

The Before And After Of Easter

Part 1

Andrew and Jo Riordan were a young couple in a church where I was Pastor. When their first child Caleb was born, he had to undergo emergency surgery in the first few hours of his life because he had a hole in his heart. Kelsey, their second child, was born normally. But Brianna, their third child was also born with a hole and her heart. Her life hung in the balance while the surgeons desperately worked on her to keep her alive. I'm pleased to be able to tell you that through prayer, and the skills of some very dedicated surgeons, these two children that were born with a hole their hearts, are now both healthy and thriving.

Our Hole In The Heart

Actually, every one of us was born with a heart irregularity. Every one of us was born with a hole in our heart, and the hole has a particular shape. We recognize that there is an emptiness there, and so we try and fill it. Some try and fill it with relationships. They think that if only they can find a person who will satisfy their deepest needs, then they will be happy. They spend their life searching for the right marriage partner, or they flit from relationship to relationship, always feeling dissatisfied that the other person is not quite what they want or need. Some people try to fill the hole in their hearts by being successful in a career. They feel that if only they can get recognition in their job and climb to the top, then they will be satisfied and fulfilled. Other people believe that if only they have enough material goods, that will fill the hole in their heart. And so they spend the major part of their lives buying cars, houses, boats, nice clothes, fancy stereos, plasma TV's and every conceivable kind of gadget in an effort to fill an emptiness in their heart. But nothing fits. Travel doesn't fit the hole. Money doesn't do it. Sex won't fill it. Alcohol doesn't fill it. The only thing that fits that hole is God. Yet many people spend much of their lives trying to fill the God shaped hole in their heart with other things, and nothing fits. It's a God shaped hole and only God can fill it.

Many hundreds of years ago a saint named Augustine said "You have made us for yourself O God and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you." If you were a person who lived before the time of Jesus, and you had a longing to fill this God shaped hole in your heart, you basically had two options open to you. One of the options was represented by Greek religion. The other was represented by Jewish religion.

The Greeks - Many gods.

The Greeks weren't the only ones who believed in many gods, but they illustrate the point. It didn't matter whether you lived in the Amazon jungle, in India, in ancient China, or in civilized Greece, the concept was the same – you had to appease the gods. There were gods of war, gods of the sea, fertility gods, gods of marriage, harvest, of death, of love, of music. There were gods who lived in the trees and rivers, gods of the rain and sun – the list just goes on and on. The problem was that you never knew when these gods were mad at you, and when they were happy with you. The whole of life was spent keeping the gods happy. An offering to the gods here. A sacrifice there. But there was always an emptiness in the heart that told you that it was never enough. There are still millions of people around the world who spend their whole life trying to appease multitudes of gods. The hole in the heart isn't filled, because they never know when they have done enough.

The Jews – One God.

The Jews were different. They didn't believe in many gods, but in one God - The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The refreshing news that came out of the nation of Israel was this : "**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.**" (**Deuteronomy 6:4**) What relief! The message of the Jewish people was, "there is only one God to worship –

the lord God of Israel. The way to know this one God is to obey him and keep his commands". Sounds simple doesn't it? Just keep the ten commandments, worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and you will know God.

But there was a problem. No one could keep the ten commandments – not even Moses who delivered them. Not to mention the fact that there are over 600 specific commandments in their law – what we call the Old Testament - that Jews were required to keep as a sign of their loyalty to God. God was so holy and so distant, that to try and know him in such a way that he would fill the hole in the heart was something that very few people attained. Getting near to this God was very difficult. By the time of Jesus, God was worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem. But you couldn't get into the temple as a worshipper without a sacrifice for your sins. The sacrifice had to be a lamb without any blemishes, or if you were very poor, two pigeons. If you were a woman, or a Gentile, you were barred from getting too close to the presence of God. If you were a Jewish man, you could get reasonably close to where God was worshipped in the temple, but you had to be a Priest to offer sacrifice for sin. The Priest would take the persons lamb, cut it's throat, and dash some of it's blood against the altar. Even the priests could only go into the holy place after carefully preparing themselves. They had to carefully wash, and be sure they hadn't done any wrong. Beyond the holy place in the Temple was the Holy of Holies. It was like the throne room of God. The only person who could go into that place was the High Priest. And even then, he only went in one day a year.

