that the word isn't today meant. In those terms at all, I would imagine most people hearing this have no idea that the word might have a derivative going back to a Germanic goddess of the springtime or related to the springtime. But best we could tell that is the actual etymology of the word itself.

Now, as it comes into common usage, of course, all that gets left behind and it just gets, it's kind of a synonym for spring. The idea for spring or for the for the value of spring for new life. The idea of the new life that we're seeing in nature around us, all that. So you could see how that would get connected to new life in Christ, to the, to the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of spring, the resurrection of Easter relative to the resurrection of nature.

You could see how all of that can get connected up. But to answer your question, that's actually, we think the etymology of the word itself.

[00:03:47] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Okay. So yeah, just knowing that insight is I think valuable, important as we think about this, because like I said, Our goal is to equip believers. We want them to think biblically. We want them to live in holy ways. We want them to act redemptively. And like you said, around something like the celebration of Jesus's death, burial and resurrection.

This is, this is what some people call our Superbowl. Our, this is our world series. This is, this is our prime time, if you will. But you also referenced a minute ago. The I mean, this kind of jumbled reality of Jesus and the Easter bunny that just lives in the cultural mind as well as the change of seasons, that type of thing.

Um, you know, I heard a comedian on Netflix not long ago talk about How strange some of these things are that, Hey, we're going to celebrate Christmas and here's the birth of Jesus. Here's Mary and Joseph and their, their journey to Bethlehem and Jesus being born in a stable. Okay, let's go get a tree and cut it down and bring it in our house.

How does that, how do we make any sense out of that? Same thing with Easter in some ways, here's Jesus. Jesus came and was on the earth to be our savior. He was crucified, buried, resurrected. So, let's go get some eggs and decorate them. How does, but that's all of those things are mixed up in our culture in a really big way.

And I'm also thinking about parents. You know, you and I have grandchildren, we're, we're interested in how they are going to understand this. Um, my, my five year old granddaughter is going to tell the story of Easter using what are called resurrection eggs. Um, um, what would you say to just everyone listening, but also particularly parents, grandparents about how important it is that.

You know, yes, you make a distinction between those things which are biblical and those things which are cultural. How important is it that parents, grandparents try to help separate? You know, biblical fact and story from fairy tale. Um, how does that relate to this conversation?

[00:05:51] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I think it relates directly. I'm really glad we're having this conversation from a very practical point of view. It's a little like the Santa Claus conversation you have every year at Christmas time, that Santa Claus itself, as it's understood today, now, not St. Nick as he was initially St. Nicholas of Lyra, but as it is today, is very much a secular thing.

And that doesn't make it a bad thing. I think it can be a wonderful thing for us to have our children think about toys and sharing toys, that sort of thing. Same context here. If we think about Easter bunnies in the context of eggs and springtime and all of that, I think that can be a fun tradition.

We're going to do an Easter egg hunt at our house, going to invite our perfect grandchildren and all of them are perfect grandchildren to come over and be part of that celebration and all of that. But what it does do is provide a teachable moment. You know, Jesus all across his teaching ministry, it seems, was always looking for chances to turn the momentary into the eternal, to turn what's happening here into what's happening in glory.

And so you'll see a sower went out to sow. Well, my guess is there was a sower sowing. There in Galilee, as Jesus says, a sower went out to sow when he gets asked questions, he uses the task theology, the temporal question to turn that in an internal direction. So in this context, if my grandkids are with me, I think I want to say something like, well, you know, one of the things that Easter eggs gives us a chance to do is talk about how life comes to be and how a little chick inside an egg can come out of that and come into life when it didn't seem it was alive before.

You might've thought it was dead there inside that egg, but actually it wasn't. Just because you couldn't see it didn't mean it was alive. And then it comes out of that and it becomes what it was born to do. Well, that's what Jesus did when Jesus was buried in a tomb. It's kind of like a chicken and egg in a, in a way.

And then he comes out of that. It comes out of that tube into life. And that's what we celebrate at Easter is the resurrection of Jesus. And then from there, talk about what that means and why it matters. So I think there are ways to use this teachable moments. The things we're doing in the culture that lead ultimately to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon was asked the secret to preaching. He said, take a text and make a beeline for Jesus. Well, I think in that same context, we could say, take a cultural event, take a tradition and make a beeline for Jesus and use it as a teachable moment. And that's, I think that's a privilege for parents and grandparents at this time of year.

[00:08:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, I think that's such a great insight. And what I want to go back to what you said a moment ago as well, is that just because it's a cultural phenomenon or a cultural thing or a cultural tradition doesn't automatically make it evil or bad out of hand. Can you take that a little bit further? Because we usually just kind of have a black and white.

Perspective on that, you know, um, that, you know, there's, there's a reference, I think, in the book of Jeremiah to trees. And I heard Philip Yancy say that his mother at one point, who was a very, very conservative, very, very dedicated believer, when she read that passage, she forbade them to have a Christmas tree for like three to five years because of that one text.

Because she was reading it from the standpoint, well, if it comes from the culture, then it is by definition bad and should be excluded. Talk about that way of thinking and why that's not necessarily the best case.

[00:09:03] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, thanks for that. That's a real issue for me. And so I'm really glad to do that. I'll try to do it very briefly. It would take me about half a semester to do this in the philosophy class. So I'll do this in about 2 minutes. And those that were my

[00:09:14] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah.

[00:09:14] **Dr. Jim Denison:** right. Those that were my students wished I do it like this and not like that.

So, and you know this story, Mark, but six centuries before Christ, there's this person named Orpheus. He's a legendary kind of poet, lecturer, philosopher type guy. Comes up with this kind of crazy idea that your soul existed in a pre incarnate state, and it sinned, we would say, and it was punished by being put in your body, and the body's the prison house of the soul, and the point of life is to purify the soul, so it can go back where it came from.

from. Well, that was just one kind of idea six centuries before Christ, but it influenced the Pythagoreans who influenced Plato, who influenced the whole Western world. And so we have this bias that the body is bad and the soul is good, that the secular, which is the Latin for of this world is evil.

Because it's fallen, because we live in a fallen world, that therefore it's to be depreciated and to be rejected, and if something comes from the culture, it can't be a good thing, and so if Easter is being celebrated in a, in a secular tradition, it must be pagan and evil, and we can't have anything to do with it.

That's a Greek idea. Jesus gives the lie to that in the Incarnation, when the sinless Son of God takes on flesh. If flesh was inherently evil, Jesus couldn't have taken on flesh and been sinless. If flesh is inherently evil, Jesus would have given not one minute to healing bodies, but only to healing souls.

He wouldn't have cared about feeding 5, 000 families, physically only, spiritually. But instead, Jesus sees us holistically. 1 Thessalonians 5. 23, may your body, soul, and spirit be kept blameless and whole. Those are different aspects of the one person. It's not that you have a body, soul, and spirit as three separate things.

