

Have You Considered Getting a Life?

Rich Nathan

March 22-23, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 3

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Like all of you, I've been deeply concerned regarding the events of the last few days as America is once again at war. I've got to be honest with you and tell you that I've been very ambivalent about the timing and process by which we, as a nation, arrived at the decision to go to war.

But one thing is absolutely clear. The regime that has been ruling Iraq for the last several decades is unthinkable brutal. Perhaps you've read the articles in the NY Times or some other source about the systematic torture of Iraqi athletes. Saddam Hussein's son, Uday, has overseen the Iraqi National Olympic Committee since 1984. From athletes who have escaped Iraq, we have learned that Uday systematically tortures athletes when they fail to perform up to his expectations. Dozens and dozens of athletes, both men and women, have been murdered. Hundreds have been tortured, beaten, and left to rot in the basement of the headquarters of the National Olympic Committee.

Uday, according to several athletes, beat athletes with iron bars. They've been dragged on their backs behind trucks on pavement. And when their backs become bloody, they are dumped in raw sewage to make sure that their wounds become infected. One soccer player said that he was imprisoned and tortured after he announced his retirement from the International Team. A goalkeeper, who was held

by Uday to be responsible for a soccer loss to Japan, was whipped for three days by his bodyguard and forced to kick a concrete football. Some athletes were thrown off of a bridge and killed.

Athletes got off easy in Iraq. The human rights abuses to Iraqi scientists are absolutely horrific. A key scientist of the Iraqi Atomic Energy Organization, a man by the name of Dr. Hussein Al-Shahristani, talks about being arrested, tortured, and kept in solitary confinement for 11 years for refusing to work on a military program for producing nuclear bombs. He said he was more fortunate than many of his fellow scientists who had holes drilled into their legs by electric drills. Some of his fellow scientists had their eyes gouged out. Many of his fellow scientists had their children brought to the jail and in front of them, before their eyes, the Iraqis tortured the children. Women in the families of scientists were brought before the scientists and raped by soldiers. Many scientists and political prisoners were used as guinea pigs for chemical and biological tests.

The list of other tortures against political prisoners in Iraq are simply too gruesome to mention.

What is even more horrifying is that this kind of state-sponsored torture is not at all confined to Iraq. Amnesty International produced a several hundred page document titled "Torture at the End of the 20th Century," and you simply cannot read a couple of pages of this document without having your mind just reel at the capacity for cruelty that we human beings possess. The report revealed that torture is the state policy in

49 countries of the world – state policy to use starvation, electric shock, suspension by one's arms, submerging in water to the point of suffocation, sexual abuse, throwing sulfuric acid on people, blinding, amputation and all of the other things that people could do to other people's bodies and minds and families.

I read about what was going on in Iraq. I read about what is happening around the world. The question that comes to mind is how do you explain this?

Moving closer to home, there was a story in this past Thursday's paper that began with this sentence: "The risk of being murdered is 10 times greater on the day of birth than at any other time of life. And the killer of the newborn is almost always the baby's mother." Imagine that. The greatest risk of murder that a human being faces is when we are most helpless – on the day of our birth. And the risk comes from the person who conceived us, carried us, and is supposed to care for us. The risk comes from the person who is supposed to have a natural love and bond to us.

A recent study of mothers who killed their newborns found that many of the moms do not fit the stereotype. They are not all frightened, unwed, 14 or 15-year olds who are afraid of being beaten by abusive, disapproving parents. Over half of the murdering moms are older teens or women in their 20s. A significant percentage are married and have other children.

Now, how do you explain a 25-year old mother killing her newborn? The study's author said, "We don't know what's going on." Theories abound trying to explain this

utterly unnatural behavior. The study's author suggested several possibilities. "Maybe these women are in denial about being pregnant. Maybe they are taken by surprise by the birth of these babies. Maybe these women are mentally ill. Maybe there is something else going on causing this behavior that we can't explain."

Of course, not all evil is as brutal or overt as the stuff I've been describing. Think about the infinite number of subtle ways that we can do harm to other people simply by changing the tone of our voice or by choosing a certain word. "Oh yes, Diane is a very interesting person, isn't she?" Why do we deliberately choose to hurt other people's reputations through innuendo? How many times in your life have you used your sharp tongue simply to shred another person?