The Dividing Curtain

The thing that divided the Holy place from the Holy of Holies – representing the presence of God – was a heavy, white, linen, fabric curtain woven with blue, purple and scarlet forming a mass of cherubim, representing the angels who guarded Gods presence. That curtain was a powerful symbol of the separation between a holy God and sinful man. My guess is that there was always a great deal of apprehension when the High Priest entered through that curtain. These people knew their Old Testament history. They knew that it was a dangerous thing when people came face to face with God. When God appeared on Mt Sinai, the whole mountain shook. There was thunder and lightning and the threat that if man or animal even touched that mountain when God was on it, they would die. The glory of God on that mountain was so great, that it covered Moses for 40 days and 40 nights. When Moses came down from that encounter with God, his face was glowing so much from the reflected glory of God, he had to cover his face before people could look at him.

Sometimes I wonder if we think about what we are singing in some of the worship songs we sing. *"Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Open the eyes of my heart I want to see you, I want to see You, To see You high and lifted up Shining in the light of Your glory"*. To a devout Jew in the days of Jesus, to pray a prayer or sing a song like that would have been a death sentence. To ask to see the glory of God, or to stand in the presence of God was like asking for a lightning bolt to come down from heaven and strike you dead. God was holy. God was pure. Nothing sinful would survive in the presence of God. When the High Priest went beyond that curtain into the Holy of Holies, he would spend days preparing himself spiritually, confessing any sin he was aware of to be as sure as he possibly could be that God wasn't going to strike him dead. It was a dangerous thing to step into the presence of God. When the High Priest went in there, there was always the chance that he would never come out alive. There was only one day a year when the High Priest could go into the presence of God, and that was on the Day of Atonement. On that one day, the High Priest would offer the blood of a sacrificial lamb as the atonement for the sins of all the people. This was a sin offering on behalf of the people, so that the wrath and judgement of God could be satisfied.

So if you were a person with a God shaped hole in your heart, it wasn't easy to fill the God shaped hole. You needed a living sacrifice that was acceptable to God. Something had to be put to death, and it's blood shed in order to satisfy God. And you needed a High

Priest, someone who was pure enough who could go through the curtain of the Temple into the Holy of Holies on your behalf.

The Split In History

The moment Jesus died on the Cross, something happened that split history in two. The death of Jesus signalled a change in the way people related to God that would never be the same again. In one moment, the whole sacrificial system, the whole system of needing a Priest to meet with God on behalf of others, was done away with. God demonstrated that all that had gone before the Cross had been done away with by the death of Jesus. The way people understood that was that the heavy linen fabric curtain that had kept people out of God's presence was ripped from top to bottom. Who did it? It was too tall, and too heavy for any human to have done it. For a human to have done it, it would have been ripped from bottom to top.. But the moment Jesus died; God reached down, and destroyed that curtain that represented the barrier that hid him from people. It was as if he was tearing open all of the restrictions that had stopped people coming close to him, and saying to us all, "Here I am. Now, through Jesus, and what he has done on the Cross in becoming the sacrifice for your sin, you can know me. No longer is there a barrier. It's now safe for you to come close. It's like this now because my son Jesus has died on the Cross so that you can live".

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, John Griffith operated a huge mechanical railway bridge on the Mississippi river. His job was to raise the bridge when ships went through, and lower it when trains wanted to cross the river. One day he took his 8-year-old son, Greg, to work with him to see how the bridge worked. At 12 o'clock John put up the bridge. There were no trains due for a while, and they went out a couple of hundred feet on a catwalk to an observation deck where they sat down to eat their lunch. Time went by too fast, and John heard the whistle of the Memphis Express, with 400 passengers, which would be rushing across that bridge in just a couple of minutes. He knew he had just enough time, so without panic he told his son to stay where he was. He jumped to his feet and ran to the control room to lower the bridge. Just as he was about to push the lever, he looked down to see that his son had slipped and fallen into the huge gears that operated the bridge. His left leg was caught between the massive cogs of the gearbox. There was no time to rescue his son. He had to choose between the 400 people on the train, and the life of his only son.

John Griffith made the hardest decision of his life, and lowered the bridge in time for the train to cross. With tears running down his face he saw the passengers in that train. There were men reading the afternoon paper, women drinking tea, and children eating ice creams, all of them oblivious to the decision a father had made to sacrifice his son so that they could live.

Here's what Matthew writes in his gospel about the death of Jesus.

"From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." (Matthew 27:45-51)

It's cost God the life of his Son to fix the hole in your heart. Today is a day to thank Him.

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