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Introduction—JC Ryle

John Charles Ryle - more often known just as JC Ryle, was a Church of England pastor in Liverpool in the late 1800s. His first wife died when she was young. He married again, but his second wife also passed away. He did marry again, by which time he had experienced his fair share of life's sorrows.

He began to preach through the Gospel of John in his 50s, and when he got to chapter 14, where we find our sixth "I am" statement, he wrote the following words:

"Heart trouble is the commonest thing in the world. No rank or class or condition is exempt from it. No bars or bolts, or locks can keep it out. Partly from inward causes, partly from outward, partly from body, partly from mind, partly from what we love and partly from what we fear, the journey of life is full of trouble. Even the best of Christians have many bitter cups to drink between grace and glory. Even the holiest saints find the world a valley of tears. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only sure medicine for troubled hearts."

Those words can only have been written by someone who had personally experienced adversity in life.

We are gradually making our way through the seven occasions in the Gospel of John where Jesus declared "I am this" or "I am that." And today we have come to the longest of Jesus' I am statements, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."*

And once again, we cannot grasp the meaning of this statement unless we understand the setting, so let us sketch out the scene before we draw truth and comfort from this "I am."

The Setting—troubled hearts

It is Thursday evening, the next day Jesus will suffer and be crucified, and all Twelve disciples are gathered together in Jerusalem to eat the Passover Meal, “The Last Supper.” Hostility against Jesus had been rising and the disciples sensed—even if they did not want to believe it—that it would not be long before the religious leaders would arrest, try and kill their Master. This is the menacing background to the sixth saying. All sorts of thoughts must have passed through their minds. Perhaps *doubt*—if Jesus really was the true Messiah, why did he have so many enemies? Is Jesus *the authentic* Messiah? Perhaps *fear*—if Jesus is arrested, his followers were likely to be next in line.

As if that was not enough to trouble the hearts of the Twelve, distressing events had just taken place in the upper room. All the disciples had just *demonstrated their selfishness* by not volunteering to wash one another’s feet—the common hospitality that preceded a communal meal. Jesus had to become the ‘servant’ instead. Jesus *had just predicted that one of the disciples would betray* him, sending a wave of self-examination all round the room! “Is it I?” “Could I betray Jesus?” Judas, *the betrayer had just left the room*. Jesus told them he was “going away” and that they could not follow him where he was going. (Jesus was talking about his death—they could not follow him to his death!) And then Jesus predicted that *strong Peter would disown* him three times in just a few hours’ time! If strong Peter could stumble, what hope for the rest of them?

It was in the midst of these most disturbing events that Jesus declared “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” when the hearts of the disciples were a medley of:

- *Doubt* over who Jesus really was
- *Fear* over possible arrest and worse
- *Guilt* over their failure to think of others
- *Sorrow* over the imminent departure of Jesus
- *Confusion* over the existence of a betrayer in their midst
- And *shock* over the predicted failure of one of their strongest colleagues, Peter!

Doubt, guilt, sorrow, fear, confusion and shock! That’s just about every sad emotion in the book, isn’t it? And all at once! Perhaps someone listening today can identify with one or some of those emotions. Let’s see how Jesus comforts his disciples, and let us learn how he would

comfort us too: for the words he speaks to them, he also speaks to us.

Here's where we are going:

- (1) Troubled hearts are a common thing
- (2) Troubled hearts are the concern of Jesus—he cares when our hearts are distraught
- (3) Trouble hearts are cured by faith in Jesus

(1) Troubled Hearts are common

When we find our hearts anxious or fearful or guilty or sorrowful or guilty or confused, we are not to think, “there is something wrong with me,” or “I can't be a very good follower of Jesus,” for troubled hearts are common. Jesus himself had a troubled heart, as he contemplated the suffering that he knew lay ahead of him: *“Now my heart is troubled” he said to his disciples, “and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour?” (12:27)* Troubled hearts are a common occurrence for God's people. How did JC Ryle put it, *“No rank or class or condition is exempt from it. No bars or bolts, or locks can keep it out!”*

Trouble hearts are caused *by the brokenness of the world we live in.* *“man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” (Job 5:7)* Sit by an open fire and what will you see? Sparks flying up in the air. As certain as sparks fly upward—that is how certain troubles will come our way in a fallen world!