Those are aspects of the one person. Like I'm a, I'm a husband, I'm a father and I'm a son. Those are not three separate entities. That not three separate ontological realities that that's me, just dimensions of me. So you have the physical and the spiritual dimensions of the one person. Yes, the body is fallen.

Yes, we live in a broken, fallen world. Romans 8 22, that creation groans and travail, but it nonetheless is redemptive. And God works within that redemption. And Jesus came inside that redemption. And Jesus didn't call priests to be his followers. He called fishermen to be his followers. Jesus didn't base his ministry at the temple in Jerusalem.

He based it in a village in Capernaum up in the Galilee. And so this idea, That if something's in the culture, it can't be used. Isn't how Jesus taught. That's not how he ministered. It's not how

Paul ministered. Acts 17. He starts out with Greek philosophers, Epimenides and Aretes and uses them because that's what the Greek philosophers he was talking to understood.

It started with common cause and led over from that. Justin the martyr had this idea that there's a seminal logos, the seed of truth in every person and a great way to minister is to start there. Start with common cause. Start with what you believe. Start with what we have in common. Start with the culture.

and move from the culture to Christ. That's how Jesus did it, how Paul did it. That's how evangelism is being done in the Muslim world. The Muslim world believes that Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life and ascended to heaven and will return at the end of history. So when I'm talking to Muslims, I start with that.

Well, let's start with what you believe about Jesus. And then I like to ask the question, how could Jesus be all the things you believe and only be a man? I've actually had Muslims ask me that question. How could Jesus do all of this and only be a man? And I wanted to say, well, now, wait a minute. I wanted to ask you that question, you know, but so you start with common cause, you start with the culture and you move from the culture to Christ.

One last thing, Paul Tillich many years ago made clear what he called the method of correlation. Philosophy asks the questions. Theology provides the answers. Don't like the way he did it often, but I love the method. The way I would say it is culture. Ask the questions. Scripture provides the answer. So start with the questions people are asking and go from there to the answers God provides.

And I think we're doing what Jesus did. So anyway, it's a huge issue for me, as you can tell, I'm really glad you gave me a chance to talk

[00:13:14] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, and there's so many, yeah, and there's some places I may want to go here for a minute, you know, because just even the idea that there would be in the Muslim community, people who believe aspects about Jesus, number one, that we didn't know that they believed anything about him, but that. We would also find out that they believe some things maybe more deeply about Jesus than we do such as the virgin birth and that type of thing.

And so that's kind of a astounding probably for some of us to hear, but then it just, as you were talking, I was thinking how we are so given to seeing things as either, either, or kind of a black or white reality. Um, and secularism may at times be. Materialism, or it may be against materialism. You and I went to hear a speaker the other night and one of the things she pointed out is that the younger generation seems to be longing for some sense of the transcendent, um, that in some ways they've been really overly grounded in the material and they think the material is all that there is.

And that some of the things like a resurgence of liturgy in the context of worship. Those kinds of things are actually very meaningful to them because it's helping them to see and to understand there's something more than just being a consumer. There's something more than just the material world and things that you can accumulate.

And so it just seems like we're given to just sometimes attaching ourselves to an idea and running with it too far. Um, is that making any sense to you?

[00:14:54] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Absolutely. And again, it goes to the preconceptions that a lot of us bring to these worlds. It's been said that the music you like in high school is the music you'll write the rest of your life. I found that to be true. I was driving the other day on the road, had a couple hours on the road and I was looking for a station to listen to and I gravitated to a thing called the bridge because it plays 70s and 80s music.

And I just kind of like

[00:15:14] **Dr. Mark Turman:** forties, the forties and the fifties music. Yeah. I thought it was from the

[00:15:17] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, it can do that too. Um, I'm not that old, fortunately, at least not yet. Although every day, getting older every day, but I think Chicago is the greatest band there's ever been. A lot of my grandkids have no idea who that is, what that is.

And when they're in concert, they come out on their walkers these days, you know, but all that to say what we grow up with, what we're accustomed to, the world as we see it, it becomes the filter by which we see kind of everything else. Those become the way the questions that we're asking and the things we're interested in.

So if somebody wants to persuade me to come to where they are, they need to start where I am. They need to start inside my world. They need to start with the questions I'm interested in. And then from there, get over to the place where perhaps they want me to be. In this sense, we're like spiritual physicians.

The doctor is doing the wrong thing. If he comes in, when you're there to see the doctor for your annual physical and starts with what he would like to treat. Starts with the issues he would like to address well now that I've got you here. Let's have a conversation about genomics Let's talk together about genetic Transformation relative to cyborg medicine all the while you're there because your foot hurts You know what he comes in if he's effective and does as he says well, what's the problem today?

What's the issue? Why are you here? What is it you'd like to discuss? What is the, what's the presenting issue here? Counselors, if they're effective, start with the presenting issue. They may

try to lead you to the issue behind the presenting issue ultimately, but they start where you are. A good fisherman wants to go where the fish are, wants to use the bait the fish.

are interested in. Well, it's shady over here, so I'm going to fish over here. Well, I don't like worms because they're kind of grimy, so I want to use this plastic lure here instead. I want to fish on my terms using the stuff I want to use. Not an effective way to catch fish, and Jesus told us to be fishers of it.

So all that to say, learning the culture, knowing the questions people are asking, starting where they are. Holy Spirit will help us do that. The Holy Spirit knows The minds of the people were called to, to reach more effectively than we do. If we'll listen, he'll prompt us. He'll give us sensitivity. He'll give us compassion.

We'll be able to, but a lot of it's just relational, isn't it? It's just earning the right to be heard. It's building relational bridges and starting where they are. It's again, it's Jesus with the woman at the well. If I had shown up at the well mark and this woman sitting there, I'd have started out by saying, do you know who I am?

Do you know that I'm the Messiah? Here's my business card. You know, Jesus starts with water. Hey, could I have a drink of water? And he leads her from water to living water. And that's the model, I think, for us.

[00:17:43] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And if, and if you just turn that story page back one chapter to chapter three, he's talking to a religious leader who knows way all kinds of things about religion. But Jesus starts in a completely different place with him because he's in a different place and brings and brings him toward what he needs to understand about faith and new life as well.

Let's, let's talk a little bit about this phenomenon that you and I, as people who pastor churches for a long number of years kind of what I call the, the pastor's curse of Easter, which is Easter is the day when so many people come to worship and they gather. And they celebrate, they usually wear their brand new clothes.

They put on the, some, at least in the South still put on their white shoes for the first time. And, and we plan extra services even today in most communities, you can see churches letting people know that they're not only going to have their regular services, but they're also probably going to have at least one or more additional services.

