

***Aren't we Better Off Without Religion* - Exodus 34:4-9** **Notes, Family Worship, Bible Reading**

Notes from the Sermon

The vision of John Lennon's famous song *Imagine* sounds wonderful, picturing a world where humanity comes together to work for peace and get rid of all distinctions between us. The song is so singable and cries out for something for which we all long. Yet, the core message of the song is actually a call to abandon religion and any meaningful belief ("Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion, too), so what we find is an anthem declaring the world would be so much better if we got rid of all religion and embraced an atheistic, secular worldview together. The dream is that if we all did this the world would be a better place, because religion is really the cause of all the world's problems and violence. Meanwhile, at the time this song was recorded his hypothesis was being tested around the world in a failed experiment called Communism. The most violent and cruel regimes on planet earth were the ones who actually put Lennon's "dream" into practice. That being said, here in our context people by the millions are wondering if religion is actually the problem as myriads have left their Christian faith and are embracing a spirituality that allows the rejection of organized religion. Estimates are that 40 million Americans have left the church in the last 30 years, and while they have not received the secularism of Lennon (people are actually still incredibly spiritual), they have stopped going to church and participating in any faith community.

Now, before we get angry about this we need to realize there are valid reasons often flowing from church hurt and personal struggles. While many have left because of convenience and busyness, many in our culture have had difficult church experiences where people in the church did not act like the Jesus they claim to worship or they see the public posture and beliefs of people who hold to a form of truth but do so without any sense of compassion. We need to know that there is a significant kernel of truth in the belief that religion has caused violence and is often cruel. The combination of bad press and media coupled with the reality that the loudest and consistent voices on social media come from "true believers" who fight everything, and its not difficult to see that the faith once for all delivered to the saints gets a bad rap.

So how do we respond? We need to begin with compassion and the gentleness of Jesus. Yes, Jesus confronted people with truth, but he often sat in the dirt with them first and he communicated the centrality of His redemption in the context of love and relationship. But we also need to work at reshaping the narrative for people. The truth is that the vast majority of people who follow Jesus and attend Jesus are being transformed into His likeness. We will come back to this reality in this series, so won't spend a lot of time here. But the other reality that has actually been affirmed by multiple studies and articles written in major publications (USA Today, Time Magazine just to name 2) is that our church attendance and religious participation is actually significantly beneficial for us and for our culture. These studies have shown time and time again that those who regular attend church because of convictional beliefs have better mental health, stronger families, lower mortality rates, lower suicide rates, and live happier lives. To be honest, the verifiable data that is available to us refutes this question, even before we open our Bibles to examine why. The result of Lennon's dream is becoming a disaster in our nation and culture.

While there are many reasons this might be true, at the center of it is the God who has made Himself known in Scripture. Our text this week is a mountain peak in the Bible. God rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai where He met them and formed a covenant with them. This means that God is a God of relationship who invited them (and us) into a relationship with Himself, a relationship with the True and Living God who created heaven and earth and created us for His glory and purpose. God chose to make Himself known and come near. Furthermore, God saved them into a people, a community of faith and practice where they individually could know God and collectively represented Him to the world, the world where people rejected the true God for cheap replicas we call idols. Yet, the Hebrews immediate failed in keeping their side of the relationship, building a golden calf idol and acting just like the polytheistic nations who did not know God. It is in this context where God tells Moses who He is, the relational God who is "merciful and

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” This is the most quoted and referenced passage in the whole of Scripture because it is here that God reveals His core character. He loves us, is for us. There is great blessing both now and in eternity for those who run to Him, believe in Him, hold fast to Him, and find forgiveness and grace in Him. On the other hand, God will not overlook our sin and for those who set a life trajectory of turning away from Him, the consequences will not just affect them, it will reach to multiple generations. This is happening before our very eyes as the generation that left the church is parenting children who know nothing of God nor have any interest in church. So there are deep blessings in Christ and having a relationship with Him. Those who walk in faithfulness with the faithful and compassionate God in the person of Jesus know this. And there is a curse and deep brokenness that will show up in the lives of people who reject Christ and His people. This is why we need the church, and why we need to keep reminding our world that this question leads to generational pain and problems.

Bible Reading for the Week

Daily Bible Readings

Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat
I Timothy 5	1 Timothy 6	2 Timothy 1	2 Timothy 2	2 Timothy 3	2 Timothy 4	Joshua 1

Reading from this past week: Exodus 34:4-9

Reading in preparation for this coming Sunday: Colossians 3:11-14

Family Worship

Song - *Glorious Day*

<https://youtu.be/huW3vkEdZCo>

Gospel Project

Unit: The Miracles of Jesus

Story: Jesus healed and forgave

Big Picture Question: Is Jesus God or human?

Answer: As the Son of God, Jesus is both fully God and fully human.

Scripture: Matthew 9

New City Catechism

Question #24: Was it necessary for Christ, the Redeemer to die?

Answer: Christ died willingly in our place to deliver us from the power and penalty of sin and bring us back to God.

Verse: Colossians 1:21-22

Scripture

Exodus 34:4-9

- What are some reasons people are leaving the church? Do you know of anyone who has decided that they don't need the church or organized religion? Why is this their truth?
- How does God describe Himself in Exodus 34. Is this consistent with the way our world views God and His people?
- What are some of the benefits you have experienced as a result of your faith in God and your participation among His people?
- How would you answer the question posed in the sermon (and chapter) this week? How did Rebecca McLaughlin answer the question?

Prayer

*Pray that our church would be a safe and beautiful place for people who have experienced church hurt and who wonder if religion is even worth it.

*Pray over the greatest need for humanity, the issue of lostness, for the billions of people around the world who do not know Jesus, and for missionaries who take the Gospel to these people.