

Jesus and the End of Religion (2)

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[0 : 00] While we remain standing, I'll pray. Our Father and Lord, open our eyes that we might behold wondrous things from your word. Soften our hearts that we might receive that word.

Transform our wills that we might be doers of it. Loose our tongues that they might proclaim your word. And we ask this for the glory of your Son in whose name we pray.

Amen. Oh, please sit down, friends. Now, friends, if you've been keeping an eye on the title of our Bible talks in the last week or two, then you'll notice that both this week and last week, there is a common title.

And that both last week and this week have the title, The End of Religion. And both are about religion and Christianity. Now, last week I defined religion in one way.

With this week, I'd like to define it another way. I'd like to define it using an encyclopedia definition. And I've taken it from the Encyclopedia of Philosophy. And it defines religion by giving a list of what it calls shared or common traits.

[1 : 11] And it says, you know, the more that a religion has, the more religious it is. And the characteristics are this. And I think you might like to consider, for example, Judaism or Christianity and think, which ones does it fit?

So, here they go. Belief in supernatural beings. God or gods. Two. A distinction between sacred and profane objects.

You know, things that are special and set aside to God and things that are not. Three. Ritual acts focused on sacred objects. So, particular objects are special and set aside.

And you perform certain acts around them. A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods. In other words, a way of living sanctioned by God or gods. Four.

I think we're up to. Five, perhaps. Characteristically religious feelings of awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration. Which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects or during the practice of sacred events.

[2 : 21] Next. Prayer. And other forms of communication with gods or God. Next. A worldview or a general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual in it.

Next. The picture contains some specification of the overall purpose or point of the world and an indication of how the individual fits into that purpose. Next.

A more or less total organisation of one's life around a worldview. And finally. A social group bound together by all of the above.

Now certainly with Judaism you could tick all of those things off. And you could say yes that's true. And I suspect with some forms of Christianity you could do the same. But I think this list fundamentally fails in one area.

You see what it does not do. When you go through those list of things. It does describe what common characteristics might exist. But it does not give a rationale for religion.

[3 : 25] It doesn't say why religion exists. I think that religion as a whole has a specific purpose. It is designed to orient you to the divine.

That is. It is put in place. Designed to enable you to get on the right side of the divine. Designed to draw you near to the divine.

And relate you to the God that you worship. Put you on the right side of that God. Whether it be him, her or them. Now when you look at the list. Well Christianity shares some common things in that list doesn't it?

However let me tell you that it is dramatically different in some areas. It parts company with other religions at some crucial points. And last week and this week we are going to look at those.

Our passage last week addressed the issue. Our passage this week is going to bring the issue to the forefront. By looking at one of the most seminal sacred objects to Judaism.

[4 : 29] And by looking at Jesus' attitude to it. So have a look in your Bibles at John chapter 2 verses 13 through to 22. Now if you read the story, the story is pretty straightforward isn't it?

It is the time of the Jewish feast of Passover. Verse 13. Like many Jews, Jesus goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. Verse 13.

Jewish feasts like this are normally associated with lots of sacrifices. And Jesus found people selling animals and birds for those sacrifices within the temple precincts.

And he is offended by what is going on. Verses 14 and 15. So what he does is he drives those people out of the temple and tells them off in very strong terms.

Verses 15 and 16. The Jewish leaders are in turn themselves offended. And they ask him to give a sign as to what authority he has to do this.

[5 : 27] Verse 18. He responds by telling them, well destroy this temple and it will be raised up in three days. Verse 19. Now the Jews, the Jewish leaders ponder this rather enigmatic statement by Jesus.

And really don't understand what it means. Verse 20. John then explains it to us as we look on and we hear this conversation. And describes how the disciples later do some reflecting on this.

And find out the real meaning of what Jesus said. That's verses 21 and 22. Now just like last week, there are some issues raised by this particular passage.

First, there are problems with the fact that this story here seems to be somewhat different from the story of a similar event elsewhere in the other gospels.

What are we going to do with that? Well, we'll have a look in a moment. Second, there's the issue of the meaning of some of the words that Jesus says about the temple. So what we're going to do is go through fairly quickly today each of these problems and see if we can just clear the decks.

[6 : 33] And once we've cleared the decks, we'll see if we can work out what exactly this is all about. Trying to understand what Jesus is trying to accomplish through what he says and what he does here.