But then. Pastors and church leaders know, well, the Sunday after Easter is going to be the least attended probably all year long in many ways. That's an interesting phenomenon. What does that, what does that say about our understanding of Jesus's death and resurrection? Um, what does it, what does it say to us as a contradiction of faith?

Is there a call to repentance in there somewhere? What does it, what do we think we ought to understand about that? Especially. I'm thinking, Jim, about how we might not only repent ourselves, but how we might encourage other believers and others that are curious. Hey, keep coming to learn more of this story than, than just, I guess what I'm trying to say is how can every Sunday be Easter?

For more of us.

[00:19:39] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, isn't that a wonderful question? And boy, I went through that as well. You know, every year I thought, okay, this is the sermon this year that's going to bring them back. This is the service that's going to impress them. This is the way it's going to work. And this is going to be the year we break that cycle.

And next week's going to be as great as this week. And I was wrong every year. It never happened. We never had a time that we didn't have the pattern that you're describing on some level. And it became very deflating. It really became very frustrating. It became very discouraging. You know, because I would just have the sense, well, I'm just not a good enough preacher.

We're just not a good enough worship planners. Because, I mean, if literally half of the church, of the people that came last Sunday, didn't come back this week. What does that say about me? What does that say about my performance, my ability, all that stuff? It's, it's real easy to get caught up inside all of that.

And so the first thing in my good days that I try to go back and remember is every day is resurrection day and every Sunday is Easter. And if I'll remember that, yes, the culture sees this Sunday, this one particular Sunday that gets picked out because of a really anachronistic sort of formula to go back to the third and fourth century, having to do with the vernal equinox and Passover as to why this particular Sunday, March 31st, this year gets designated Easter, just because the culture looks at it that way, doesn't mean that the next Sunday is any different in the Lord's eyes.

The next Sunday is the Lord's day and every day is the Lord's day and we're going to worship him and people are going to come as they come and we're not going to focus so much on how many come as much as we're going to focus on the people that do come and we're going to look at it that way. And the early church, there was no emphasis we can find on attracting lost people to come to worship services.

That just wasn't the nomenclature. Coleman did a study some years ago of early church worship, first century worship, and he couldn't find any evidence that the sermons of the day, that the way that the services were organized were intended to attract lost people. They were intended to

equip believers to then go out to lost people in the belief you can reach a whole lot more lost people out there than you can in here.

They didn't have buildings anyway back in the day. A lot of them were house churches and such. And so worship wasn't at all about evaluating by how many lost people happened to come to your church service. It's really, and you know this, but it's really in the revival era. Then we start thinking about trying to get people to come to revivals so that then they could come to Christ.

Well, gee, if we can get him to come twice a year to hear the revival preacher, maybe we can get him to come on Sunday for the same thing. Then in the seventies and eighties, we start thinking about seeker sensitive worship and start thinking about instruments and ways of worship that would be attractive to lost people.

Start building buildings that look more like malls because lost people are more comfortable in malls. And we start having this phenomenon of evaluating church by how many lost people came to it. it. And again, I'm in favor of lost people coming to worship. I think we ought to be sensitive to seekers as they come.

I think we ought to be attentive. We ought to be encouraging people to invite people, especially at Easter. The stats are that your lost friends are far more likely to accept your invitation to come to Easter than any other time. Something like two thirds, according to some Barna survey, I think I saw some time ago, said that don't go to church, said they would go if they were invited.

There's a cultural ethos about showing up at Easter. So you use that play to that. But my point back to the pastor would be, don't measure success by it. Don't measure success by who comes or doesn't come as much as by whether or not those that did come met Jesus. Was the word proclaimed? Was Jesus exalted?

Were people given an opportunity to encounter the living Lord Jesus? That's success. And my good days, I remember that. On my bad days, I evaluate us institutionally. Buildings, budgets, and baptisms, and all the stuff that goes inside that. So that's I think the thing to keep in mind and to try to remember.

Let's use the fact. that the culture wants to show up on this arbitrarily chosen Sunday as a tradition. Let's make sure they hear the gospel when they're there. I was always very evangelistic on Easter Sunday. I always assumed half these folk wouldn't be here again. Wanted to make sure they left knowing how to know Christ.

I typically led a salvation prayer in the worship service because they didn't know when I'd get that chance again. Be very intentional. About those that are coming, but then not think I failed if they don't come back the next week. So much. It's just trusting that we planted seeds and the

Holy Spirit's going to use that in their lives and just trust that good things will happen as, as the Lord's in charge and not me.

[00:24:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Yeah. And so, so helpful whether you're a pastor or not, you know, so many of those invitations need to be given by people who are not quote unquote clergy, um, but have the relationships to talk about the significance of what this particular spring weekend means to us and how that can be an opportunity for conversation.

One of the, one of the aspects of that and hopefully. Most of our conversations has to do with scripture. Um, you know, I get the opportunity to share at the chapel that we oversee this, this spring during the Easter season was looking at some of the passages that deal specifically with the events of Easter, but was drawn to the longest conversation about this phenomenon, this amazing miracle of resurrection that's found in first Corinthians 15.

And Paul has a paragraph. That the Holy Spirit inspired him to write where the kind of the basic facts of the Easter event is recorded in a very few sentences of. This is what happened. He was crucified. He was buried. He was raised again. He's very, but he, he says something I want you to comment on two different times, he says, and to this audience in the city of Corinth, 2000 years ago, these are primarily Gentiles, not Jewish people, but he says twice in this little summation of the Easter event, he says, as the scriptures said, um, and there's something in there that speaks to me about.

The importance of the Bible, the importance of the biblical record, the credibility of the Bible equipping us with a transformational power and understanding that comes through the death and resurrection of Christ. How is it, how important is it? Do you think that believers really come back to that foundational and clear telling?

I love what Paul says in the, in first Corinthians 51, he says, I want to remind you and Easter, his, his huge reminder of the very core of our faith, but yet he's also saying to this non Jewish audience who didn't really even embrace Hebrew scripture, but he's linking this story back to something deeply historical.

Why is all that important? Do you think, why is the spirit leading Paul to do this this way? Right.

[00:26:26] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a great question, because it wouldn't be intuitively obvious if he were speaking in a Hebrew synagogue, you could see him quoting Messianic prophecy or quoting Old Testament texts in a way that would be obviously more aligned, you would think, with cultural expectations than Gentiles, especially in Corinth, of all places, where you wouldn't think they'd have much background or really care.

Why that says that, why the scriptures say that sort of thing. So two thoughts that occur kind of in response to that. First of all, they therefore need to be educated that that is in fact important.

They do need to know that the scriptures have said this and that that matters. They do need to know that the story of Jesus is contiguous with a much larger story than just that.

