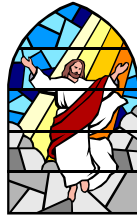


THE DOUBLE LIFE, A SECOND CHANCE, AND HEAVENLY THINGS



Scripture:

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

1. What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?
2. For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.
3. For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’
4. Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.
5. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.
- ...
13. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.
14. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.
15. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.
16. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,
17. as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

John 3:1-17

1. Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
2. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’
3. Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’
4. Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’
5. Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.
6. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
7. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.”
8. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’
9. Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’
10. Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?
11. ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.
12. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

13. No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
14. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
15. that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
16. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
17. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



IS THAT JESUS KNOCKING?

Before the physical exam, to help children understand what is going on inside them, the pediatric nurse would plug the stethoscope into the ears of the little ones and let them listen to their own hearts. Their eyes would always light up with awe. When she gently tucked the stethoscope into four-year old David's ears and placed the disk over his heart, she said, "Listen. What do you suppose that is?"

He drew his eyebrows together in a puzzled line and looked up as if lost in the mystery of the strange tap - tap - tapping deep in his chest. Then his face broke out in a wondrous grin and he asked, "Is that Jesus knocking?"

HOW WILL YOU RESPOND?

Yes, my child, Jesus is always knocking. How will you respond?

You need to start all over again, like a new birth, being born again, like starting from a different perspective - from above instead of from below.

We know that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, (*archon* member of the Sanhedrin 70 member supreme court) a ruler of the Jews, said that to Jesus.

Nicodemus most likely had entered the brotherhood the regular way, by taking the pledge in front of three witnesses that he would spend all his life (separated from ordinary life) observing

every detail of the most sacred law in the world, the Torah, the perfect word of God, great wide noble principles, (principles for people to work out for themselves).

Pharisees follow the details of the expanded Mishna codified scribal laws, and Talmud explanatory commentary, and infinite number of rules and regulations.

NICODEMUS AND NIC

He had a double life – Nicodemus, a Pharisee by day, and Nic, a seeker of Jesus by night!

Nic sought out Jesus one night: "No one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him."

Even though Jesus wasn't one of the elect, and even though Jesus practiced the *spirit* of the Torah rather than the *letter* of the Mishna and Talmud, Nic must have seen God in the signs and miracles of Jesus. It is amazing that given his daylight profession, Nic should wish to talk with Jesus at all. But he did. He wanted to talk to a homeless prophet about the state of his soul.

Nic overcame his prejudices, his upbringing in a notable family, his whole view of life, to find Jesus, undisturbed by the crowds, to find light in the darkness.

John records the scheme of conversations:

- Inquiry
- Jesus' hard to understand saying
- Misunderstanding, "Duh"
- Jesus' even more difficult to understand saying
- Discourse and explanation - so that we can see people thinking out things for themselves, and figure likewise.

Signs are not as important as inner life change. It is hard for Nic to change his mind abruptly, and he resists the sort of change Jesus implies. Jesus sees the sincere longing in Nic's heart, and reaches out to him in compassion, pushes him beyond his comfort zone, turns him from strife that demeans and divides, and invites him to a diverse realm of insight, to expand his search beyond the standard texts, dream new dreams more complex, rich and deep than anything Nic had ever known. Nic becomes the most reluctant newborn. Because of his stature, age, religious accomplishments, new birth would be a terrible trauma, with pain and blinding new perceptions. As most new babies squint against the light, weep with nostalgia for the womb, the old country, the former life.

Like Abram who left behind his known language of communication, his reputation, his kin network, his knowledge of place and how to survive in it, called to father a new way of thinking, new religious expression, new people. Life will get worse not better, but God will make you great.

A SECOND CHANCE

I say, "Sorry God, I don't want to be that great." But my soul is hungry and I want a second chance. Being born anew is a difficult concept only for those lucky enough to escape catastrophe. Ask any prodigal who has ever come to himself in a pigsty, and he will tell you it's not all that complicated.

Anothen = from the beginning, completely, radically; again; from above.

**Something indescribable happens
to the soul that comes from
the grace and power of God.**

New birth like the wind? A chance encounter, a tumorous growth, a new love, an agonizing defeat, spiritual certainty, or complete mystery? In darkness Jesus tells Nic that whatever happens will resemble the winds of chance, spirit will stir, daring

thought and deed. Nic knows fundamental change is necessary, but by his experience impossible, that kind of change is desirable but not possible. Nic wants to be changed, but cannot change himself.

Reformed life empowers. "You will be made new through water and the spirit. Turn your mind inside out, step into the air, ride the wind, be born anew and live. Don't think about it too hard Nic. Just do as I do, believe me, believe in me."

MID-LIFE CRISIS

Lift your eyes and heart to the creator of mountains, your help is in the Lord God Almighty, (Psalm 121) who gives life and calls into existence the things that do not exist (Romans 4:17).

John's ideas: rebirth, kingdom of heaven, children of God, eternal life. Children have privilege and obedience.

Matthew's ideas: become like children to enter kingdom of heaven. Like the heartbeat from childhood.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we affirm these ideas: Thy kingdom come, Thy will done on earth as in heaven.

OUR SPIRITUAL PATH

Our decision to follow a spiritual path often leaves us with questions like Nicodemus. What makes sense to us in the world of flesh doesn't make sense to us in the world of the Spirit. What calls us in the world of the Spirit seldom makes sense in the physical world.

Jesus challenges us all to look at the fundamental truth of our lives; the beliefs of others that do not fit into our own preconceived notions of the way things are supposed to be, and not be; our expectations of ourselves, those around us – the groupings of people we find acceptable or not– our dark places, places of the flesh that are born only to collapse, places where the Spirit is not given enough room or sustenance to be born. Jesus

reminds us that: “the wind blows where it will” and that we don’t even know where it comes from, much less where it is going.

NICODEMUS FOLLOWED JESUS

Nicodemus went on in faith as a follower of Jesus. When the ranking Pharisee and deputies were arguing to arrest Jesus in John 7:50, Nicodemus speaks up for him. “Since when does our law pass judgment on people without first letting them speak for themselves and without establishing the facts?” Nic insisted on fairness of the law toward Jesus.

Along with Joseph of Arimathea, who took Jesus’ body down from the cross (John 19:38), “Nicodemus came, too, bringing aloes and myrrh,” took Jesus body, wound it up in strips of burial cloth along with the spices, and they laid Jesus in the tomb.

OUR CONVERSATION WITH GOD

Perhaps it is in the darkness of Lent, like the darkness of night that hid Nicodemus, that we will find the freedom to explore the impossible so that we might see the miracle of our daily lives. See our reflection in the face of Christ, like Veronica who had compassion to mop his brow along the Via Dolorosa, and feel the wonder of God’s grace.

**The gift of eternal life originates
in the love of God and depends
on the faith of the recipient.
Take responsibility for your choice.**

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

All that we are, all that we celebrate, all that we struggle with is a part of the conversation we have in various ways with God during our life’s journey of searching. A reassuring word comes to us in the midst of all this, something many of us learned in Sunday School: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Listen to your heartbeat.

God’s love provides new life to people who believe. This love is an invitation to discover the Spirit of God, the power and joy of loving God. Our spiritual self improvement is not done just for ourselves. Our love of God can increase our capacity to give love to others as well as to receive it from those who would love us, and help us fellowship with one another. We share life with others as people faithful to God.



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