So let's have a look at the first problem. And I'm really only going to do this very, very briefly. Have you noticed that this story here of the cleansing of the temple is right at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus?

But when you read the other gospel writers, it is right at the end of Jesus' ministry. Did you notice that? Well, there have been lots of inks built on this problem.

Lots of people have talked about it. And there are lots of ways I think you can explain it. And some, I think, have weight. And some I wouldn't give much time of the time of day to, really. However, rather than bore you with going through them all, let me just say that, in my view, I don't have a problem with Jesus having performed the incident twice.

Once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. And in fact, there would be something very dramatic about that because, really, his death is so tied with the temple and his attitude to it.

[7 : 45] And so I can imagine something at the beginning of his ministry and something at the end which both said profound things. So I don't have a problem with two events happening. And I suspect that is what did happen.

Next, let's have a look at the next thing. The next issue rises out of the words of the Old Testament. You see, have a look at verse 17. We are told that later on, when the disciples reflect on this series of events, they remember some words from an Old Testament psalm that helps them understand exactly what Jesus has been doing here.

Now, in that psalm, the writer says, Zeal for your house will or has consumed me. Now, that verse comes from Psalm 69.

And so in your Bibles, I want you to find that psalm. Now, I won't tell you the page number because it's so easy to find, really. If you open your Bible in the middle, that's the book of Psalms.

And you can find Psalm 69 for yourself. So have a look at Psalm 69. And I want you to just notice some things about the psalm before we arrive at this verse.

[8 : 50] First of all, notice that this psalm is written by, is for David. It is a Davidic psalm. So it's really about the David who really is the one that God promised the temple to.

So that's the first thing. Second thing, you notice that David is really in significant trouble in this psalm. You can see it right at the beginning. Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my

neck and I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold.

I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me and I'm weary with my crying. My throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.

More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause. Many are those who would destroy me. My enemies who accuse me falsely.

What I did not steal must I now restore. Can you see, he's lamenting the fact that he's overwhelmed, that he feels deserted by his God.

[9 : 54] And what he's doing is waiting for God to come and rescue him. And verse 4 indicates, as we've just read, that he's oppressed and opposed by others. He has hoped in God, but he's born reproach for God's sake.

And in verse 9, if you look at it, it is clear that the source of the opposition that he feels and the terrible state that this has put him in is the failure of people to understand David's attitude to the temple.

In other words, his zeal for God's temple, his zeal for God's purposes displayed in his temple has placed him in a risky position and exposed him to hostility and opposition.

It's isolated him from others. It's into this situation that Jesus puts himself by his actions here. You see, can you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying, by saying what I say about the temple, by doing what I do here in the temple, I have placed myself in the place of the psalmist.

I am concerned that people relate rightly to God. And I'm concerned that the temple be a good place to do this of worship and relating. And so when he cleanses the temple, he both exposes himself to opposition, but he also displays his motivation.

[11 : 14] He has zeal for God and for God's place. However, in this very concern, in this zeal, he is persecuted. And in fact, as we know, it is his attitude to the temple that will eventually bring about his downfall and his death.

But let's move on and focus on the words that he says in verse 19. Have a look at them there. I'll read verses 18 to 20. So please follow me. Then the Jews said to him, what sign can you show for doing this?

Jesus answered, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. And the Jews then said, this temple has been under construction for 46 years and you will raise it up in three days.

In other words, they're saying, you know, we've had a big team of people working on this. We've had a king in harness in one sense working on this. This has taken 46 years. You want us to rip it down.

You're going to put it back up in three days. Now, on a literal level, they are very unlikely to call his bluff, aren't they? They're not going to say, all right, we'll try this.

[12 : 23] Let's rip it down. You put it back up again in three days. Nevertheless, they are between a rock and a hard place, aren't they? You see, in verse 18, they said, give us a sign or a miracle to validate your actions and demonstrate your authority for doing them.

And now he says, all right, I'll give you one. Rip this place down. I will put it back together. However, in their discussion with him, they are missing the real point. John's explanation in verse 21 takes up the real point.

Look at what he says. John says, but he was speaking of the temple of his body. So I can imagine it might have been something like this. They look at the temple. He says, rip it down.