Troubled heart are caused *by our inability to see the whole picture.* If the disciples had been able to see what was going to happen over the few days and months—Jesus would suffer to take away their sins, Jesus would rise victoriously from the dead, Jesus would spend 40 days with them, Jesus would ascend to heaven, but leave behind his Holy Spirit - they would not have been so upset, but they couldn't see the whole picture. And if we too knew the end of our troubles and especially the good God is able to bring out of them, our sorrows would surely diminish.

But, thirdly, *Troubled hearts are caused by our human weaknesses.* Some folks are just more worrisome and fearful by nature! Past experiences of life may have made others to be more prone to anxiety. And our failure to apply what we already know - may also give rise to a troubled heart: Jesus, after all, had been preparing his disciples for this hour for a long time, they just weren't listening!

Whatever the cause, let's not condemn ourselves when our hearts are troubled, for troubled hearts are common. When I was preparing this sermon, I spent a few moments reflecting on my own heart. Some people may think that pastors are beyond troubled hearts! Not at all. I was surprised at how often my own heart is troubled, by all sorts of things!

In the second place, let us learn that

(2) Troubled hearts are the concern of Jesus

This is a moment in Jesus' life, when we could surely excuse him from caring *for others*, since his own burden is so heavy. And yet, what do we find? Jesus lays aside his own—*far greater woes*—and empathises with the troubles of his disciples!

Is it not true to say that we are so often consumed with our own troubles that we have little time or energy to empathise with the sorrows of those around us. But not Jesus, our ever-sympathetic High Priest. In the hour of his greatest need, Jesus' turns to the needs of others: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*" He says to his disciples

Let every follower of Jesus hear today that Jesus knows and he is concerned when his children have troubled hearts. And he does not want them to languish long with a troubled heart; he wants to bring our hearts to rest.

How does Jesus do this? What is the cure for troubled hearts?

Yes, he *commands them not to worry*, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," and we too must heed that command. We must not allow our hearts to rule our heads. There are times we must question our hearts in the words of Psalm 42: "Why are you downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me?" and then command them not to be troubled.

Yes, he fills in the *gaps in their knowledge* which are causing them anxiety— they don't understand where and why he is going to a place they can't come to - so he explains: "*In my Father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*"

(3) Troubled hearts are cured by Faith in Jesus!

But more than a command or new truth, *Jesus points to himself*, and says, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.*” (Just as you trust in God trust in me, for I am God.) The cure to a troubled heart is a greater trust in Jesus Christ, who himself is the answer to all the questions of our hearts.

And that’s where this sixth “I am” statement comes in. Jesus calls himself “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*” to his disciples in this troubled moment because, they are wondering with Jesus saying he is going away, how they will get to God, well Jesus says, “*I am the Way to God.*” They have *doubts* as to whether Jesus really is the Messiah, is he telling them the truth, Yes, “*I am the Truth*” he says! They are worried about his death - and their death - so Jesus says “*I am the Life*”

When Jesus says “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” to his disciples he is saying to them, “*I am the answer to all the here and now questions that trouble your hearts.*” And he says the same to every troubled heart, “*Trust me, for I am the answer to all your questions.*”

The cure for a troubled heart is to trust in Jesus!

The final piece of the puzzle is prayer

Someone asks, “But how exactly can I trust in Jesus?” John Calvin, a great reformer from the 1500s made a famous true statement, which we’ll end with: “*Prayer is the greatest way we can exercise our faith*”

The greatest way we can put our faith into practice is *to pray!* So whenever our hearts are troubled, instead of turning to idols—to *chocolate, or sport, or to some other earthly distraction*—let us immediately turn to Jesus Christ in prayer:

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer!*