They do need to be discipled to understand that what Jesus did is part of a much larger pattern of revelation, of progressive revelation, of a redemptive purpose, and this is not a one off event. And so if you don't know what that is, you need to know what it is. If you don't see it in a larger context, you need to see the larger context.

And I think Paul's kind of wanting them to understand that this is part of a bigger story than you may right now know. But the other thing I think Paul understands here that we do well to remember, there is something uniquely powerful. about the actual story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The gospel in a nutshell, the gospel is the good news. And as we know, the gospel in a broader sense can be more than just the death and resurrection of Jesus. But that unique part of the story, that heart of the gospel is something the Holy Spirit uses in a transformative way. Every time it's told. And we can, and we therefore should always make certain to tell it, never get tired of telling it.

Happened to be reading today, interesting you'd ask that question, something Billy Graham wrote, where he said in 1953, he was conducting an event in Dallas, Texas, an evangelistic event, a kind of a crusade as he used to call them. And one particular evening after he had preached, there were very few that responded to the invitation and he was discouraged afterwards.

And a German businessman, He wrote, happened to be there that night, came up to him afterwards, put his arm around him and said Billy do you know why? There wasn't a larger response tonight. And Billy said, no. And the German businessman said, you didn't preach the cross. And so Billy said the next night, he preached the cross and the response was overwhelming. And from that, he wrote, there is something unique about the cross, about the actual death and resurrection of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit uses in the hearts of people in a different way. All of scripture is inspired. I believe every word of scripture is inspired. I think you can preach from Leviticus and God will use that in some way, but there just is something transformative about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why Paul never got tired of telling the story. That's why Peter never got tired of telling it. That's why Billy Graham never got tired of telling it. And so making certain that we preach the cross, the actual event of the death and resurrection. Not only is that what makes Christianity unique. in the world.

Not only is that the case beyond all cases to prove the love of God for us, the transformative love of God. Someone asked Jesus, how much do you love me? And he said this much and raised and

spread his arms and died. I mean, that is the proof positive of God's love for us, but there's just something, Mark, about the, I mean, Bill Graham was right, of course.

It was just something about preaching the cross. That ought to be every Sunday, not just Easter Sunday. We need to find a redemptive, creative way to do that. But yeah, there just seems to be something in the event itself that the Holy Spirit uses that we obviously want to partner with.

[00:29:59] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and that's why it's got a great segue into something I wanted to bring up, which is the idea of coming back to the, to the cross, coming back to the events of Easter over and over again in, in the revisiting. And as Paul said, the reminding of this essential good news, because there's so much bad news in the world, there's so much brokenness in the world.

And that's revealed in both the cross and the resurrection. We'll get to that in a second, but. The idea I want to chase out here for a minute is just the idea of returning to this. There might be some people, not many maybe, but there would be some that would say we don't really need to have this kind of repetitive celebration.

We don't need to have the repetitive celebration of Christmas, that type of thing, but many, maybe all faiths have these kinds of rhythms. Um, Islam has Ramadan, which has been going on. The Jews have the celebration of Passover, which is the context initially for what happens with Jesus. They also have things like Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, they have Hanukkah.

That happens around the same time as Christmas. We obviously have Christmas, we have good Friday, we have Easter. These are mountain peaks for us. Um, but again, as, as Paul mentions to the Corinthians, I want to remind you of this. Um, why is this, um, what, what's so important about returning to this, um, and to this kind of a revisiting of the core message, we, you know, maybe we ought to have, we don't come from liturgical.

Forms of worship. We we probably should add in more things like the celebration of Pentecost and the celebration of Ascension Sunday that other Christians do actually probably a majority of Christians do compared to Protestants. How can that empower us? How can that equip us to better be the believers and the witnesses that we should be?

You know, why is it should we never get very far away from Easter?

[00:32:00] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. Thank you for that. Really three thoughts. I think the first is the power of story. Jesus told stories and then preachers like me come along and turn them into three points that begin with the letter P, you know, he loved to tell story because story resonates. That's why the story of Passover was so important to the Jewish people.

That's why the story of Hanukkah is still important to the Jewish people in Purim before that. And that's why the story of Jesus death and resurrection is so important to us because story

resonates on a deeper level, even than intellectual. Speaks to us intuitively. Forms character. It creates life.

Narrative preaching is not a recent phenomenon. Jesus was a narrative preacher. And so the power of story, I think, is something to remember here. The second thing is the power of these stories, these stories formed the character of the people that told them. If we have the kind of God who will die on a cross and be risen from the dead, what does that say about that God for my needs, for my issues?

Today. It might be that I'm grieving a loved one. Well, I need to know that as Jesus rose, they can rise. If I mean that I'm going through temptation that no one else understands, but Jesus does. Jesus experienced the worst form of torture that can be so he can feel your pain. You can't feel a pain he doesn't understand.

There's really nothing in human experience that the cross and resurrection story doesn't speak to. So it demonstrates the relevance of the story, it's the power of story, it's the power of this story, the relevance of this story, that I think we can continue all through the year to demonstrate and to connect to the issues that we find ourselves in.

But then third, I think there is something in human nature that's created in such a way that cyclical, seasonal, repetitive, rehearsing of life is valuable to us. There's a reason we mark our anniversaries and weddings. There's a reason birthdays come around every year. There's a reason even the secular world loves to celebrate the 4th of July every year.

It loves to think about other Halloween and other new years and other secular holidays. The world of nature doesn't know that this day happens to be January 1st. It isn't to get the memo. That's the new year, but we're built that way. God created seasons. and created us within this context of season. C. S.

Lewis talks about this idea of rhythm, that every year is new and yet every year the same. You know, it's a new Christmas every year, but it's still Christmas. It's a new Easter, but it's still Easter. And then one other thing I would add. A number of years ago, I saw an interview with Charles Stanley, the longtime pastor of First Baptist in Atlanta, when he talked about the importance of repetition and simplicity.

And he said he thought preachers make a mistake when they assume that because he said it last week, they don't have to say it again this week, that everybody that was here this week was here last week, that they're like, they're in some college or seminary setting where you have to be here. You have to write this stuff down, have to memorize it for the test.

Not true. In a typical church, half the people that were here this week weren't here last week, and that even assumes they remember what they heard last week. You only remember 7 percent of

what you hear. They're listening to my sermon, but they're thinking about lunch, and they're trying to wrestle their kids, and they're wondering about this meeting they have with their boss on Monday, and they're worried about losing their job next month, and so the idea of repetition.

The idea of continuing to tell the story is important, I think, just given the nature, the transient nature, and the distracted nature of our culture these days. And so it's story, I think it's this story, I think there's a seasonality to life that actually goes to repetition as a means of teaching the truth in a way that's really productive and powerful.

