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What Do I Need?

Easter

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Video:

It's hard to tell the story of humanity without also telling the story of religion. There is something deep within the human soul that causes most of us to turn toward God. However, throughout most of history, it's been on our terms. This is the essence of religion. We want God, but in limited ways. Not enough to love our neighbors, and certainly not enough to love our enemies. We want a blessing, and maybe a little help now and then, but not so much that it alters my lifestyle, or asks me to sacrifice. We want enough of God to feel good, but not so much that it gets in the way of my fun. We want religion.

The story of religion has been mostly the story of the many ways we've tried to use and manipulate God to give us what we think we want. We attend this service, we do that ritual, we jump through the necessary hoops to believe God owes us one. But we have no intention of ever truly surrendering our lives to God. We want to use Him, but have no interest in bowing and worshipping Him. This is the essence of religion.

The religious Jews of the first century were no exception. They were very religious. They engaged in a lot of God talk and religious activity. They believed through their good works and religious activities they could manipulate God to bless their agenda. At the top of their list, was their passionate desire to overthrow the Roman Empire and run their own show. This was abundantly clear on that fateful parade into Jerusalem that we refer to as Palm Sunday. The Jewish people cheered and celebrated Jesus entering Jerusalem as their king. In their minds, Jesus was about to lead a revolution that would overthrow Rome and set them free. Why did they think that? Because that was THEIR agenda. That's what THEY wanted. They had been faithful to their religion, and in turn, God was obligated to fulfill what they wanted in return. When it became evident that Jesus was not going to do what they wanted Him to do, their cheers turned to disappointment, which quickly turned to anger. The same crowds that proclaimed, "Hosanna to Jesus, King of the Jews," on Sunday, were now crying, "Crucify Him!" only a few days later. When it became evident they couldn't use Jesus to fulfill their own agenda, they had no more use for Him. Those Jews would not be the first or the last to turn away from God believing God failed to keep His end of the bargain.

This weekend, all around the world, millions of people will flock into churches to get just enough of God. Enough to get a blessing. Enough to make them feel good. Maybe enough to ask a favor, but certainly not enough to cause them to love their enemy, to serve others, to surrender their lives or bow down and worship. For many this year, Easter will be about trying to get just enough to use God to get what they want and nothing more. And like the religious people of ages gone past, they will walk away disappointed again, angry that God, once again, was not willing to play our little religious game.

Yet, what if what we want is not what we need? What if what Jesus offers is not so much what we want, but rather what we desperately need? What then?

So what if you got everything that you want? Everything that you want. Do you think then you'd be happy? Do you think then you'd be fulfilled? Do you think then you'd finally be satisfied? It's easy for people to think, "If I just had everything that I want, then, I'd be happy!" But virtually all of the research shows overwhelmingly that's just not true. You would either want something more or something different. We as Americans have more than any generation that has ever lived. And yet we're more unhappy. We're more dissatisfied. We're more anxious. We're more despairing. We're more addicted. We're more suicidal than any generation before us. One would have to ask the question: What is wrong?

So here's a question to think about. What if the issue that could ultimately unlock what we're looking for, isn't about what we want at all? What if it was actually to understand what we really need? This is not something new. This tension between what we want and what we actually need has been there from the beginning of humanity. All the way back in Genesis chapters two and three, we're introduced to Adam and Eve, who literally had everything. Which raises the question: what could they possibly want? Answer: more. And they believed that by becoming their own gods, deciding for themselves what's right and wrong, what's good and evil - if they took charge of their own lives, certainly, there could still be more. That's what they wanted. So that's the choice they made. And immediately it was disastrous, and the first thing they did was to hide from God. That's good to remember because we're going to come back to that in just a couple of minutes.

The second story in the Bible, chapter four, is the story of their two sons: Cain and Abel. Abel loved God. He worshipped God. He bowed before God. He desired to surrender to God as God. Cain, not so much. Cain was not an atheist. He was not an agnostic. He was not a skeptic. As a matter of fact, he was absolutely convinced that God is real. But he wanted God on his terms. In essence, he wanted a god he could control and manipulate. Tell me the requirements. What are the rituals? What is the checklist? What are the hoops I have to jump through? He wanted God in a box, where he could still run his own life, and God was there if he needed Him. What Cain wanted was not to sacrifice, not to give God his best, not to surrender his life to God. What Cain wanted was $5 worth of God, please.