Or consider how often you and I just choose to look the other way. There's something going on in our families, or something going on in our workplaces, and we just choose to look the other way. The people at Arthur Anderson weren't much different than people at many of our workplaces. They were making lots of money. It was harmful to their careers to protest too much or see too much about what was going on at Enron. People at Arthur Anderson and Enron and many of these other corporations and accounting firms and law firms remind me of Sgt. Schultz from the old comedy show, Hogan's Heroes. Those of you who are really old can remember that show – Hogan's Heroes. Sgt. Schultz used to walk around saying, "I see nothing; I hear nothing; I know nothing."

How do explain our willingness to regularly pretend that we do not see evil around us? How do you explain how often you just turn your head aside and choose not to feel, not to hear, not to see what is really wrong?

And if we are going to survey the world, we can't forget the corruption that exists in many religious organizations. What I'm talking about is not confined to those men and women out there, the Iraqis, people around the world, murderers who are in prison. If you are in the church world, it is not too hard, to hear about a long-term affair that existed between staff members of a local church. Many people have come to this church claiming spiritual abuse or manipulation.

My wife, Marlene, and I lead a home fellowship group for former pastors who are now attending the Vineyard. Just in the course of sharing, they have told terribly disturbing stories of serving on pastoral staffs where there was a complete lack of financial integrity, lots of manipulation regarding money or tremendous resistance on the part of the church to welcome anyone who didn't look, smell, or act like the people in the church.

How do you explain state-sponsored torture? How do you explain moms killing their newborns? How do you explain the infinite array of subtle ways that we choose to hurt each other, or the corruption that exists in religious organizations?

Throughout the centuries, the world's great philosophers have tried to come up with explanations for human corruption. The French philosopher, Rousseau, said that

people left to themselves are innocent and happy. “It is society,” he said, “that corrupts us.” The problem is sociological. We’re not guilty, society is. The answer is to remake society.

Karl Marx proposed that all of our problems came from class divisions between workers whose work-product is taken from them and capitalists who steal for themselves the profits made off of workers’ work-product. The problem is economic. The solution is setting up a socialist society.

Sigmund Freud decided that the cause of all of our problems was childhood traumas that have been repressed into the unconscious. The problem is psychological. And so the solution is psychotherapy.

The Bible explains all of the terrible things that we produce as coming from the disordered heart of men and women, or to use one simple three letter word, sin. The Bible says that there is something broken, twisted, corrupt, horrible that exists in every human being from the most religious to the most irreligious, from Iraqis to Americans.

Last week I gave a message entitled “Christ the Revolutionary.” In the famous story that we are going to read today, Jesus offers not only a diagnosis of our problem that is more radical than the philosophers, but also he proposes a solution more revolutionary than any philosopher ever dared. He tells us that we need to get a new life. I’ve called today’s talk “Have You Considered Getting a Life.” Let’s pray.

John 2:23-3:2 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. (3.1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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." In reply, Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

When reading the Bible, it is really important to remember that the chapter divisions and the verse divisions were not part of the original writings of the Bible. The apostle John did not break up his book into chapters 2, or 3. The present chapter divisions for the Old and New Testaments weren't decided upon until the year 1205; and they were put in there to make it easier for people to locate a passage. The verse divisions in the Old Testament were very early; they were about 200 AD. But in the New Testament, the verse divisions were not established until 1551. The point is, that sometimes the author is continuing a theme that is destroyed by the chapter divisions.

In this case we read 2:23, Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But

Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

Apparently, there were people who believed because of the signs. They saw Jesus' healings. They saw him cast out demons. They heard about the water turned into wine. But apparently, their faith went only so far. They were like people who are driving to Columbus from Indianapolis and they see a sign that says, "Columbus 31 miles". They jump out of the car and hug the sign. and the dad says, "Look, Sylvia, Columbus is 31 miles. Let's take a picture of all of us by the sign." Here are folks who didn't press on to find out more about what the sign was pointing to, or who the sign was pointing to. They didn't press on and follow the sign all the way to the destination – to Jesus. So as a result, their faith was shallow; it didn't change their lives.

Alot of people have had wonderful things happen to them. They were in a hospital in the critical care unit. They were there as a result of a car accident. They had a gunshot wound. They suffered a stroke or a heart attack or cancer. People are praying for them. They are awake and they are praying, and miraculously they fully recover. They don't die. They are restored to health. It was a sign, a sign. This intervention was a sign. They don't die. Maybe they tell people about the sign: "I just was dying in the hospital and miraculously I recovered." But often I've seen this happen. Often that same person really doesn't change in terms of their basic priorities. There's not a new life there at all. We're the same people with a story about a sign.

Now, let me make this more personal for you. How many of you have had a sign, a true sign from God? You dodged a bullet. You have been miraculously spared. By all rights you should be dead. You can identify with that critical care unit. Or you avoided a horrible accident. Somehow, miraculously, you didn't die. You are here today because there was an intervention.

