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Africa Trip – 2015

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Wed Evening

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What Does It Take To Please God?

John 3:1-6

"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (2) This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." (3) Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (4) Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

What would you say if I were to ask you this morning, **"Give one good reason why you should go to Heaven?"** The answers that we would get from asking the question, "Are you going to heaven?" are fairly predictable. There would be a variety of answers.

Some would say "I hope so." Some would say, "I am trying," or "I am doing the best I can!" Some would say, "Yes, because I have been baptized." Others would say, "Yes, because I am a church member." **But none of them would be right.**

The question, "**Are you going to Heaven? And, if so, why?**" It is without a doubt "**the**" most important question your mind can ever entertain. The reason that this is such an important question is obvious, there is only one alternative to heaven. That is hell, the place the Bible calls outer darkness, where there shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, where "the smoke of their torment ascends up for ever: and they have no rest day nor night." And there is nothing in between. It is Heaven or it is Hell. God says in His Word that all men and women must appear before Him in death. Then they shall be divided as a shepherd would divide the sheep from the goats; one into everlasting punishment, into everlasting hell and torment; and the other into everlasting glory.

In John chapter three we have more than the record of a two-thousand year old conversation, we have the answer to the question, "**How do we get to Heaven?**" In this text, a man approaches Jesus late one night with a look of quiet desperation. His name is Nicodemus and he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness to ask that question -- the one that had been

keeping him awake at night. In verse one we read, *“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (2) This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”*

In order to understand this story, we need to notice three things about this man named Nicodemus.

First, besides his name the text reveals that he was a “Pharisee.” If you know anything about the Scriptures you probably have a negative view of the Pharisees. You may think that all Pharisees were legalistic hypocrites, but that is not true at all. In the days of Jesus the Pharisees were a very much respected group known for their knowledge of the Old Testament and their scrupulous keeping of the law. The Pharisees were the theological conservatives of their day, and they believed that the Old Testament was the revealed Word of God which contained an inspired code of ethics which should be practiced literally. This was such a demanding life that only a few thousand were ever willing to make the commitment.

Secondly, note also that Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but he was also one of the most important religious teachers of his day. He is also called a “ruler of the Jews.” From what we read about Nicodemus in John chapter seven we can conclude with some confidence

that Nicodemus was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish legal court in the land. This was a select group of seventy men who served as the highest Jewish court in the land, much like our present day Supreme Court Justices.

Third, it is also important to note that in verse eleven that Jesus refers to him as **“the teacher of Israel.”** Notice the definite article is used. He is not called just **“a”** teacher but **“the”** teacher. The meaning seems to be that Nicodemus was probably the most popular religious teacher of Judaism at the time.

If you want one word that would describe Nicodemus, it would be this: He was **good!** He was **very good!** But he still had this nagging question that his religion could not seem to answer. So he comes to Jesus to ask his question. I can imagine Nicodemus watching from the shadows as Jesus did his work -- preaching and teaching and healing. And as he watched, Nicodemus saw something in Jesus that all his religious rule keeping hadn't been able to provide. He saw LIFE! It was as if God was pouring out life through Jesus. So he comes to Jesus to ask his questions, because he senses that Jesus has the truth from God.

The core of what he wanted to know from Jesus was this: **“Jesus, is my goodness, good enough to get me into Heaven?** Is my goodness good enough to make me acceptable to a Holy God? Is my goodness good enough

*to get me in?" We all want to ask Jesus that question?
Don't we?*

*Jesus answers Nicodemus that, no his goodness is
not good enough to get him into heaven.*

***No amount of goodness is good enough
to establish a relationship with God or
to get us to Heaven !***

*When it comes to getting into Heaven, it doesn't
matter how many good works we are able to perform.
It doesn't matter how much money we give to Christian
causes, how many church services we attend, how many
quiet times we have, how many underprivileged kids we
support.*

No one gets to Heaven by being a "good person"!

*Nicodemus had devoted his life to being good, trying to
live up to the standards his religion said he had to meet
in order to please God and to win a place in Heaven.
And he did it relatively well, better than most. He was a
very good person. And he comes to Jesus pointing at his
goodness asking, "Is it good enough?" And Jesus says,
with compassion: "NO... No one can get to heaven by
being good because no one can ever be good enough!
You are going to have to go about it another way!"*

Three things About Being Born Again

First, Jesus Tells Nicodemus the Necessity of Being Born Again (3:3)

Nicodemus has not asked a question, but he has a problem that needs an answer. In verse three Jesus says, ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”***

We would have to say that Nicodemus is the “cream of the Jewish crop.” He is a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures. Can you imagine being Nicodemus and being told by Jesus that all of this is not enough to get you into Heaven? Yet that is precisely what Jesus tells him! With one sentence Jesus sweeps away everything that Nicodemus stood for, and demands that he be re-made by the power of God. Jesus is turning this man's world upside down. Nicodemus has never heard such a thing before, all his life he has understood that one gets to Heaven by keeping God's law. This means that everything that Nicodemus has done in his life to this point means absolutely nothing. Jesus tells this remarkably good man: ***“If you want to get to Heaven, if you want a relationship with God that begins now and lasts forever then you must go about it in a totally different way, you will have to be born again...”*** In other words, Jesus is saying: ***“You can't do it, Nicodemus, but God can! He can transform you***

***from the inside out and make you good enough!
And he wants to do that for you... if only you'd let
him!"***

To understand we need to focus first, on the key phrase ***"born again."*** The Greek adverb (***anōthen***) translated here as ***"again"*** has a double meaning, it can either mean "again" or "above." In this case, both meanings apply, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the only way to find what he is looking for is to be ***born again from above.***

***Not only does Jesus tell Nicodemus About the
Necessity of Being Born Again but***

***Secondly, Jesus Tells Nicodemus the Non-
Negotiables of Being Born Again (3:4-7)***

Nicodemus' Response is given in verse four,
***"Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when
he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's
womb and be born?"***

Nicodemus' response is a little surprising, in that Jesus quite obviously was not referring to a second physical birth and an educated man like Nicodemus can hardly have thought that he did.