The liturgical traditions and the, visual nature of these churches is a lesson for us. You walk into churches that have iconography and have the various elements of theology illustrated. Part of that predates the day when people had written Bibles they could carry around. And part of it was teaching theology visually because it couldn't be taught in written form or even a preliterate culture or whatnot.

But another thing to say is every Sunday, those stories are there. Every Sunday that baptism scene is in front of that baptistry, if that's where that's located, or every Sunday there's commandments over here, or there's other elements of the Christian story around you. And this kind of repetitive visual story, narrative, is a valuable point.

That we lose because we're so concerned about icons that we don't want there to be distractions to the service, that sort of thing. I mean, Mark, there's a reason we do the Lord's Supper regularly. There's a reason, there's a table for the Lord's Supper down there, even if we're not celebrating and there's a reason there's a baptistry up there, even if we're not baptizing.

And so this kind of repetitive teaching I think is a really valuable pedagogical tool. I think it aligns with human nature in a way that's redemptive.

[00:36:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and we kind of have developed our own somewhat in the Protestant tradition from the standpoint of the cross being very visual. The baptistry, as you mentioned, the pulpit. And often times a communion table or a Bible. Those, those in some ways are the reminders and the storytelling that we use through symbol.

Um, and you, you recently wrote about, there's an article on our website at denisonforum.org about something that recently came to you in the Easter story about the preparation of the last supper. And you gave some great ideas. I love people to go to read that story and read that article that you wrote basically encouraging pastors and others, um, that there, there is some important truth in almost every part every part of the Easter story, certainly every part of the Bible, but.

You related how just that story about how Jesus told his disciples to go into prepare this room where the last supper occurred. That's one example. Um, how would you encourage believers to

go back to these stories that we find in the gospels that we find in places like first Corinthians 15 to go back, what, what should be their attitude when they come to this room?

To review again, the, the great story of Easter. I get, how can we find fresh things from a story that we may know, or at least we think we know very deeply.

[00:38:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a great question. And that's one of the challenges, quite frankly, as a pastor is how do I tell the Easter story? We know how the story goes. We know how the outcome turns out. So at the end of the day, how do we do this in a way that makes that fresh and newly alive? in our hearts and lives. So a couple of thoughts here.

The first is something that some years ago became really powerful for me, as simple as it is. Every word is in the Bible because it has abiding value or it wouldn't be there. Paul in his reference to, in his letter to the Colossians, makes reference to a letter to the Laodiceans, which is a town not far from Colossi, and asks them to read the letter to the Laodiceans and in turn share this letter with them.

Well, we don't have Paul's letter to the Laodiceans in the New Testament, do we? Clearly, Paul wrote something that wasn't abiding in value beyond the immediate context. John says at the end of his gospel, if everything Jesus did had been written down, the world couldn't contain all the books that would be written.

So what is in the Bible must be of abiding value or it wouldn't be there. I believe every word repays investigation because it's of abiding significance or it wouldn't be there. So we come along and ask why. So why is that there? What was it that made that valuable then? And therefore because human nature doesn't change, makes that valuable today.

So that's kind of a guiding presupposition as we drive into this. So now on a second level, once I've decided, all right, every word here must matter to me, it wouldn't be there. Question being why? Now I'm going to start looking for things I hadn't noticed before. I'm going to start asking about the details that I hadn't really paid attention to.

I'm going to ask the Holy Spirit to draw my attention. Two ideas, thoughts, details that I hadn't paid attention to before. And the article that you're referencing, that wasn't my coming to the text and saying, what can I find that is new that I could preach on Easter? That was me just reading the text and me sensing the Holy Spirit pointing out to me in a way I'd never thought about.

Well, this whole business of them going and there being this man carrying this pot, and he's going to show you a place that is furnished as you follow him. I happen to read the English Standard Version Study Bible and in the ESV Study Bible note, there's a reference that carrying pots of water was something women usually did.

So when there's a man carrying a pot of water, that would be distinctive. And that would therefore be a detail that the disciples would be able to pick out in a very crowded time when there's maybe 2 million people, according to Josephus, crowding into Jerusalem for Passover. That would be the giveaway.

That would be the clue. That'd be a man, not a woman carrying the pot. I didn't know that. I didn't, I didn't, I had never picked that up until I saw that in the ESV study Bible note. And that's what started me down this whole train of thought. All right. Well, if Jesus knew that, if Jesus knew there'd be a man with a pot, well, what, what does he know? Did he prepare that ahead of time? Did he arrange that with this man last time he was in Jerusalem, in which case he knew even then we'd be here now. And he had the forethought to make that preparation so he could tell Peter and John to look for him. If that's not the case, then Jesus, by divine miraculous, mysterious knowledge, knew there'd be a man among women carrying a pot of water that Peter and John could find.

Either way, there's a word here about divine omniscience that I had missed. And if Jesus could take care of that detail. What else can't he take care of? If Jesus could arrange that, what else could he arrange? If that part of Easter was part of divine revelatory significance, the whole story must be. And now, how does that relate to us?

So anyway, that's what drew me down that road that you're referencing in that particular article. It all starts with the belief that detail mattered or it wouldn't be there. So now Holy Spirit show me why it matters. Why was it there and why does it matter to me today? He loves to answer that prayer. He loves to reveal.

It's not new truth, but it's new truth to me. In a way that is revelatory to me and then perhaps to someone else. I'll add this very quickly, Mark, over the years that I've been preaching and teaching, I've found that if something's new to me, it brings a new life to me as I share it with others. If I can find something I wasn't aware of, that I'm just a better preacher, I'm a better teacher in that.

And so I've learned to try to find those things, to try to find things that are interesting to me. Because I'm more likely to make them interesting to other people. And so that's kind of a clue, I think, for preachers and teachers at Easter, find something you didn't know. Likely your people won't know it either if you didn't know it.

And you can share that in a way that has a new level of energy, I think.

[00:42:24] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And I think that's true. Even for those that. Might call themselves plain vanilla Christians and their job is not to preach or teach in church, but when, anytime we have a new discovery, especially a new discovery about something that's related to our faith, I think it energizes us. And it, it's like, Oh, look, it like, as you said, it's not new truth,

but it's new truth for us and it can energize our testimony in a way, just, you know, just like I was referencing before out of.

Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It never, I never paid attention very much to the fact that he says, as the scriptures say, and how he's anchoring something. I hadn't seen that before. And I'm like, you know, and I sometimes when I'm reading what are familiar stories to me in the Bible, whether it's Moses and the crossing of the, the cross, Of the reds of the, of the, of the sea or David and Goliath or any of the stories.

Sometimes I'm like, well, I asked myself, why is this detail here? I think you may have pointed this out in your article of you could have just, you could have left this whole detail out, or sometimes even like a whole paragraph or a whole portion of the story. And you're like, I would still get the gist of the story without this.

So why is this here? Right.

