

**THE PRAYER OF THE DAY** Eternal God, You so loved the world that You gave Your only Son into death for our sin. Take our lives, Lord, and use them to lift up Your Son so that all will be drawn to Him and find eternal life, for He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**          Genesis 12:1-9

*(The story of how God called Abraham and His promise that Abraham would become the father of a great nation.)*

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. 6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. 8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. 9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

**THE EPISTLE LESSON**          Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

*(St. Paul describes how the righteousness of Abraham was given to him by grace through faith.)*

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about-- but not before God. 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. 6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." . . .

13 It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, 15 because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. 16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring-- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. 17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who

gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

## THE GOSPEL LESSON

John 3:1-17

*(Jesus goes to Nicodemus and tells him how to be born anew through water and the Spirit.)*

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 In reply Jesus declared, **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

**5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."**

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man. **14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

**17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

INTRO - A couple of years ago I was at a Pastors' meeting when our District President, Warren Schumacher, made a challenge. He challenged us to pray for 5 people who don't know Jesus, people who have chosen not to believe, or people who don't attend church. About 5 or 6 years ago, I guess, I took that challenge. My prayer list has 5 names, though I have been praying at times for more than 5. I have actually been praying for the friends and relatives of some of you here, and trying to witness to them about God's saving love for them in Jesus.

I. Most people see John 3 as the setting for one of the most important verses in the Bible.

A. Jesus talks about coming to new life with Nicodemus, and finally explains it with John 3:16.

1. **16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

2. Some remember this as a verse that talks about Baptism, which by the way is important today. John 3:5 says, **5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.**

3. But, how many of you have seen this reading as an evangelism effort by Jesus?

B. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, as a curious Jewish leader, asking questions. But, Nicodemus is not yet a believer in Jesus. Jesus responds by calling Nicodemus to faith.

1. In answer to Nicodemus' first question, Jesus talks about the need for new life in order to be saved. **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

2. He calls Nicodemus to new life through baptism and faith. **5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.**

3. Finally Jesus calls Nicodemus to faith in Himself. **14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

C. Jesus calls His church to share God's offer for eternal life with others. In this passage we see Jesus in a one on one conversation calling someone to faith.

II. Now, I have personally witnessed to all of these people for whom I have been praying. But, none have yet told me they believe Jesus is their savior. In some cases I guess I may have been a little too forward for them. In others, I was not willing to argue, or be rude, in others I had a good conversation but little response. Sometimes it is easy to get frustrated, or maybe give up.

A. As a man, Jesus himself may have been tempted to give up sharing God's love with Nicodemus.

1. First, Nicodemus asks some silly questions. 'You must be from God.' 'How can a man be born again?' Nicodemus asks.

2. But, in spite of Jesus' effort to both answer Nicodemus' questions, and Jesus' effort to call Nicodemus to faith in God's Savior, we hear nothing in this reading about Nicodemus coming to faith.

3. It seems he leaves an unbeliever still.

B. Have you ever felt frustrated by a witnessing experience?

1. Often, sharing something personal like God's love can be scary, somewhat nerve wracking.

2. But, if I take the chance at making a fool of myself and being rejected, and then my efforts don't lead to anything, well, it is easy not to try again.

3. How about you? Jesus calls people to make disciples, to be his witnesses. Do you ever feel like ignoring His call? Do you?

C. We should not be surprised at Nicodemus' response. Jesus says that faith happens in differently mysterious ways in different people.

1. Did you hear what he said in verses 6-8?

2. After Jesus says, in verse 5, **no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.** Jesus then describes how the Spirit works faith in a person.

3. **6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."**

4. In other words, the Spirit's working of faith in a person is a mystery. **but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."** At the end of John 3, we don't know where the Spirit is going in Nicodemus.

III. Let me tell you the end of this story. We don't hear about Nicodemus again until after Jesus is crucified. **John 19: 38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. 41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.**

A. After Jesus was tried by Nicodemus' companions in the Sanhedrin, when Jesus was dead, and when being Jesus' friend was dangerous, Nicodemus comes out publicly to stand up for Jesus.

1. He and Joseph had come to faith.
2. They risk their lives to live their faith in Jesus as God's Messiah.

B. We can learn a lot from this verse about Jesus' witnessing, and our witnessing.

1. First, God loves everyone, and wants everyone to be saved. **16 "For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** There is no one so foolish, so difficult, so evil that God does not love.

2. Secondly, Jesus spoke the truth, gently.

A. In response to Nicodemus' silly questions, Jesus told him that he lacked spiritual insight, or Jesus spoke the law, but not in a harsh way.

B. Jesus shared that He, Jesus, was the Son of Man, the Savior who would be lifted up so people could be saved.

C. Jesus called Nicodemus to Faith, telling him that everyone who believes has eternal life, but all who do not believe are condemned.

3. But finally, Jesus let the Spirit work. It might have been 2 or 3 years later that we find Nicodemus responded to the Spirit in faith.

C. God doesn't want us to give up on anyone.

1. He wants us to keep praying and witnessing.

2. He wants us to truthfully and gently tell other people that Jesus is the Savior of the World.

3. But, if the Spirit works faith, and the Spirit works mysteriously, it is wise to follow Jesus' example. We share the truth gently and effectively, but we aren't the one who ultimately convinces the person to believe. We let THE SPIRIT be the one who leads the person to faith, if they are going to believe.

CONCLUSION - My list of 5 is actually getting bigger. I am going to keep praying, and keep witnessing, because I believe Jesus saved all, and I trust the Spirit is working. How about you???