

How to Go to Heaven

By Bobby Schuller

Today we're beginning a series called DIY. DIY is super hot right now. It means "do it yourself." We're going to do a series on the basics of Christianity and how to just be a normative Christian that's following Jesus. How to read your Bible, how to pray, how to practice the spiritual disciplines. And one of the reasons I picked this is I think like very often we think that because I was born in a Christian family, or because most of my friends are Christian, or because I go to church on Sunday, that that's enough. That I have enough, and I'm doing enough. And then very often in the midst of that we wonder why our lives feel empty. And that's because you got to do it yourself. No one can follow Jesus for you! And that's what we're going to talk about today, and all the other stuff, it doesn't matter if you're not saved.

And so today I want to just, you know, you guys know me. I'm here to convert you 100%. I want you to become a Christian, like, and if you're here today and you're not a believer, I'm going to give you the opportunity today to stand for Jesus. All joking aside, it is just so important. It's the most important decision you can make in your life.

And before we get into any of those other questions, like how do I read my Bible, how do I practice the disciplines, how do I pray, you have to answer the question – how do I go to heaven? And the answer is so

simple: you just trust your life to Jesus. If you're friends with Jesus, He's going to let you in. It's so simple. And we tend to take this gift that God gave us, such a simple gift, and make it complex and worry about it, and you shouldn't have any worry in the world. If you've trusted your life to Jesus Christ, in spite of your mistakes and your flaws, and your doubting, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. If you proclaimed Him Lord of your life, that's enough. He'll let you in.

We're going to talk about that today. Because I want you to leave here.. maybe you've been a believer your whole life and you're struggling and you're worried. I'm surprised many people, especially my parents generation, really worry – am I really saved? And then there's other people here who say 'I've been going to church and I want to become a Christian, but I don't know how.' My hope is that you'll leave here with full blessed assurance that your destiny is at home with Jesus Christ in heaven.

Well one of the reasons I wanted to talk about this, as well, is because it's the 500 year anniversary of Martin Luther, the great rebel of Christianity. Can I just tell you something? Maybe you're here today and you think I don't know if this Christian faith thing is for me. I'm kind of a black sheep or a rogue or a rebel. Can I just tell you those are Jesus' favorite people. When you look in the Bible, He's going to prostitutes and tax collectors and hoodlums and thieves and He's just a friend of sinners.

And you come here today and I can't wait till I get to heaven and see all the people that aren't supposed to be there. You're going to get there and you're going to be like you're here? Right? You'll be like.. whoa. And then you're going to be like where's Aunt Mabel? She was the one always telling everybody they were going to go to hell. Where is she? Aunt Mabel will be in heaven, too. She'll just be washing the feet of Job.

And that's true, by the way. That the kingdom of God is an upside down kingdom. That it's a kingdom of grace, one in which rebels and rogues and outsiders are called and chosen. It doesn't mean that God wants us to sin or to do evil. He wants us to lead moral and good lives, but it begins with grace. It begins with His power, because of humility. Anyone who loses his life for my sake will gain it. Anyone who humbles himself will be exalted. That's the kingdom of God.

And so I want to start with Martin Luther because one of the reasons I picked this was it's the 500.. well recently it was the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation. Which was not only good for the church, it was good for the whole world. I mean a lot of people point to the Protestant Reformation as the beginning of the renaissance. It was important because Martin Luther was a German monk, who by the way had no intent to break up the church. His dream was to change the church and reform it, or really to bring it back to an early church type model.

Into this world, Martin Luther was born into a Catholic church that was highly institutional, much more than it is today. It was a nation state with a standing army, with a king, the Pope, that would wage war, that would execute people, and it had gotten to a place where everyday Roman Catholics lived in terror. Now Catholics in those days were not worried about hell, they were worried about this made up thing called purgatory. It's not in the Bible, it's not a real thing, but there was this tradition that developed that Christians, who were baptized, still had to go to like a temporary type hell to get clean. And so if you didn't live a holy life, you had to still burn for a few thousand years before you could to go heaven.

And in those times, there was these things called indulgences. If you gave the Catholic church money, you could spring your family members out of purgatory. How great is that? And so here is Martin Luther trying to understand this as a monk and in theological training, and finally because he's in seminary, he gets his hands on the first Bible he's ever seen and he says wait a second, he said the first time he read the gospel of Romans, and saw that we're not saved through indulgences or penance or through priests or popes or institutions or organizations, we're saved through the death and resurrection of one person, the King of king and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, who calls that all beloved children come boldly before His throne. If that were true, he said he would jump on a table and dance and sing a jig.

And he had this wonder as he read the gospel in Romans and in the Bible, what if this is true, that we're not saved by what we do, we are saved by what Christ did for us. And that that alone cleanses us and gives us rogues and rebels and sinners the freedom in the midst of our mistakes and our struggles to just know that no priest can save me, no institution can save me, no pastor can save me, no mom or dad or anyone can save me. The only one who could save me is Christ and He already did it. And if I proclaim that over my life, and if I'm baptized into that reality, I don't need to worry at all. And if I believe and know that God loves me as His beloved son or beloved daughter, and then built my life as a response to that, good works and deeds and things, well then I'm living a life pleasing for God.

So I just want to say to you friends, even if you don't believe in God, He loves you so much. He's just so proud of you, He loves you. He wants you to know Him personally.

