

## John #7 – The Ultimate Problem

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*John - GIW*

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**Bible Text:** John 3:12-21  
**Preached on:** Sunday, October 25, 1992

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"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Congregation of Christ, right there is the fundamental problem. Everyone who is ever called to preach to sinful men has to face that problem. How are you going to preach, and indeed why would you even bother to preach to men who are dead in trespasses and sins and can't even understand what you are saying?

Jesus Christ did not commit himself to men, even to those who seemed on the surface to be pleased with him, because he knew all men and had no need that anyone should testify of man because he knew what was in man, chapter 2, verses 24 and 5. Even in this confrontation with a great leader of the Jewish church of that time, a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus, it became perfectly evident in a very short time that Nicodemus didn't have the faintest idea what Jesus was talking about. When Christ talked about being born again, the man said, would you believe it, "Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" And in verse 10, Jesus Christ says, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" And then in verse 12 he said, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe when I tell you heavenly things?"

You see, congregation, the Apostle Paul was right when he said man is dead in trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2. He was right when he said the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned, 1 Corinthians 2. And Jesus was right when he asked the question, "If I have told you earthly things and you don't believe, then how in the world will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Now right there we are face-to-face with one of the great doctrines of the word of God reaffirmed in a powerful way at the time of the Reformation which we, in the Reformed churches of Jesus Christ, have come to speak of as the doctrine of man's total depravity, the entire corruption of man's nature as a result of the fall, and the consequent total inability of man to even understand, let alone to be make use of the understanding of the heavenly things of the gospel of Christ.

Now that really is a problem. If God calls you to preach and the people you're preaching to are dead, what are you going to do? I've asked myself that question many times and I am so thankful that I have the answer from Jesus himself, for immediately after making

that earthshaking statement in verse 12, what did Jesus do? Well, congregation, I'll tell you what he did, right away he began to tell Nicodemus heavenly things. That's what he did. That's exactly what he did. He began to tell him heavenly things and the first heavenly thing that he told Nicodemus was this, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven." Yes, even on earth Christ was in heaven, mindboggling but it's true, and that means that he and he alone is qualified to speak of heavenly things with finality and absolute authority.

Now it's true, you can think of a number of people in the Bible who had glimpses of heavenly things. The 70 elders of the nation of Israel up on the mountain had a glimpse of heavenly things like golden pavement or something like that and the Lord's feet walked up and down on it, something of that kind. Paul, the apostle, says that he was taken out of the body or in the body, he wasn't even sure of that, to the heavenly realms and he saw things that he was not allowed to speak about. He wasn't allowed to write about them or speak about them but he did see them. And John, the beloved apostle of Christ, also saw heavenly things which you'll notice in the book of Revelation that he was only allowed to write exactly as directed what he had seen. Now the reason for this is quite simple, every one of these men that we can think of in the Bible who saw glimpses of heavenly things were sinners like we are and that means they were out of their element. You can see that when John falls at the feet of Jesus as a dead man. It was too much for him. He was out of his element up there in the heavenly realm but that was never true of Jesus for that was his own native habitation. From all eternity he was there. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with Him and all things were made by Him." So heaven was his natural habitation, his home. Coming down here was the strange thing for him just like going up there was the strange thing for John. So no one even begins to compare with the Lord Jesus Christ when it comes to qualifications to speak about heavenly things.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be in New Zealand? Well, I would suggest that if you would like to know and you've never been there, you should ask somebody who has been there. I lived there with Doris for 17 years so I can tell you quite a bit about New Zealand. Even better if you could talk to somebody who's lived there all their life and only is over here as a visitor, then you could find out a lot about New Zealand. Well, the only man that ever walked on the earth who lived eternally in the heavenly region is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and here he is saying this to Nicodemus. Now you've got to understand Nicodemus was a high ranking official in the Jewish church of that day and all he could see here was a Galilean by the name of Jesus, who everybody said was the son of the carpenter there in the city of Nazareth, and he is making a claim like this? "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven." That's one of the heavenly things that no one in this world could ever know if Christ had not revealed it.