[00:43:38] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Why is it a man, for instance, he could have said a person carrying a pot. Why? Well, it turns out there's a reason it's a man as opposed to a woman, that sort of thing. Yeah. Yeah. Even one word, even one word was valuable.

[00:43:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And so, like I said, coming to that with asking the Holy spirit to just draw our attention to those kinds of things can help teach us something new about the goodness of God, the closeness of God. And can energize our testimony in a fresh way. And so we would hope that we would long for that for everyone through this celebration of Easter.

I do want to take a few minutes before we finish to just talk about a couple of other things. One of those is just. Um, the brutality that Jesus endured the reality of his death. We, I've heard you, I've heard other ministers talk about this. Other teachers talk about this, how, how just phenomenal it is that God turns the brutality of a Roman cross into the means by which we have eternal life.

I, I, I think that's really important. Often felt certainly years, not so many years ago when Mel Gibson produced the Passion of the Christ and gave us a very vivid viewpoint of just the enormous suffering and brutality of what Jesus endured. Um, in what sense do you feel like that, that his death confronts us?

Um, what are maybe one or two truths that, that re we really should really reconsider? About the enormity of his suffering as a way of really reconnecting and appreciating the story of Easter,

[00:45:19] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, thanks for asking that because it's not something we think about and we should. It's something in the first century they'd be very familiar with, be very aware of in a way that we're just not, and we don't see crucifixion. So it's not a regular part of our lives as was the case in the Roman empire.

And so, by way of just some maybe some cultural theological background here just a bit, the Jews executed by Stoney. They would take the person who was to be executed, they'd take them to a height, twice the height of a man, according to the Mishnah, they'd be shoved off from that cliff. And then if they survived that, then the accusers would be the first to cast stones until the person was stoned to death.

That's how Jews were, that's how Stephen was martyred, was by stoning. Why wasn't Jesus stoned to death? Would be the question. That would be the Jewish manner. It's what they wanted to do there in Luke chapter four, when they were so angry at him there in Nazareth, wanted to shove him off that high place as the first stage of stoning, and then stone him if he survived that.

Well, the Romans crucified their citizens by beheading. Paul was beheaded. Why wasn't Jesus beheaded? Well, he wasn't a Roman citizen. Yes, but he could have been. He came as a, as a Jew, he could have come as a Roman citizen if he'd wanted to arrange that, he still would have died for our sins, his death still would have occurred, had he been beheaded or had he been stoned, or had he died in some other manner, hemlock like Socrates or whatever else it might be.

By contrast, he died in the most cruel, cruel way. Inhumane form of torture death ever devised. Historians are united about that fact. Christian, Jewish, secular, whatever, they're united in that fact. The way that the Romans perfected as it were crucifixion from the Persians was intended to inflict the cruelest form of, of torture possible.

So as to say that the rest of the world don't do this or you'll get what he got. That's why they crucified so publicly. That's why Jesus was executed publicly. And that's why there was the scourging beforehand with the cat of nine tails. That was embedded with pieces of lead and nail that would rip the flesh open.

Many victims just died under that. That's why that crown of thorns that pierced through the scalp all the way to the skull. That's why in the crucifixion itself you could be tied to the cross and you'd be left to die of exposure and thirst over three days. And then they would put the nail through the hand, the hand can't support the body weight.

So they would put the nail through the hand and then they would tie the arm to the, to the cross beam and they would leave you there. That's often how they crucified. And in Jesus case, he had to be crucified that day because of Passover. So then they drove the nail through the wrist. Because the wrist could support the body weight and through the feet and then crucifixion suffocates your body weight, suffocates the lungs.

So you have to pull up on your wrists to get your weight off your lungs so you can breathe on your crucified wrist. Well, they pierce the ulnar nerve when they drive the railroad spears, stike, a stake as it were through the wrist. So you lose the ability to use your arms. So you push up with your legs.

So then they broke the legs called the crucifragium, this massive club that would break the femurs. And then you can't push up from your legs. how the victims on either side were crucified. Jesus died before his legs were broken because he voluntarily gave up his spirit. All that to say, scientists have looked at this, doctors have looked at this, papers have been published in the, in in medical journals, demonstrating that what I just described is the worst way a human being can be put to death.

To death question being, why of all the ways Jesus. Well, you might say, well, let fulfill prophecy as it does. Go back to Psalm 22, and you see a lot of descriptions. A thousand years before Jesus' death, even before crucifixion was invented, you see predictive descriptions of crucifixion. Yes. But the Holy Spirit could have had, David writes Psalm 22 in a way that would prophesy the heading or that would prophesy stoning.

And so, the Lord even arranged the prophecies in a way that Jesus will fulfill them by crucifixion. So again, why? Well, my answer to the question is, and I said this a moment ago, so that you will never have to wonder if Jesus understands your pain. Because you physically cannot, it's physically impossible for you to experience pain greater than Jesus experienced on your behalf. The depth of the horrors of the cross show us the horror of sin, show us the depth of depravity. show us the reality of God's compassion, that God literally feels, the God of the universe literally has felt pain worse than, unless you've been crucified, pain worse than you can feel. There have been times in my life when that fact was incredibly painful.

Sustaining for me, I had a foot surgery a couple of years ago. That was an incredibly painful experience to go through just physically. And it really was helpful to know that Jesus, when sometimes people will say, I know how you feel, but they don't, you're really not supposed to say that. It's really a bad thing to say.

I know how you feel because you don't, Jesus can say that. Jesus could say to me with my foot up in the air for that week, as I was going through the pain of that, Jesus could say, I know how you feel because he did. My Cuban friends that are going through intense suffering right now with the horrors of what's happening on that island, Jesus can say, I know how you feel.

And if you wonder about that, look to the cross. So to me, Mark, the horrors of crucifixion demonstrate the depth of our sin, the depth of our depravity, but also the depth of God's compassion.

[00:50:41] **Dr. Mark Turman:** just so much to think about there. And like you said, referencing just our depravity, we sometimes so often try to just trivialize our sin, you know, well, nobody's perfect. And that type of thing. And, and I just try to remind myself, sometimes try to remind others that if you want to know how really bad sin is, look at the cross.

Just look at the cross. If you really want to know how serious and how broken and how dark and, and just how, um, just indescribable human sin is and what God was willing to take upon himself on our behalf. Um, you'll never, you'll never think of. Of sin, hopefully in a trivial way after that, um, um, couple of things, it's just not fair to talk about Easter without talking about resurrection.

I'm not, you may even want to help me theologically here from the standpoint of, should we ever talk about the cross without talking about resurrection? Um, And there's so much here to learn in terms of the power and influence of witness and ministry. So many things to think about this, but, um, we were, we were listening to an Anglican priest named Tish Harrison Warren.

