

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM - MARK 12:34

JOHN WESLEY'S LIFE VERSE

Young John woke up with a start. There was something desperately wrong in the house. He smelled smoke and bolted up out of his bed. Now John was only 6 years old. But he instinctively ran out of his bedroom into the upstairs hallway. The staircase was engulfed with flames. A sinking feeling filled the pit of his stomach as he realized that there was no escape. John couldn't have realized at this point that all the other members of his family had been safely rescued outside, and that he alone had somehow been left in the house.

But young John did not panic. He ran back into his bedroom, opened the upstairs window and began to cry for help. His scream was heard by his terrified parents and neighbors who had already gathered as they realized that their young 6 year old was still trapped in their doomed house. John's father and some neighboring men jumped into action. They formed a human ladder. John's father stood on the ground with a neighbor standing on his shoulders. As John crawled out of the window with the flames licking at his back, the neighbor could just reach him and lower him to safety.

One of the other neighbors took a picture of this family tragedy as the parsonage where John lived was totally destroyed by the flames. For the rest of John's life, he kept that picture hanging on his wall with the words inscribed below, *Is not this a brand plucked from burning?* John was convinced that God had saved his life for a special purpose. Such was the childhood of a man who would be remembered as one of the greatest evangelists - John Wesley.

Even though he was raised in a preacher's home, and even though he had this dramatic rescue as a young boy, and even though he was taught God's providential hand and had a strong sense of purpose in his life, John Wesley had a rather unusual conversion which actually occurred later in his life. But it is important that we see his example - for there have been and certainly still will be others who can learn and benefit from it.

As John Wesley grew to maturity, he naturally received the best theological education which was available to him. He even embarked upon a life as a missionary. But it was at the conclusion of such a missionary journey to our own country that he was lead by a probing question to examine his own personal relationship with God.

The year was 1738. We were still almost 40 years from independence from Great Britain. John Wesley had crossed the Atlantic Ocean as a missionary to proclaim the gospel to those who were living in our land. He had journeyed to Indian tribes with an interpreter. He had preached in church after church - mainly in the south. I can remember standing in the church in Savannah, Georgia where John Wesley started the first Sunday School in America. The trip had produced many successes. But it was as Wesley heard the conversation of 3 fellow ministers that his heart began to ache. These men were speaking to each other of their faith in God which had produced such peace and contentment in their hearts. As Wesley quietly listened to them, he honestly had to admit that he had no such assurance within. On the evening of May 24, 1738, John Wesley wrote of this conversation in his journal: *They replied with one mouth that this faith was a gift, the free gift of God, and that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I resolve to seek it to the end. I continue to seek it.* Wesley then went to bed with a heavy heart - doubting his personal relationship with God.

It was the very next morning that John Wesley opened his Bible for his

morning devotions. The verse that he first saw would become his life verse. They were the words from our Savior to one of the teachers of the law as recorded in Mark 12:34. *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God.* Wesley's heart skipped a beat as he read those words and he immediately took them to heart. He felt that God was speaking to him, telling him that he was not far from the kingdom of God.

On the lengthy trip back across the Atlantic Ocean by ship, John Wesley continued to wrestle with his spiritual questions. A humble Moravian Christian noticed his despondent demeanor. *I must ask you one or two questions: Do you know Jesus Christ?* the Moravian brother asked. *Of course, I know Jesus Christ,* Wesley replied. *I know that he is the Savior of the world. I have preached this message as a missionary. True,* the Moravian continued. *But do you know that he has saved you? I hope that he has died to save me?* Wesley answered. But it is obvious from this record in his journal that he had grave doubts as to his personal spiritual condition.

John Wesley finished his trip and continued his study of the Scriptures. But all the time, he had nagging spiritual doubts inside. Finally, his spiritual

eyes were opened one night as he heard the reading of the Preface to Luther's Commentary on Romans where Martin Luther records his own spiritual conversion. Luther as well had embarked upon a spiritual journey to Christ. He had been raised as a staunch Roman Catholic and had revered God and His word, but there had never been a personal relationship with God. Wesley read Luther's own account of his conversation with a spiritual mentor named Staupitz. *Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins?* the wise old Staupitz asks Luther. *I believe, replied Luther reciting a clause from the creed, I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Ah, answers the older Christian, but you must not only believe in the forgiveness of David's sins and Peter's sins, for this even the devils believe. It is God's command that we believe our own sins are forgiven us.*

As John Wesley read those words his spiritual eyes were opened. Listen to his own words as recorded in his journal: *In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the epistle of Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my own heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone,*

for salvation: and an assurance was given to me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the laws of sin and death.