So Jesus is telling Nicodemus heavenly things. The second heavenly thing that he is revealing to Nicodemus, this man who can't understand anything, is God's great plan of salvation for he goes on to say, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish

but have everlasting life." Now it might surprise you to think of that as heavenly teaching and yet the Bible is very clear, brothers and sisters, that the plan of salvation is the acme of the wisdom of God. It is the epitome of his great glory and majesty as the one and only living and true God and that's proved by two things that we read in the Bible. Peter says the angels who live in heavenly places, they always have, it's the only home they've ever known, yet their focus of interest and curiosity is the wonder of God's plan of salvation. They desire to look into and understand these things, says the Bible. And the Apostle Paul says that it is the plan of God by means of the church to reveal throughout the whole length and breadth of the whole universe the manifold wisdom of God. It's what has happened here on this planet in the Incarnation, life and death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God, that God has revealed in a higher degree than in anything else that exists the manifold wisdom of God.

Now of course, there was some revelation of this under the old covenant. The ceremonial law was really a little model designed to communicate the idea of the sacrifice of the Son of God, the death of the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. And then there were also a number of things that God did in the history of salvation that also taught this lesson, here Jesus selects one of them as the primary symbolic example for he says, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Well, you remember that story, don't you? That was designed by God to be a vehicle of instruction of his people concerning the very thing that Jesus here is revealing to Nicodemus. Now those people in the wilderness were suddenly attacked by a great many poisonous serpents. Before they knew what had happened, they were being bitten right and left with terribly venomous poison and one after another they were dying throughout the camp of Israel. Dear friends, that is really an accurate picture of what has happened to the whole human race, for the sin of our first parents is like a terrible poison flowing down through the stream, the bloodstream of the human race. Then God said to Moses, "I want you to take some bronze and fashion it into the form of a serpent and I want you to lift that high up on a pole and display it in the camp of Israel, and then you tell people that if they will look at that ugly sight, they will be cured." And we are told in the account in the Old Testament, that everyone who was willing to do that, to fasten their eyes on that repulsive sight, the bronze serpent, they were instantly and effectively healed.

Now it's kind of a hard choice whether that was something beautiful or something ugly. As a matter of fact, I believe, congregation, that it always has to be looked upon as both, the cross of Christ is a beautiful thing to a man who is dying and there's no other way that he can live, the cross of Christ is an ugly thing in and of itself, however, because the Bible says God has made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. You can't look at the cross of Christ and see the marred visage of Jesus as Isaiah describes him, as one that we do not esteem, one who was reproached and rejected by God Almighty himself, you can't look at that without saying it's ugly but neither can you really see it for what it is without seeing it was the most beautiful thing that ever has been in the universe of God for it is this heavenly thing, this great plan of the salvation of God whereby he redeems sinners without compromising his own divine holiness, there we see the beauty of the living God fully and wonderfully revealed.

And that brings us to the third heavenly thing that Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus and that is the simple fact that no member of the human race will ever be saved from eternal damnation except through the mediation of this same Jesus. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Very well then, "He who believes is not condemned; but he who does not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Son of God. And this is the condemnation," we're getting back, you see, to the point Christ is making in this whole passage, "this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world," and would you believe it, "men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light," yes, that's right, "and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." There is no statement anywhere in the word of God more devastating to the stand of the natural man than that one for it tells him that he is already under the condemnation of God, and that unless he is made a new creature in Christ, there is no possibility that he will ever escape God's wrath and condemnation.

So Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, "Nicodemus, you may be a Pharisee, you may be a high ranking church official, but unless you become a new creature and you come to trust in Me as the one and only way, truth and life, you are condemned forever." And you come back right there to the ultimate problem because the problem is that these heavenly truths that Christ is here teaching Nicodemus, are the very thing that man by nature absolutely hates. He is at enmity, totally and completely at enmity with any such notions, does not come to the light but flees from it because men love darkness rather than light.

Now that would be hopeless indeed if the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> verse were not there but verses 20 and 21 tell us that in spite of this fundamental problem which is the absolute impossibility that the natural man will ever really understand the truth of God, he can't even understand the analogy of the wind, how in the world could he understand the work of the Spirit, can't even understand the analogy of the serpent on the pole, how could he understand the great salvation of Christ, yet in spite of that there are those who come to the light that their deeds may be clearly seen that they have been wrought in God. Now do you understand what that means, wrought in God or done in God? Well, it means that it is something we do not do but he does. He takes them up by his supernatural power and miraculous working into union with himself and there is a work done in them which makes them different, and right there in verse 21 you are back where Christ was when he was talking to Nicodemus about being born again.