He says, almost as it were pointing to himself, but not actually doing it. Destroy this one. It'll be back in three days. Remember John 1?

Remember John 1? We're told that in this body, God became a human being. In this body, God became flesh. In this body who is Jesus Christ, God revealed himself to humans.

[13 : 28] In this body, God chose to live among humans, walk among them. In other words, in this body of Jesus Christ, God is.

And when you think about this, there is a real problem, isn't there? You see, if you're a Jew, you were conditioned to think that God did not dwell in a person, but in a temple.

And that was where God dwelt. Well, that's where God made himself known. And what Jesus has done is turn this on his head. And John has said that Jesus is saying that Jesus is that place.

He is the real temple. He is the focus of true worship. In his body, in his temple, the ultimate sacrifice will take place.

And by the way, friends, in his zeal for this, he will be consumed. You see, in his body, in this true temple, that ultimate sacrifice will take place.

[14 : 27] There will be no need for sheep. No livestock are going to have their throats slit. No doves are going to be cut up. But he, Jesus, will give his life for the sin of the world.

And after he has done this, three days will pass. And on the third day, his body will be raised from the dead, just as he prophesied here. And when he is this, when this happens, his disciples will remember what he said.

And they will believe the scripture and the word Jesus spoke here. They will believe in him. They will worship this Jesus. Now, can you see that we're now getting down to the real guts, the real meat of this story, aren't we?

You see, we're beginning to see something of what Jesus means. You see, Jesus is saying that temple, that 47-year-old building, that thing that had a predecessor or two before it, that thing there is now obsolete.

You see, the physical temple that used to represent God dwelling with humans is no longer needed. You don't need it because since Jesus came into the world, God is now represented in a different form and at a different place.

[15 : 41] God is now dwelling with humans in the physical body of Jesus. It's in one sense going back to Eden in one way, because what God is doing is walking around in physical form in his created world, in a human being.

He's walking among us. God is now dwelling with humans in the physical person of Jesus. And the day will come when that final sacrifice will be made.

And on that day, Jesus will die for all the sins that humans have committed against God. And after he's died for humans, he will rise from the dead and he'll be the new temple, the new meeting place with God and humanity and the new way in which they can live together in friendship.

And you see, can you see what he's saying? He's saying there's no longer going to be boundaries between God and humans. All who believe in Jesus will be considered the friends of God. They will be true worshippers of God.

Do you remember how John put it in his first chapter? In John 1, 16 to 17, he said this. From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.

[16 : 49] The law indeed was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only son, who is close to the father's heart, who has made him known.

Here is God revealed. God opened up for humanity. God visible. Now, this is landmark stuff, friends. I think for many of us as Christians, we don't really recognise how landmark this is.

Do you remember how both this week and last week I said that all major religions in the world are basically systems about searching for God and finding out how to relate to him or her or whatever? Well, Jesus says that here in our passage today that Christian faith is distinguished. You see, Jesus tells us that Christian faith approaches the issue of our separation from God in a very different manner.

Instead of telling us, go and observe this sacrifice. Go and get this secret knowledge or experience. Go and visit some priestess and have him or her do something for you.

[17 : 56] Observe these laws, thereby draw near to God. Belong to this particular group or company of people. Perform this ritual act focused on sacred objects in special places and so on.

Or adhere to some moral code sanctioned by some divinity. Organise your life based on some particular code. Instead of all of these, Jesus tells us, No, actually, friends, God has drawn near to you.

Instead of needing us to draw near to God through religion, God has drawn near to us in the person of his son. God has come to us in our situation.

He has become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. He has put on flesh and visited his creation. And what's more, he has died in the place of that rebellious creation.

And through his death, he has allowed his rebellious creatures to return to friendship. Please understand what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is spelling the end of religion as we commonly perceive it.

[18 : 59] Although, unfortunately for us Christians, we then put it back in place. He spells out the end of religious systems as a way of drawing near to God. These systems are gone.

A new era has dawned. It has arrived in Jesus. And the focus is not on religion or religious systems. The focus is now on a person.

A person who was incarnate God. A person who is now exalted to the right hand of God and demonstrated to be God. Believing in him, that is true worship.

Believing in Jesus is the only way to friendship with God. Believing in Jesus is the only way to worship with God. Believing in Jesus is the only way to worship with God. Now, I want to say to you this morning, and I need to say this, because I think there are probably people here today who have tried all sorts of ways of relating to God.