She referenced this a little bit. Um, what, what is the significance that Jesus, when he is resurrected, Appears to a relatively small number of people when he could have made himself at that moment known to everybody, he could have, he could have ended the story right there for all the world as we know it.

Okay, what, what in your understanding is the significance of that

[00:52:27] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a great question, isn't it? Cause you would wonder if I was Jesus, why wouldn't I do it that way? It does say in first Corinthians 15, as you know, that he appeared to more than 500, you know, at various times in various ways, well, that sounds like a big number. Do you compare it to probably 25 million of the Roman empire?

Historians don't really know, but that's a good guess. And that's just the Roman empire, not to mention the entire rest of the world. When he comes back, he's going to do that. I mean, Paul made it clear to the Philippians, when he comes back, every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And so, at one point, he's going to do that. Why didn't he do it then? You'd think that would have certainly helped the world instantly come to follow him, if the entire world had met the risen Christ. In a way like that, you would think, would you? And so you wonder, well, God, why didn't you in fact do it that way?

Well, obviously the bottom line answer is that God knows more than we do. And he's ways are higher than ours and his thoughts are higher than ours. And so if he, the fact he didn't do it that way means it wasn't the right way to do it. I mean, we just have to know that going in. He didn't make a mistake here.

God's not taking notes right now. I'm thinking, gee, I wish I'd thought of that, man. I wish I had a do over, you know, man, why can't I go back and do that? That's not what's happening here. And so it obviously wasn't the right way to do it because that's not what he did. But if we can begin asking ourselves, well, why didn't he?

Well, what would be some guesses? The text doesn't tell us that. Of course there's no biblical chapter and verse answer to the question, but there are some facts I think. That we could bring into evidence. One of them is all evidence must be interpreted and may not be compelling. So Jesus is raised from the dead.

That first Easter Sunday, and the guards are like dead men, and then they go tell the authorities. The authorities know Jesus has been raised from the dead, and what do they do? Go find him and worship him? No. They bribe the guards to lie about it. And tell the world that the disciples stole the body while they were asleep.

How they knew it was the disciples because they were asleep is an interesting question, but be that as it may, they had some of the earliest opportunity to repent and follow this risen Lord. And they didn't do that, did they? Instead, they tried to cover it up. It says, and I love this first act, actually, Matthew 28, 17, that when the followers of Jesus and not just the 12, I think met the risen Christ, it says they worshiped him, but some doubted. And they're in the very presence of the risen, resurrected Christ. It's back to Lazarus. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, what did the authorities do? Did they now follow Jesus? No, they tried to kill Lazarus. Like that's going to bother Lazarus, you know, having been, having, having experienced paradise.

I don't think Lazarus is unhappy. I think of all people that were happy to meet death, Lazarus would have to, you feel sorry for Lazarus, you know, William Barclay said, pity Lazarus. He had to die twice. I mean, he was the first martyr in a sense. And so, but yeah, the authorities, I mean, talk about. incredible evidence here.

The red, it wasn't the resurrection of Lazarus. It was a resuscitation of Lazarus because he died again. But resuscitation of Lazarus and the authorities now try to put him to death again rather than worship Jesus. Evidence must be interpreted, may not be compelling. So my guess is that if Jesus 500 or 500, 000 or 5 million, not all would have followed.

A lot wouldn't have. And then past the first generation, nothing we're seeing right now would be relevant anyway. The 500 passed this on, but they all died. Here we are 20 centuries later. It wouldn't matter to us that he did appear to the entire planet. If we're needing to see the risen Lord Jesus with our own eyes as they did to be as convinced as they were, well, past the first generation, Jesus would have to keep it up.

If that's the strategy of winning the world, well, he has to just keep coming and dying and being raised for every generation, doesn't he? Has to keep doing this for every human being if that's how this is supposed to work. The good news is that that is how it's supposed to work. It's just through us. Now we're to be the risen Christ to the world.

We're literally the body of Christ, not just figuratively. Now we're the hands and feet and eyes and ears. Now we are to be the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus to the entire world as though

it were Jesus himself. Now you and I are continuing the ministry of Jesus. And if we do that in the prayer of the Holy Spirit, the reality of the resurrection and the relevance of the resurrection becomes as powerful as though it were Jesus in his body.

It's just Jesus in our body instead. So in a very real sense, we are doing what we're asking Jesus to do. It's just, he's doing it through us. There's no cartoon us up. Go ahead.

[00:57:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And that's, and that's one of the astounding things about this, right. Is that we can do that. We can be those compelling witnesses as you were talking to our staff just a day or two ago about being the fifth gospel. There's Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but you are the next gospel.

And that. The Bible gives credence to this. The apostle Paul, who we've referenced several times is one of these people. There's no ever, no indication that Paul ever heard or met Jesus personally. So in that sense, he's some kind of a second generation Christian, you might say. So, but to those who think, well, I just can't believe unless I actually see him kind of the spirit of Thomas.

Um, that we might say the Bible says, no, you, you can know and believe in him. You can be a convinced witness without having had the opportunity to have seen and touched him personally. Which kind

[00:58:03] **Dr. Jim Denison:** those who have not sinned and yet believed, you know, Paul had met Jesus on the Damascus road, of course, met the risen Christ, but this is much after the fact. This is much after the fact. And even at that point, Paul is convinced by this. He's persuaded by this, but again, evidence has to be interpreted and may not be persuasive.

Now Paul's telling the story. And a whole lot of folk heard the story and weren't convinced by it. How many times? Three times, I think, in the book of Acts, it's recorded that Paul tells that story. And there's no evidence that anybody he told it to came to Christ because of that story. And so again, it's the Holy Spirit to convict.

I can't do that. My words can't change human hearts, can't convict of sin. So we're going to trust the spirit to use the story to change lives. But you are the story, is your point. You can be that story as much as though Jesus were in the flesh. He's just in your flesh.

[00:58:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And that really kind of brings me to my last question, which is, we talk about this often. We're going to be doing some more work in this area, just about. The importance of faith in Christ. And as Paul said in another letter to the Corinthians, that you, that we are to test ourselves to make sure that we are in the faith, um, because you and I come from the Protestant tradition of Christianity.

We tend to really focus on Paul's conversion that you mentioned just a minute ago how he has this very powerful, unique encounter with Jesus while he is on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. And he is radically changed from a persecutor of the church to becoming a preacher of the church.

And, As Protestants, we really focus on that. Um, but I grew up the first decade of my life in a Roman Catholic family that where that kind of an understanding of conversion to correct to Christ and to belief in faith, It wasn't emphasized that way. Um, and I've thought more about that as I've gotten older and how, you know, we don't know exactly when Peter was converted.