So these people that do come to the light, they're not different by nature. They are not better because there's some leftover good in them that isn't in other people. No, it's just like Jesus said to Nicodemus, the wind, the Spirit blows where it will and they're born of the Spirit of God, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit, and they become new creatures and because they become new creatures, the light can enter their hearts and minds, and because the light can enter their hearts and mind, they begin to hate what they

used to love and they come to the light instead of away from it, even though it exposes them as sinners, they come to the light and they want to come to the light, and in doing so you can see that they have been wrought in God. Do you see why Jesus never used the altar call method, folks? Do you see why Jesus never tried to get people to raise their hand or come forward or perform some bodily motion? He didn't do it because his entire dependence, this most perfect pastor in the history of the church of God, his dependence was on the sovereign work of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit that quickens, makes alive, as Jesus once said, the flesh profits nothing.

Well, congregation, I hope you can see from this simple exposition several things that are painfully absent from the church of God in general in America today, where so much is done to build the church that contradicts the teaching of Jesus. Do you know that I've know preachers who say they believe in the depravity of man but they say, "I never preach it. I don't want to offend people, don't want to offend anyone." The number one thing on their agenda is not to offend anyone though they say they believe it, and here's the Son of God and the first thing he does in his ministry, the only perfect ministry there ever has been anywhere, the first thing he does is to put it right out before the sinner his total and complete depravity and helplessness. Did you know that in every great revival in the Christian church that's what's been done? One of the great blockbuster books at the time of the Reformation was written by Martin Luther and it was called "The Bondage of the Will." Everybody at that time believed that man had a natural endowment of the power of free will and Martin Luther put an atom bomb on that when he wrote about the bondage of the human will and he said, "No, man's will is not free, it's in slavery to the wickedness of his own heart."

Well, friends, if you're dead in sin you're not going to like it when somebody tells you you are, and you're not going to like it when you are told that you have to be dragged out of your lair to the light so you can be exposed as a hell-deserving sinner and then that you have to get down on your knees and beg Jesus Christ to have mercy upon you. But that's the gospel. And what about it, did this way of Jesus Christ's preaching result in the salvation of sinners? Well, I have a very brief answer for you: sometimes it did and sometimes it did not. And at the time that he was saying these things to Nicodemus, it looked like a time when it was not to be. Nicodemus didn't understand. But that's the wonderful thing about preaching, folks, because when you preach the truth of God, you're like the sower in the parable of Jesus, you're out there sowing the seed and if you know anything about sowing seed, you'll know that the seed may take quite a while before it germinates and comes to life. And the seed was planted in Nicodemus and by the sovereign blessing of God, I believe that seed took root, and in God's time after that seed had germinated, Nicodemus came out, Jesus had been crucified, and he was crucified because of the implacable hatred of the Sanhedrin, imagine then the courage it took for Nicodemus to risk his reputation and maybe even his life by going to claim and honorably bury the dead body of Jesus. Oh, I'm sure Nicodemus became a believer but it wasn't through the altar call on the spot, it was through the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit of God.

So the whole idea that we preachers can determine the time when people come forth from death unto life is absolutely contrary to the Bible. What we are to do is to preach the truth boldly and without apology to everyone, including members of the Sanhedrin of the church, and then rely on Almighty God in his sovereign power to wake them from the dead and make the seed of his truth grow. Congregation, if we want to see the church of God revived again, this is how it will come by preaching the whole counsel of God without fear and without favor, trusting in him and in him alone, not methods, that's the American wickedness, not methods and gimmicks but the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit of God to make dead sinners hear it, understand it, and believe it.

It's the preacher's task to show you heavenly things, and because of your dullness to illustrate them by things that are earthly, but it is God the Holy Spirit and God alone that can open the eyes of your understanding so that you might see and enter the kingdom. And my prayer has always been that God would do that to honor the faithful preaching of his word. Amen.

*Father in heaven, we thank You for this glorious testimony of Jesus to Nicodemus, Nicodemus who couldn't even understand earthly things and yet Jesus went right ahead and told him heavenly things. Well, Lord, it's like that today. We don't have the power to open those hearts that are hard, those minds that are firmly fixed in erroneous and deceiving ways but, Lord God, You can do it. Merciful God, bless the preaching of Your word by bringing forth fruit that others may know that this has been the work of God. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*