During the latter part of the 19th century, early part of the 20th century, there was a French painter, who painted an absolutely magnificent painting. We're going to throw it on the screen. The original of this painting hangs in a museum in Paris. It is a massive painting: 13 feet high, 23 feet long. The painting is simply entitled "Cain". It is a depiction of Cain, whom we see out in front, followed by his family. This is an accurate picture, if our life is only defined by pursuing what we want. What the New Testament refers to as "the way of Cain". A life of desolation, a life of despair, a life of constantly seeking, but never able to find that which ultimately satisfies. I would suggest to you, this is the very essence of religion. Religion is all about trying to control and manipulate God. I don't want enough of God that I have to sacrifice. I don't want enough of God that it ruins my fun. I don't want enough of God that I need to

surrender or bow and worship. I'd just like $5 worth of God, please. I want to put God in a box. I want to keep Him there. I'll open it up if I need Him. Maybe He can bless me. Maybe He's there in a time of crisis, but otherwise let's leave Him at church. I'll visit Him a few times a year. That's all I want of God.

All through the Old Testament and into the New Testament, there are story after stories that basically talk about this tension between what people think they want and a desire to use God in order to meet my agenda, versus what people actually need. So it's no surprise, that when God would become flesh and actually walk on this earth in the person of Jesus, that there was a constant tension between those who sought to use Jesus to get what they wanted, versus those who needed to understand what they desperately needed. I'm going to tell you a few of those stories. If you want to follow along, the first one's in John 3. I'm going to skip around a little bit. It might be easier just to kind of listen along.

But the first one is a story of a highly religious man by the name of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Nicodemus was an expert in the Old Testament law. Nicodemus was more passionately religious than probably any person in this room this morning. But Nicodemus also understood something was missing. Something was not satisfying. He understood there was something different about Jesus, and he wanted to ask Jesus some questions. The text tells us he came to Jesus by night. Jesus was not at all popular with the religious teachers. Nicodemus did not want to be seen talking to Jesus, so by night he slips in and asks a few questions. In essence, he says, "Jesus, you seem to be different. I'm up to my eyebrows in religion. I'm just kind of feeling like it's not working for me. What am I missing?" Jesus responds by saying, "Nicodemus, all the religion in the world is not going to deliver. You know what you need? You need to be born again." You often hear people refer to this language, in our culture, often kind of making fun of the language of being born again. But these are Jesus' words. When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, He did not say, "You need more religion! You need more hoops! You need a longer checklist!" What He said was, "Nicodemus, what you NEED is radical conversion. You need to be born again." This confused Nicodemus. They got into this long discussion about what does that mean? Do I go back into my mother's womb? How can I be born twice? It created a great deal of confusion for Nicodemus, which leads to Jesus explaining what would be necessary in order for Nicodemus to be born again. In verse 14, partway through, Jesus says, "**Even so must the Son of Man** [meaning Jesus, Himself] **be lifted up** [which is language which means He must be crucified on a cross]". Why? "**So that whosoever believes, will in Him have eternal life**." (**NASB, John 3:14-15*) What Jesus said to Nicodemus is what you NEED is to be born again and what will be necessary for that to happen is I must be crucified. It's followed by arguably the most famous verse in the Bible:

"**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.**" (*John 3:16-17*)

A lot of confusion about this with people in our culture. They're absolutely convinced the reason Jesus came was to judge everyone. Jesus just said it. He didn't come to judge everyone. He came in order that the world might be saved. Why? Because that's what we desperately need.

But that implies people need saving. Who needs to be saved? Well someone who is lost. The problem is a lot of people in our culture don't see themselves as lost. And if I'm not lost, I have no need to be saved. You say, "How is it possible that people could be so blind to their need? They know what they want, but they don't understand what they need." Jesus actually addresses that in His conversation with Nicodemus. He goes on in verse 19 to say,

"**This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light. For their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.**" (*John 3:19-20*)

If I was just to use a little different wording and capture the same meaning, the text says, "This is the judgment that the light has come into the world and people want darkness." What do we want? We want darkness. Why? Because light exposes our evil deeds and no one likes to have their evil deeds exposed. What was the first thing that Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They hid from God - because of the shame of their sin. Our natural instinct, because of our sin, because of what's going on in the darkness is to hide. We don't want others seeing our stuff. Many of you have heard this story before, but years ago, when I was going to college, I lived in downtown Chicago, and I had a job for a man that would purchase apartment complexes that were right on the edge of being condemned by the city of Chicago. And my job was to bring them back to life. And so I would go in these apartments and if I went after dark, it was very common, that if I went into the kitchen and it was dark and I would just quietly listen, I could hear the rats running around in the kitchen. And I would wait until I heard quite a few rats, then I'd flick on the light, and the rats were exposed and the rats would scatter.

Once the light was on, the rats were exposed. The reason people don't understand what they need is because they prefer darkness because darkness hides our rats. We want to pretend that everything's okay. We want to pretend we're good, religious people. We want to pretend we're as good as the next guy. But when the light of Jesus shines on our lives, our rats are exposed and we don't like it. That is why there is so much negative energy around Jesus and Christianity in our culture. People don't like the rats exposed. What they want is darkness. But as long as you remain in the darkness, you will never understand what you actually need.