We don't know exactly when John or many of the other apostles and followers of Jesus, we don't know exactly when was that turning point. Um, that they said, okay, I really believe we could look at different stories, but talk about it. It, we call it good news because it is the best news. And I sometimes preach when I have the opportunity, people say, well, you can't believe that God would forgive us of all of our sins because of what Jesus did, that's too good to be true.

And I would tell my church and. Often say, well, it is too good to be true if it came from anybody other than God,

[01:00:35] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah.

[01:00:36] **Dr. Mark Turman:** As a way of just kind of pulling this whole conversation together. Talk about the, just the absolute importance of. Of why you need to not only know the good news, you need to believe the good news because that's really the point of everything that we do.

[01:00:55] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It is. It really is. A gift has to be opened, doesn't it? It's one thing to know it's sitting under the Christmas tree. It doesn't do you much good until you open it. Until you receive it. A meal has to be eaten. You sit down at the table, and there's this wonderful feast here, but until you eat it, it's not relevant to you.

It's not practical in your life. But you're right, this idea of a salvation prayer, this idea that you pray a prayer, something like, Lord, I ask you to forgive my sins and be the Lord of my life. I give my life to you, that sort of thing. Something that's been made really popular in recent generations, I think again, historically, goes back to revivals.

Goes back to services with open invitations. Spurgeon never had an invitation. In a worship service he would have an inquirer's room afterwards where people could come and he would stay and talk with them About the thing but this idea of coming down to the front. Well now that i've got you here I need to do something to help you trust in christ.

So here's a prayer a way Of praying to ask Jesus to forgive your sins and be the Lord of your life. That is a way to do this. And so we'll do this now. And this is in this revival context. And then as

that moves over into worship service, so you have the invitation at the end of the worship service, a way of introducing people to faith in Christ.

That's certainly a wonderful way to meet the Lord. That's how I met the Lord. I became a Christian on September 9th, 1973, when my Sunday school teacher led me to pray a salvation prayer. Started becoming popular. That again is a way to communicate a means by which a person could trust in Christ is through a prayer at the end of the track that you would then pray.

That's how my wife met the Lord is through a track that she discovered and went home and memorized that prayer. She didn't know if she could pray with her eyes open. So she memorized it so she could pray this with her eyes closed, this little girl, and it was in that, that she prayed a prayer by which he asked Jesus to be Lord of her life.

It's a wonderful way. I'm not at all to disparage here, but that's not in scripture. There is no sinner's prayer. As you know, in the Bible closest thing I suppose would be the thief on the cross. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Well, we don't ask people to pray that when they come down to the front of a worship service or during invitation.

And so it's a wonderful way, but not the only way. to do that. Ruth Bale Graham, Billy Graham's wife, never had a conversion moment that was so obvious to her that she could tell you on September 9th, 1973, I prayed these words, you know, she just knows that from the time she was young, Jesus was her Lord.

She had trusted him. She was She was committed to them. She wanted her sins to be forgiven. She wanted them to be the Lord of her life, even if she didn't have the conversion moment in her Presbyterian background. That came more through the catechetical process and through the discipling process of her church and and the Catholic tradition.

This is more through the catechetical and a lot of the mainline as well. So I think probably the operative question isn't so much. Did you pray a specific prayer as though that one prayer has some magical thing? It is. Do you know right now? that Jesus is the Lord of your life? Are you certain that you've asked him in your own way, in your own tradition, to be your Lord, to forgive your sin and be your Lord?

Are you sure that you've done that? If you're not sure, you need to be sure. I've often said, when people are married, they know it. I've never met a couple visiting a church when I was pastor that I asked, well, are y'all married? And they say, you know, we're not sure, you know, we might be married. We believe in marriage.

We go to weddings. We think weddings are a wonderful thing. We, I, yeah, probably, maybe, you know, if you're married, you know, it probably a time when you said, I do to each other,

something like that. So if you're married to Jesus, you're probably going to know that. And if you're not sure of that, you can be sure today.

You can pray a sinner's prayer. You can ask Jesus to forgive your sin and be your, and be your Lord. It's really that simple. But however that process was for you, the important thing today is, are you sure that you know him? That Paul, John wrote him that, that these, you can't know this. You can know.

That you have asked Jesus to be the Lord of your life. That's the important question. How you got there can be as varied as the various ways that all of us grow up and wire different ways and experience the Lord in different ways. And the important thing is if you died today, would you be with him in that moment?

And that's a question all of us can answer right now.

[01:04:58] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. It makes, makes me think of, of our shared hero, CS Lewis, who, after A long period of deliberating questions, you know, went to the zoo with his brother. And he, I think he said when he left the house, he didn't believe him when he got to the zoo. He did. And

[01:05:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** On his way to Whipsnade Zoo on the, um, on the sidecar of his brother, Warren is, yeah, on their way to the zoo. So,

[01:05:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** makes you wonder how his brother was driving the motorcycle when he was riding in the said car.

[01:05:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** must've scared him or something. And even that's a two stage, you know, he had, he was a convinced atheist under the teaching of William Keprecht, his tutor and others, and then really, I know you know the story, but it was Tolkien and others, and they were part of the Inklings, as they were called, and long walks, one specific walk he tells about when he was, I've taken this walk.

Outside of modeling college there at Oxford, I've been on this actual walk that Lewis was on when he came back a theist. And and says later in Surprised by Joy that he fell to his knees that night, the, the something about the most reluctant convert in all of Europe. Well, at that point, he was just a convert to theism.

He had come to believe there is a God again, but he still had not come to faith in Christ. It was on that ride to Whipsnade Zoo. On the sidecar of his brother's motorcycle that he made the commitment to actually trust in Christ as his Lord and Savior. Well, that doesn't have to be the formula. I hope i've never been to whipsnade zoo I've never ridden in the sidecar of a motorcycle.

I hope that's not the one way this works and so Lots of ways to do this The good news is that the gospel is as available to all of us as it is to any of us and that's god's love For all of us.

[01:06:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Absolutely. Yeah. Cause I, I really have no interest in being in a sidecar to be honest. Well, Jim, thank you for this. It's been a wonderful conversation. I hope it's been helpful to our listeners. We want to thank them, obviously, for giving us their time to be a part of this conversation. We would wish all of you the most blessed and wonderful day.

Resurrection celebration, Easter, whatever you choose to call it. We'd also say that if you have questions about what it means to have Christ as your forgiver and leader, your King, we would love to talk with you. You can reach us at info at denisonforum. org. And we would love to talk with you and help you in any way that we can.

If you're not in our area or you choose not to email, we'd love for you to Seek out a local church and go and talk to the leaders there and, and investigate the questions of faith and let them help you as well. And we hope you have a great and wonderful celebration of Jesus's death and resurrection and the promise of his coming.

Thank you again for supporting us, for praying for us. And we look forward to seeing you again on the next edition of the Denison Forum Podcast.