John Wesley was 35 years old when he wrote that entry into his journal. From that point on he traveled an average of 8,000 miles a year - mostly by horseback. He seldom preached fewer than 1,000 times a year - we know this from his own journal which he carefully kept. Wesley would ride from town to town - stopping only long enough to preach the gospel. He would preach on street corners, he would preach in coal mines, he would preach in factories, he would preach anywhere where there was a group of people. The impact that he made upon his country and the world cannot be measured. (The historian Lecky has evaluated, *the religious revolution begun in England by the preaching of the Wesleys is of greater historic importance than all of the splendid victories by land and sea won under Pitt.*)

What spiritual lessons can we learn from the life of John Wesley and the verse that brought comfort to his heart and helped to lead him to Christ? Let me draw 3 to your attention:

1. It is possible to know all about Christ, to even preach the saving message of Christ, and not to be a member of God's own family. This is a

very sobering thought - but it is true. John Wesley is exhibit A. And every person who is serious about his or her relationship with God must consider this possibility.

The simple fact is that John Wesley grew up in a pastor's house but was not a Christian until he was 35 years old. John Wesley went to Theological Seminary and obtained his degree before he was a Christian. John Wesley was even a missionary before he was a Christian. Imagine that!

There are many people who console themselves by surrounding themselves with a Christian environment. They convince themselves that because they have grown up in a Christian family, they must be a Christian. They surround themselves with Christian friends unconsciously thinking that some spirituality will rub off on them. They join a Christian church thinking that this might be the key into heaven. But as Luther's mentor reminded him paraphrasing the words of the Apostle James, *even the Devil believes in the forgiveness of sins.*

James wrote as recorded in chapter 2 and verse 19: *You believe that there is one God. Good. Even the demons believe that - and shudder.*

You see, the Devil believes that Jesus Christ died on the cross - he

knows the historic fact. He was there and witnessed the whole event. He filled the heart of Judas and the Roman Soldiers and the Jewish Religious leaders to carry out the deed. And the Devil knows that Jesus Christ died in order to provide forgiveness of sins. He's not stupid. He can see God's redemptive program outlined in the Bible. But the devil is not a member of God's family.

And so it is that a human being can believe in the historic Jesus, even believe that God made a provision for sin and still not be a member of God's family. It is not enough to believe that Jesus died for sins in general - one must believe that Jesus died for **my** sins. It is not enough to surround oneself with a Christian environment and even believe in the basic tenants of Christianity - one must have a personal relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The second obvious lesson is this one - True Salvation is a work that God produces in our lives. We can and should seek it - but God must do it.

Now this lesson is one which we must see clearly today, for we are living in a day when Christianity is systematically become more and more man centered. And in the process, of course, much of true Biblical

Christianity is lost. The emphasis today is on man's needs and what man needs to do about them. There is a simple formula offered for everything from marriage enrichment and child-rearing to the victorious Christian life. The implication is that our eternal destiny and the quality of our spiritual lives are totally in our hands - we are the captains of our spiritual ship and need to allow God to be our co-captain. That is the challenge that is so often given to us.

Now the conversion of John Wesley illustrates the necessity of God working in one's life if there is to be any spiritual life. Wesley had the best training. He knew all the answers. He was even able to lead others to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and did so on many occasions as an evangelist and missionary. But amazing as it is to us, his own spiritual eyes had not been opened to his need for a personal relationship with God. Wesley thought that service for the Lord was enough. He had convinced himself that his zeal and dedication was sufficient. When Wesley's efforts are seen in the final analysis, his was just another feeble attempt at salvation by works. He was trusting in what he could do for God rather than what God had already done for him.

When all of the religious systems of the world are considered, there really are only 2 ways that people try to gain access to heaven. The first and by far the majority view is for us to somehow earn or merit our way. Now the means to people working for their salvation are many - they vary from following the pillars of Islam to acknowledging various deities to praying at the Western Wall to trying to be a good person. But they all share in the common denominator that we are trying to do something to satisfy God. And that is exactly where all of these systems must fail - for we cannot do enough to satisfy a perfectly holy and righteous God.