The very next story, John chapter four, is about a woman who couldn't be more opposite of Nicodemus. She wasn't religious at all. She was an outcast. She was a Samaritan, which to the Jews, meant she was an outcast, but even among her own people, she was a bit of an outcast. She had spent her life looking for love in all the wrong places. What she wanted was to be loved. What she wanted was to be protected and cared for. But she had been through five husbands and was currently living with man #6. In that culture, that would be a way of saying, she had just given up. She would never measure up. She would never be accepted. There's no point in even trying anymore. She just wanted to be left alone, to be miserable with this man, until she died.

So she's at the well in the middle of the day. Most of the time the women came to get water early in the morning, late at evening, when it was cool. She came in the heat of the day knowing there would be no one else there. No talking, no finger-pointing, no condemning looks. She just wanted to get her water and go home. But there she encounters Jesus and Jesus engages her in

conversation. Jesus says to her, basically, "What you want today is water in order to satisfy your thirst. But if you settle for this water alone, it's only temporary, and tomorrow you'll be right back here again for more water." But this is where the conversation changed. Jesus said, "That's what you want, but I'm going to tell you what you need. What you need is living water, because what you have is a dry and thirsty soul. You've spent your life looking for love in all the wrong places and now in despair, you're ready to give up. But what you need is living water, and if you drink of the living water, you will never be thirsty ever again." This was a life-changing moment for this woman, where for the first time in her life, she actually understood what she needed. So much so, she said to Jesus, "The only one that could possibly deliver that would be the Messiah." And Jesus said, "You're exactly right! And that's me."

Palm Sunday was really the celebration of highly, religious Jewish people, wanting to use Jesus to fulfill their own agenda - it's clearly what they wanted. They had no idea that Jesus had come to give them what they desperately needed. This confusion over the mission of Jesus is seen again and again, but one last illustration of that: even Jesus' own disciples seemed very confused between what they wanted and what they actually needed. The text tells us in Matthew 16:

> **From that time, Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed** [meaning crucified] **and be raised up on the third day." Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it Lord! This shall never happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's.** (**NASB, Matthew 16:21-23*)

Jesus was telling them: this is the mission - I have to go to Jerusalem. I will be arrested by the religious leaders. I will be crucified. I will be buried and on the third day I will rise from the dead, validating my claim to have conquered sin and death once and for all. And immediately Peter steps up and rebukes Jesus. And in essence, says, "I don't want that!" Now to Peter's credit, he loved Jesus. He didn't want to see this happen to Jesus, so he said, "Jesus I don't want that for you!" But Jesus said, "Peter, I know that's not what you want, but we're not settling on man's interests, but on God's interests. And this has been the mission from the beginning: that in order for sinful people to get what they need, Jesus would have to go to the cross and there shed His blood in order that God could offer the forgiveness of sin - living water - that we might be radically born again."

That does raise a question that I'm often asked. Why was that necessary? Why was it necessary for Jesus to die? Why couldn't God just summarily say, "You're forgiven!" Answer: because "just forgiven" has no basis in reality. Let me explain it this way:

Let's imagine that today, when we're getting ready to leave, I get in my car and I crash right into your car. I do thousands of dollars of damage. There's basically two options on the table. One is, I could pay for the damage. That would be right. It would be fair. It would be just. The second option on the table, is for you to say, "you know, I forgive you. Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it myself." That would be grace and mercy. That would be forgiveness. But it does not come without COST. What you just said, is that you, yourself, would pay for the damage.

Either you're going to pay the thousands of dollars to fix it up, or you're going to lose thousands of dollar in value on your car. The one option that is no longer on the table, is we can't pretend it didn't happen. It DID happen. And somebody must pay. That's how it works.

But let's extend the illustration a little farther. Let's say that I say to you, "I'll tell you what, I'll take care of the damage on your car. Just give me one year. And so for the next year, I make a commitment: I am going to be the best driver in Lincoln. I always drive the speed limit. I come to a complete stop at the stop signs. When somebody cuts me off in traffic, I wave and say, "Have a wonderful day! If you want to do it again tomorrow that's fine! You know, Jesus loves you!" I even let the little squirrels cross. Best. Driver. In town. After one year of that, I show up at your house expecting the dent to be out of your car, because I've convinced myself, if I'm really good for a year, the dent will go away.

This is the essence of religion. It's believing that even though I have crashed in to the holiness of God and made a massive wreck of things, if I just am good, if I jump through some hoops, if I check off some boxes, if I just try to be a good boy for a year, somehow the dent will go away. It just doesn't work that way. Every person in the room has crashed in to the holiness of God and now we have a problem. If you're willing to turn on the light, our lives are infested with rats. And when the light comes on, the rats scramble to the corners. We have a problem!