Nicodemus question is either cynical, ***"It is
hardly possible for a man to return again to his
mother's womb!"*** or wistful ***"Is it really possible for***

a man to begin again?" If the words of Jesus are taken with a sense of cynicism then His words can be brushed aside as ridiculous and absurd.

Yet it is more likely that Nicodemus is saying, ***"Another chance, starting over, a chance for a new life, if it were only possible!"*** Yet that is exactly what Jesus is saying!

In our day and age the term "born again" has been nearly stripped of its meaning, the words have been tossed about so but that they can mean anything or nothing. But when Jesus uttered these words they were radical and new.

Verse five which says, ***"Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"*** has often been misinterpreted. To quote one of the old commentaries on this subject, ***"Certainly Jesus was not saying that baptism was necessary to salvation. Baptism is an outward thing and conversion is an inner thing of the heart. A man ... can be baptized many times but that water will not wash away a single sin nor admit him to heaven. If baptism is necessary to salvation no one was saved before John the Baptist because baptism was not mentioned in the Old Testament...."***

Am I minimizing the importance of baptism? Not one whit, I am simply saying that baptism has nothing

to do with salvation. But baptism has everything to do with obedience. You can be a Christian without baptism, but you cannot be an obedient Christian.” [W. Hershel Ford. Sermons You Can Preach On John. (Grand Rapids: Zondervans, 1958) pp. 92-93]

*So what did Jesus mean by being “born of water and of the spirit?” Throughout the New Testament, the term “water” is used to indicate the Word of God. Peter states in 1 Peter 1:23, “having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, **through the word of God** which lives and abides forever.” How is anyone saved? All you have to do to understand this if you are saved, is to review your salvation. How did you get saved? Was it not because the word of God got a hold of you?*

In verse seven Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

- ***Being Born Again Is Universal***. (v. 7)

*Jesus also makes it clear that what he is saying applies not only to Nicodemus but to everyone. In Greek there is a distinction between the singular and the plural form of “you.” When Jesus “you must be born again” he uses the plural form. It is a little easier to see in the King James Version, “Marvel not that I have said to **thee** (singular – meaning Nicodemus) that **ye** (plural – meaning everyone) ***must be born again.***” The point is*

that this is not a private principle which only applies to Nicodemus.

- ***Being Born Again Is Not An Option!***

We need to also note the use of the strong word **“must.”** Jesus is not saying that being born again is just a good idea for some people. It is not just something he is recommending, it is an imperative.

“It is said that George Whitfield, who associated with the Wesley’s in the Great Awakening in England preached on this text again and again. When one of his friends asked him, “Why do you preach so often on the text, ‘You must be born again.’ ” he replied, ‘Because you must be born again.’ ”

Jesus Not Only Tells Nicodemus the Non-Negotiables of Being Born Again but

Third, Jesus Tells Nicodemus the Nature of Being Born Again (3:8-13)

- ***Being Born Again Is A Mystery (vv 8-13)***

In verse eight Jesus gives Nicodemus a example of the mystery of the new birth by comparing it to the wind. ***“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”***

We accept all kinds of earthly mysteries by faith. I don’t really understand how a man stands in New York and sings and I not only hear him I can see him. I don’t

understand that completely, and I bet you don't either, but you believe it! If we are able to believe things we don't completely understand on earth why are not willing to accept heavenly truths by faith?

*Nicodemus asks once again in verse nine, “**How can these things be?**” Jesus counters by saying it is not a question of understanding but a question of belief. In verse ten Jesus said to Nicodemus, “**Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? (11) Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. (12) If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (13) No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.**” Jesus tells Nicodemus that he (that is Jesus) alone can convey what Heaven is like, for he alone has been to Heaven and returned.*

*It ultimately becomes a matter of belief, Jesus is asking, “**Nicodemus are you ready to place your faith and trust in me!**”*

Did Nicodemus ever get saved? I think he did! Why? Nicodemus stood up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin (John 7:45-53). And Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (John 19:38-42).

Conclusion

Let me close with one final thought, “**Wouldn’t be terrible to wake up one morning, to find yourself standing before Jesus and find out that you had missed heaven by eighteen inches?**” Perhaps you say, “How is it possible to miss Heaven by eighteen inches?” Well it is possible to miss Heaven by eighteen inches because that is the approximate distance from the head to the heart. **What does it mean to have a ‘heart’ knowledge rather just a “head” knowledge of Jesus?** To have a heart knowledge is to have a relationship rather than simply having religion. Having a head knowledge about Jesus will not save you. You can know all facts and still not be saved. You can know all there is to know about Jesus and still not know **Him!**