Or you dodged a bullet and didn't have to suffer the consequences you were certain you were going to for something you did suffer. You thought you were pregnant and you weren't. You thought you had a sexually transmitted disease and you didn't. Or your AIDS has been entirely suppressed. Someone bailed you completely out of financial disaster. Or by all rights your marriage should be over because of what you did, the pattern of your behavior, and miraculously, it is not. It is sheer mercy that your spouse has decided to stay with you and hang in there.

So, here's the question: Has this sign in your life led you to really go after what the sign is pointing to, or better yet, who the sign is pointing to, namely Jesus Christ? In your life, has God's mercy led you into a deeper relationship with Christ or did you just stop by the sign and say, "WOW, this is really great? What a great sign. I'm just so happy that everything has turned out all right."

Jesus can tell the difference between shallow faith – the "thanks for helping me out, God, I really appreciate it, now I'll be on my way" and real faith. He can tell the difference between the Nathaniels that we read about in ch.1 who found out a little

bit about Christ and kept pressing in, kept seeking, and the people who just hug the sign and take photos of the sign. They talk about the sign, but they never move forward to whom the sign is pointing to.

We read in v. 24, *But Jesus would not trust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus...*

Nicodemus was one of those men that John is trying to describe in vv. 24-25, no chapter divisions. He is one of those men who until now, has not in his life radically pushed ahead to find out the truth, to embrace the truth totally. We read, *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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."*

We don't know why Nicodemus came at night. Maybe he was afraid of other people's opinions. Maybe he wanted to have an extended conversation with Jesus at an undisturbed hour. Throughout the book of John, the apostle uses night not only as a reference to time, but also as a reference to a spiritual condition. It was literally night. He came after the sun had set. But Nicodemus was in a spiritual condition of night. Inside of Nicodemus, there was darkness. Nicodemus was probably one of those men who knew that there was something wrong with the Judaism of his day. Maybe he was always uncomfortable when he went to the temple and he saw the

moneychangers, the cattle sellers. But he let himself be convinced that this was just part of the way they needed to keep this temple running. It was all so necessary.

So Nicodemus looked the other way. Maybe he was one of those people who had the truth gnawing away inside of him, but he was afraid of speaking up. Certainly, he did not have the courage to turn the tables over like Jesus did. He certainly never stepped up and let his voice be counted. Maybe the reason he came to Jesus was because he recognized that this man was so different than him. Perhaps he believed Jesus had the courage I lacked. I've always treaded lightly. I've always tested public opinion to make sure I fit in. I've never had the courage to take a stand regarding what is right or wrong come what may.

Let me ask you a question. Do you know anyone who is eaten up inside by the truth? Do you know anyone who knows what's true, they've seen it, but they've chosen not to rock the boat because it is too scary? Do you know anyone who just lives betwixt and between? Who regularly compromises? Do you know anyone who is like Nicodemus? They want to be around Jesus, but they are afraid of really being radical, of getting weird, making other people around them uncomfortable. Do you know anyone who just doesn't like to draw sharp lines on the truth, even though internally they know what's right to do? Do you know anyone at all who has a little bit of night inside of them?

Well, what does a person like Nicodemus need, that person you know who has a little night in them, who tends to compromise and doesn't want to rock the boat too much; not you, but your friend? What does a person like that need?

Well, maybe Nicodemus needs a little bit of religion, going to church more. Nicodemus is already religious. It says he's a man of the Pharisees, which means that he is in the group of people who were the strictest observers of Jewish ritual. In fact, he's a leader in the Judaism of his day. Nicodemus would have been thoroughly familiar not only with the Old Testament but with various oral interpretations. He would have scrupulously observed the Sabbath. He would have kept all of the laws regarding what is known as kashrut, what Jewish people can and cannot eat.

Maybe what Nicodemus needs is some moral training. Nicodemus would have been a strict observer of the Ten Commandments. There's almost no chance that this man was secretly stealing or blaspheming God, or committing adultery.

What does Nicodemus need to deal with in the night inside of him? Let's broaden this out. What does the typical business person, student, scientist, single adult, the people who have experienced an amazing sign from God, the churchgoer, the atheist, the married couple, the parents, the teenager – anybody else you can think of – what do people need to deal with in the night inside of them? What do the Iraqi leaders need, and not only the Iraqi leaders, but the American leaders? And the mothers who murder their kids? And the rest of us who have a million subtle ways of twisting life

to suit our own interests and who rationalize away our own compromises. What do we need?