All sorts of ways. Perhaps you've tried just simply ignoring God and his existence, although it's likely that you'd not be here this morning if that were the case. But you might be here. Perhaps you've tried keeping all sorts of rituals and regulations, and you've tried them over and over again and tried every new one that comes your way.

[20 : 10] You've attached yourself to religion. Maybe you've sought God through special experiences, or maybe you've sought God in keeping certain codes, moral or otherwise.

Maybe you've thought that if I consult the right people, they'll put me in touch with the divine or with God. And maybe you've even come to church week in and week out and thought that really, that's what really matters.

If I'm here in church, well, I'm in contact with God. Friends, I know that some of you here probably simply think that being here each week relates you to God.

Keeping this ritual makes you his friend. But my suspicion is that deep in your heart, you know these things have been fruitless. You see, such activities don't bring you to God.

They may help you in your relationship with God, but they don't settle your friendship with God.

They don't make you Christian. Friends, I want today to strip away the dross a little bit.

[21 : 11] See, church attendance, church affiliation, rules, moral codes, pieces of bread and wine, endless Bible studies, baptism, holy places, special religious experiences, a sense of the divine, religious rituals, rigorous though they might be.

Try as you might, they will not bring you to God. These things are fruitless in actually forging a relationship with God. And if you're looking for God and closeness to God, then Jesus has a word for you.

And that word bursts from almost any and every page in John's gospel. The message is that anyone who receives Jesus is received by God as his child.

That anyone who receives Jesus is received by God as his child. Listen to John 1 again, if you don't believe me. For of his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.

The law indeed was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only son who is close to the father's heart, who has made him known. Can you hear that?

[22 : 27] There's this unsearchable God in one sense. But what he's done is come down. And in Jesus, he has made himself known. And he's there for you to see and to relate to and to engage with.

And again, from John 1 verse 12. And all who received him. You notice the emphasis? It's on receiving. Not on getting, not on going to get.

It's on receiving. All who received him. Who believed in his name. He gave the power to become children of God. Friends, I really do want to labour this as I already have today.

See, I want to remind myself. Because I'm at risk of always forgetting it. And I want to remind you again and again. And let's get this cemented in our brains. And let it seep deep into our psyche. God is not predominantly after religious ritual and church affiliation. It's not as though he doesn't want us meeting together or any of those things. Because he does.

[23 : 31] But what he really wants is something more than that. He wants us to see his son. Because he has wanted us to see his son. From the very time he started planning what he was doing in his world.

He had his son in mind. And he wants us to see and know and understand this. He wants us to acknowledge his son. He wants us to believe in his son.

Cling to his son. For only in his son will we have life. This is the heart and soul of true religion.

Relationship with Jesus Christ.

And only in him is life. Now friends if you are here today and you are not friends with Jesus. And you want to become one. Then please come and see me afterwards.

Or see one of the people who has been leading our service. Fill in the box on the communication card that says I would like to know more about Jesus. You see I want for you what God wants for you.

[24 : 32] I want you to be friends with the true and living God. Who created this world. Who sustains it. And who will end it. For those of you who are friends with Jesus already.

I want you to cling to him and not look beyond him. Because there is nowhere else to go really. He is the beginning and the end. The first and the last. He is what God wants to say from beginning to end to us.

Sure there will be lots of things we will do in response. But they will all be response to Jesus. He is the beginning and end of God's purpose. The start and the finish of Christian existence.

In him is life. And the life was the light of all people. Including us. Now let's pray together. Father we acknowledge that in the humdrum of Christian existence.

In the ordering of our lives. That often we leave Jesus behind. That there are other things that become more important.

[25 : 48] Things that rise to the surface. Things that become dominant in our existence. Yet Father we hear what is being said in these passages we have looked at these last few weeks.

That it is Jesus who is the centre of your purposes for eternity. He is the centre of your purposes for eternity.

And therefore Father he needs to be the centre of our existence as well. Father help us not to be overwhelmed with the normal religious things of life so much that we neglect him.

Thank you that in him is life. And the life was the light of all people. Thank you that those who received him you gave the right to become children.

Your children. Children of the living and true God. Please help us to cling to him we pray. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.