If all we ever do is pursue what we want, Cain has painted the picture of our future. It is a future of despair. It is a future of always seeking something that will satisfy but never ultimately finding it. But if we're willing to look beyond what we want and our desire to use God and to put God in a box, and to honestly face what we really need, we - at that point - can begin to understand that there are two options on the table: either I pay for my own sins or I accept the offer that God has paid my debt. That through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross, He paid a debt He didn't owe because I owe a debt I simply cannot pay. If I'm willing to receive His gift, He offers me salvation freely as a gift, that I might be radically born again. That I might experience living water for a dry and thirsty soul.

While the picture of Cain is not a pretty one, the gospels paint a new picture - a picture of Jesus, who came to earth to be the Savior of the world, and offers salvation freely as a gift. If religion were true, all I could tell you this morning, would be, you know, you need to go out and try harder, but by the way, at the end of the day, it won't do any good because it won't make the dent go away. But I don't offer you religion this morning. I offer you radical, new birth, in a gift freely offered by Jesus. **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.**

> *Our Father, this morning we celebrate that the price of the debt of our sin has been paid. That was the whole mission. Jesus had come to seek and to save the lost. Jesus would have to give His life on a cross and shed His blood, that we might be born again. That we might experience living water. God, help us to understand that. That Jesus has made it possible, that we can have what we need, now and forever. In Jesus name. Amen.*

Video:

My whole life, I feel like I've been defined by my performance. I still remember the moment I got my first B in 3rd grade reading. My heart dropped, because, even at that age, I felt like I wasn't measuring up. I always wanted to be the best in my class, whether it was elementary school, middle school, high school, so in high school I set the goal that I wanted to be the valedictorian. And just like most kids, I wanted to be accepted and I wanted the approval of others. It wasn't just academics that I was trying to perform highly in, it was also athletics. My freshman year, I tied the school record in the 75m high hurdles, so my life was basically defined by academics, athletics, and relationships, and I just wanted to be the best at everything, at all those different things.

From the moment I woke up, I was always on the go. I went to class, went to practice, came home, ate dinner, and basically studied until I went to bed, and then did it all over again the next day. If I thought about God at all back then, it was pretty much just if I wanted something from Him - win a race, or get an A on my test - I'd pretty much just go to Him asking for things. And when I saw my name on the record board, it made me feel like I was worth something, but on the other hand, when I would lose a race or I wouldn't get an A on something, or someone said something negative to me, I would honestly feel like my identity was being attacked.

I placed 6th at state my sophomore year. Academically I was ranked #1 in my class every single year, so that spring before I graduated high school, things seemed to be going great. And then, just like that, things started to go downhill. I got injured in track and wasn't able to compete for most of the season. I had practiced so hard my first three years of high school, and I just felt like everything I had worked for had been a waste. I specifically remember the day that I graduated high school. They said, "Jonathan Langeman Kingsley, valedictorian". I walked across the stage, grabbed my diploma, sat down, and, I was just like, "Is that it? Like, did I really just work that hard for that?" And this feeling of, just, dread started to set in because I realized in that moment that I was going to have to do the exact same thing over again once I got to college.

I just had this feeling of emptiness, and, on top of that, the girl that I had been dating at the time broke up with me. I still remember to this day exactly what she said to me. She said, “The only two qualities my husband will absolutely have to have for me to marry him are: to make me a better me every day, and to be so in love with God, that he makes me a more godly woman.” That was honestly, just like a knife to the chest for me, because I realized in that moment that I didn't know God. Up to that point, I had just been trying to essentially use God for my own selfish motives. In the eyes of the world, on the outside, I had it all together, but on the inside, I was broken and I was filthy, and God started to just reveal to me the depths of my sin, showing me just how prideful I can be. How judgmental I can be, how selfish I can be. I realized that I can be the nicest, smartest, hard-working, athletic, moralistic, fill-in-the-blank, person in the world, but if I don't have a relationship with God, none of that stuff even matters. I just said to myself, "I want God!"

I needed a Savior to save me from my sin, and that Savior was Jesus. God has really started changing what it was that I wanted and He got me involved with a campus ministry here in Lincoln. Jesus offered me this gift of eternal life for free if I just believe in Him. It was something that I couldn't earn or perform for. So now it's not that I don't still struggle with performance, because I do, but I hold on to the simple truth that my identity is in Christ. The world says that you're defined by what you do. But God says that you're defined by what Jesus has already done for you on the cross. God didn't just give me what I wanted. He gave me what I needed, and now I just have this incredible feeling of freedom in Christ.

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