Jesus says we need to get a life. V. 3, *In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* According to Jesus, the only answer for dealing with the garbage inside of us is not more psychotherapy. It's not just a redistribution of goods. It's not a change in our social structures. What we need to do with the night inside of us is not to become more moral, more religious. We need to get a life. Literally. Jesus, the Revolutionary, says we need to totally be made over.

Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God." In other words, no one can have God reigning in their lives, no one can come under God's control, no one can discover who the signs are pointing to and embrace the one the signs are pointing to, no one can live with God forever unless they get a totally new life. See, if humans beings were a house, Jesus is saying you just don't need a new paint job, a little surface touch up, some light sanding on the outside, and then we'll put a fresh coat of paint and some flowers around you. That's the moral improvement route. Jesus is saying if you were a house, the house has to be razed. It has to be burned to the ground and completely rebuilt.

Or to use a different picture, if we were talking about medical treatments, Jesus is saying you just don't need a little bit of botox for the wrinkles on your face, you just don't need a facial, or liposuction, you need a triple organ transplant – heart, lungs,

liver. If you were a car, you just don't need new floor mats. The car needs to be crushed in a car crusher. You need a whole new car. Night does not get out of a person's soul by surface change.

Let's just get counseling. We'll learn new skills for communication, resolving conflict, or money management. Everything is going to be okay. How many people have gone to marriage counseling and ended up six months later exactly where they started because their hearts aren't changed. They haven't discovered new life.

My favorite author, CS Lewis, in one of the truly great Christian books ever written called *Mere Christianity* – it has to be in the top 3 to 4 Christian books ever written – it says, “The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is remain what we call “ourselves” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, yet at the same time to be “good.” We're all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—hoping in spite of this to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As he said, ‘A thistle cannot produce figs.’ If I am a field that contains nothing but grass seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be plowed up and resown.”

Have you been plowed up by God? Has there ever been a time in your life where God just dug deeply into you and plowed you up, the core you? Dug you out of the way and put in you a new life?

I've called this series "The Jesus I Never Knew" and what Jesus is offering in this very familiar text on being born again is absolutely the most radical diagnosis of the human condition and the most revolutionary prescription for change in the history of civilization. No great thinker has ever said what Jesus Christ is saying here. What Christ is saying is Sorry Mr. Rousseau, we need more than just a change in society. Sorry Mr. Marx, we need more than just a redistribution of wealth and power. Sorry Mr. Freud, digging up your past and talking endlessly about what your parents have done to you simply will not change your life. You have to become a totally new creature. Your old person needs to die. And God needs to put in you an entirely new life.

Again, here's what C.S. Lewis says, "Jesus Christ never taught vague idealistic gas. When he said, 'Be perfect,' he meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard: but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder—in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

Well, have you been hatched? How does it happen that we get a new life? Nicodemus asked in v. 4, *How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born.* How can you, with all of your memories, and all of your experiences growing up, and all that you went through at the hands of your parents, and all of your habits, after so many years of living in one direction – how in the world can you totally change? How can you start over when you are old? How do you get right out of your soul?

Here's Jesus' answer in v. 5, *I tell you the truth. Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.* Becoming a totally new person, getting a new life, coming under God's control and reign, is a matter of a new birth. Jesus calls it being born of water and the Spirit. No one, not the person raised in a good Christian family, not the devoted mother and wife, not the nurturing grandmother, not the sincere Hindu, not the activist for the rights of the disabled, not your mom or dad, or your kids or husband or wife, not your Catholic boyfriend or girlfriend, or your son or daughter, not Nicodemus, no one can experience the kingdom of God without being born first of water and the Spirit. You can never embrace who the signs are pointing to unless you are born of water and the Spirit.

Now this statement of Jesus' "being born of water and the spirit" has been argued about for centuries. It has been variously interpreted by Bible scholars. Some say the water is the water of baptism. That unless you go through Christian baptism and receive the Holy Spirit, you can't enter the kingdom of God. Some say the water is the amniotic fluid from the womb that accompanies a natural birth. In other words,

unless you go through a natural birth and a supernatural rebirth by the Holy Spirit, you can't enter the kingdom of God.

I think those two interpretations are impossible. No one at the time Jesus spoke those words would have understood anything about Christian baptism. Christian baptism came later. No one in the ancient world ever referred to natural birth as coming by water.