True Biblical Christianity stands alone in that it presents what God has already done for us. A person is saved not because of what he can do for God, but he is born again into God's family as he believes and accepts what God has already done for him. God has provided the atonement for our sins in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are born again into God's family as we see our spiritual helplessness and cast ourselves upon His mercy, receiving what He has already done for us.

John Wesley lived much of his life trying to do in order to please God. He was acutely aware of the spiritual void in his life, but he convinced

himself that if he only worked harder for God, that void would be filled. It was only as he came to the realization that the Lord Jesus had died for him personally and that God desired a relationship with him personally that the scales of darkness fell from his eyes and he was able to see spiritual truth clearly.

3. Thirdly, we must never underestimate the power or importance of God's word in bringing individuals to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And this brings us to our text in Mark 12 - John Wesley's life verse.

This statement of Christ was given in response to the inquiry of an honest seeker of God. The anonymous person is simply called *one of the teachers of the law* in the context, but the way that Jesus responds to him shows that he was a sincere inquirer. He asked Jesus *of all of the commandments, which is the most important?* Now I am sure that this person had thought long and hard about this question. After all, he was an expert in the law, so he was not the type of person who would respond spontaneously, off the cuff. And it is probable that having studied the law for years, he had become overwhelmed by the magnitude of regulations. How could he ever obey all of these requirements? So he was concerned with what the most

important ones were - perhaps if he obeyed them, God would be satisfied.

Jesus with great wisdom sums up the entirety of the law by saying that he should *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. . .and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Now at first glance, we are tempted to think that Jesus is offering a religion that is man centered - something that we can do in order to please God. Love God . . .love man: do this and you will please God. But it is obvious from the context that this law expert saw immediately what Jesus was saying. He saw how that these 2 commandments summed up all of the rest of the law - for all the elements of the law centered around our relationship either with God or with our fellow humans. He also caught the implication of what Christ was saying in making relationship with God a priority over service for God. And this is what Jesus was impressed with when he said *you are not far from the kingdom.* Jesus saw that this man had answered *wisely.* This word is used only this one time in the N.T. - and it means that the young man answered with insight, that he understood the spiritual truth that Jesus was really saying. For this expert in the law

acknowledges that relationship with God is more important than service for God. *Well said, teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.* In essence, this expert in the law begins to see that relationship with God is more important than attempted service for God. It was this insight that began to open his eyes to spiritual truth.

You see, one who seriously tries to keep the law in order to gain access into heaven is eventually lead to the Lord Jesus Christ. For nobody is able to keep God's perfect law. Who among us would make the claim that we have loved God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength all the time all of our lives? Who among us would make the claim that we have never failed in our love for God once in our lives? Who among us would claim that we have always acted in perfect love towards our neighbors all the time all of our lives? That we have never failed once in demonstrating perfect love towards our neighbors? If our entrance into heaven is based upon the perfection of our love towards God and our neighbors we all are in real trouble. And that

is the reason for the Apostle Paul saying that the purpose of the law is to act like a schoolmaster or a tutor to lead us to Christ and his redemptive work. As we are confronted with God's perfect requirements and as we all are aware of our own failures and weaknesses, we realize that there is no goodness that we have that is great enough for us to gain access into heaven.

But the wonderful truth of God's word is that God desires a relationship with us. And that relationship is not based upon what we can do for Him, but that relationship is rather based upon what He has already done for us. God demonstrated his love for us in that while we still sinners, Christ died for us. He didn't die for us generically. He didn't die for us abstractly. He died for us individually. He died for us personally. And God desires to have a personal relationship with each of us. We must see that truth if we are truly to become followers of Jesus Christ. John Wesley was a religious man. He would have called himself Christian. But he was not born again into God's family until he personally received the forgiveness of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was 53 years after his conversion, John Wesley was lying close to death at the age of 88. His closest and dearest friends were by his bedside. One asked if he had any final words. A quiet hush descended upon the room

as Wesley gathered his strength for one last comment. He then said in a clearly audible though soft voice: *I am the chief of sinners, but Jesus died for me.*

Do you know that Jesus died for you this morning? I am not asking if you believe that Jesus died on the cross or if you believe that he is the Savior of the world. I am not asking if you have been raised in a Christian home or have been regular in attending church most of your life. I am not asking if you consider yourself to be a good person. All of these things are praiseworthy - but not one of them will get anyone into heaven. Do you know that Jesus died for you? Do you have a personal relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you been born again into the family of God? These are the questions that will ultimately matter.

PRAYER