The best explanation is that Jesus is not describing two different births, one of water and the other of the Spirit, but Jesus is describing one birth. The grammar suggests something like a spiritual-water birth. Literally Jesus is saying unless you experience a spiritual-water birth you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What is that about? The background for Jesus' statement is found in a prophetic word spoken by the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is prophesying a day when God will come and restore the nation of Israel. He's going to take the dead, dry bones of Israel, and he's going to raise them up. Here's what we read in Ez. 36.25, *I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you of all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

God is promising a day when people will be sprinkled, as it were, with water. He's talking about the refreshing pouring out of the Holy Spirit. We'll be cleansed. We'll be given a new heart. We'll receive a new nature.

How does it happen? How do you get this stuff? Jesus says in v. 6, *Flesh gives birth to flesh. But the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.* Total renovation of the soul, a new heart, a new life doesn't happen as a result of gradual evolution, becoming a better and better and better person so that one day you become a totally new person. You don't grow into new life by making little changes. I'm going to work on my temper and then I'm going to work on my money management. Then I'm going to get a personal trainer and lose some weight. This radical change that Jesus is talking about is not the gradual evolution of the self. *Flesh gives birth to flesh. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit.* Jesus is saying we reproduce in kind. Your dog will not give birth to a kitten. Your parakeet will not hatch a goldfish.

The new birth is entirely beyond the capacities of the flesh. In other words, what he is talking about is totally beyond human capabilities. Self help is no help when it comes to getting the life that God intends for us. We human beings in our own strength and our abilities and through our own efforts cannot produce spiritual lives in ourselves. Only the Holy Spirit can produce this radical remaking. V. 7-8. *You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again.* Three times he says, you must be born again, you must be born again, you must be born again. V. 8, *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You may hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

Only the Holy Spirit can produce this new life. There's a mystery in the new birth. It is like the wind, which is always a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In fact, that same word was used for spirit and wind in the Hebrew Old Testament. And the same word is used of Spirit and wind in the Greek New Testament. Jesus is saying only the Holy Spirit can produce new life but there is a mystery in new life. It is like the wind. We don't understand the Holy Spirit any more than we understand the wind.

See, you and I may not understand the reasons why the Spirit blows into someone's life. And you and I will not understand God's decision when to blow his Spirit into someone's life. But you can tell the effects. You can tell if the wind is blowing as you see paper moving along the ground, or dust kicking up, or as you watch leaves rustle, or you feel pressure against your face. You know the wind is blowing by its effects.

And you can tell that the Holy Spirit has given new life in Christ to someone because you see the effects. A person who gets new life in Christ is not instantly made perfect. I think Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sums up what it looks like when a person gets new life in Christ. Shortly before he was assassinated, Dr. King was speaking in Los Angeles and he quoted from an old slave preacher who said, "We ain't what we ought to be. And we ain't what we want to be. We ain't what we're going to be. But thank God we ain't what we was." We ain't what we was.

See, the issue of the new birth is not do you remember the exact moment that the wind began to blow. Some Christians put so much emphasis on being able to tie

down the exact moment when you are born again. The issue is not can you tie down the exact moment when you are born again. The issue is do you see the effects in your life of the wind blowing? You must see life change. You must.

So let me ask you a personal question. Do you see a change in your life that cannot be explained naturally but can only be explained by the activity of God's Spirit. In other words, is there anything about you that can only be explained by the direct intervention of God? Is there anything about you that can't be explained by the family you were raised in, can't be explained by your education, can't be explained by your talents or your experiences, or your intelligence? Is there anything about you that demands a supernatural explanation? There is no other way to explain it, other than that the Holy Spirit has blown into you and given you new life.

If you say you cannot point to anything definitively in which you can say, "Here is the evidence of the Holy Spirit remaking me, here's the evidence, I see it. Here's the evidence of the Holy Spirit renewing me. Here's the evidence of the Holy Spirit giving me a new heart, pouring spiritual water over me," then what is it you can do?

I want to close with vv. 14-15, *Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, Jesus is referring to an Old Testament story from Numbers 21 in which the Israelites were dying of a plague that

resulted from them being bitten by poisonous snakes. Moses was instructed by God to make a serpent of bronze and set it on a pole. Whoever looked at the bronze serpent was healed. So Jesus says, just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, I [Jesus] must be lifted up on the cross, so that everyone who looks to me in faith can receive life that will heal the night inside of them.

Here is the wonderful statement of the good news of Jesus Christ. Today, if you look to Jesus Christ and you recognize that his death on the cross is the source of eternal life for you, if you put your trust in him, full trust in him, and say, “Today, Lord, give me life, a life worth living,” Christ will do that. Let’s pray.