So today, if you're going to talk about how to go to heaven, you got to read John 3:16, right? John 3:16, you all know it because you watch NFL. It's the fat guy in the end zone with the shirt off and the paint, and he's holding a sign, because he believes that somehow if you see him holding a John 3:16 sign, even though it's a Vikings emblem on his chest, you're going to get saved. I can't wait to meet the first person that actually got saved through that, because it's all worth it. You guys know what John 3:16 says, right, let's say it together: "For God so loved the

world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

So this word was from the evangelist John, giving a commentary on a story held between a super rich powerful religious guy who was coming to Jesus and wanted to know how to inherit the kingdom of heaven. It goes a little like this. It's a bit long so I'll sort of paraphrase it.

First, let me tell you about Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who we paint them poorly sometimes, but they weren't altogether bad guys, they were the pastors of their day. But the Pharisees oversaw the law of the Jews. The word Pharisee means separated. Separated. So you see right there there's like.. we hold everyone at a distance. We are holy, and you are not. And this group was called the Chaburah. Everybody say Chaburah with a guttural. Chaburah means the brotherhood, so they're tight. There's six thousand maximum, very tight, very protective of their ideas.

Over this group of six thousand people, was a governing council of 70 men, usually older, the best rabbis in the group call the Sanhedrin. Everybody say Sanhedrin. And the Sanhedrin is a jury, a group of judges who oversee the theological teachings, beliefs and doctrines of the Jewish people.

So the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin want to make sure that every single law is obeyed. Now when we think of the law, we think of the Ten Commandments. I mean the Ten Commandments is beautiful! I love the

Ten Commandments. But when they talk about the law, it's much more than that. It's not just the six hundred or so levitical commandments, it's also the Mishnah, which is a commentary on these laws about how to do or not do certain things. And let me tell you, if you think that Pentecostal or Catholic church you grew in was legalistic, you ain't seen nothing! Nothing compared to first century Judaism.

Let me give you a small example of what Nicodemus had to teach and regulate as a member of the Sanhedrin court. This is from the Mishnah. Now in the Mishnah, which was the commentary, again, on the law, there were 24 chapters just on how to obey Sabbath. Twenty four chapters! So in this portion I'll show you, they're struggling on whether tying a knot or not tying a knot is considered working on the Sabbath.

And this is what they started out: "The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty. The knot of camel drivers and that of sailors. And as one is guilty by reason of tying them, don't forget, so also untying them. On the other hand, knots tied with one hand are legal. A woman may tie up a slip of her girdle, the straps or shawls of her sandals, or slits of wine and oil."

Okay, did you catch that? So its working on Sabbath if you tie a knot with two knots, as in like your camel, a horse, or a boat, but it's not work if all you're doing is opening a bag of wine, if you're tying your shoes, or if you're tying your girdle, being a lady. So what happens is.. now this is a real case. Some guy wants to draw water from the well on

Sabbath, but he can't tie a double knotted tie, right, because that's working on the Sabbath. So he takes his girlfriend's girdle, ties one end of the rope with one hand, and the other end of the rope with the other hand, and lowers the box using a girdle to draw water. That's real, by the way. And that's okay but the other is not.

Now here you see what religiosity and legalism does. Why did God command us to have a Sabbath? Because He loves us! He's like just take a day off. Take a day off. Don't work for one day, okay? Just take a day off and don't buy or sell anything. It's so simple! And then what happens – religious people come in and write twenty-four chapters on what counts as working. He's like you took a non work day and made it the biggest work day of the week! You turned it around! You made it a curse! Isn't that what religious people do? We do that. Take a day off. Okay, we'll write 24 chapters and we're going to be worried and we're going to..

And so when you talk about the ridiculousness of using a girdle to lower a bucket into a well, this is what people in the first century believed was life and death! This is what Nicodemus had to oversee. He had to go and judge whether or not using your girlfriend's girdle to lower it into the water was okay or not, whether you were guilty or not.

And what you see in the story is a man who is longing for God. Nicodemus wants to know God, he wants to be close to God, he's doing it the way he's been told to do it, but something is missing. Something is

empty. His religion, his rules about one handed and two handed knots, and all the other rubbish, it doesn't mean anything to him.

And then Jesus comes and His disciples are like eating kernels on the Sabbath like it's no big deal, and He does miracles on the Sabbath, and he sees something in Jesus that he's never gotten from these rules. He sees freedom. He sees the kingdom of God among us. And so he wants to know more about it, and that's when we get to John chapter three.

It says that there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. That's the Sanhedrin. He came to Jesus at night and said, picture it, it's at night. Did you catch that? When nobody would see. Snuck out. Put his coat on. I wonder if he wrestled on his way there because remember the Pharisees hate Jesus. He's wrestling, should I really talk to Him or not? And then he starts with "Rabbi." Saying you're a teacher. You're called from God. He says, "He came to Jesus at night and said 'Rabbi, we know you're a teacher who's come from God for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with Him.' Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.' 'How can someone be born when they are old,' asked the old man. 'Surely they cannot enter second time into their mother's womb to be born.'" There is Nicodemus, making it too complicated.

“Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and of Pneuma.’” Pneuma, it means both wind and spirit or soul or breath. It’s the same in Hebrew. Ruach is a wind or breath or spirit. In other words, when Adam and Eve were made, God breathed His life into them. And so it’s like in order to be saved, I need to receive that the very air I breathe is the Lord. He says, “flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You 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.”

Nicodemus just doesn’t understand. He looks at Jesus and he says, how can this be? And Jesus says, you’re Israel’s teacher and you don’t understand these things? “Very truly I tell you we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen.” Jesus is saying I’ve seen heaven. “But still you people do not accept our testimony. I’ve spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things. No one’s ever gone to heaven except the one who has come from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Now this is important: “just as Moses..” just a quick break here. In the Torah, the most important part of the Bible for Jews, there’s this story where God tells Moses to make an image of a snake, which is already weird because the law says not to make graven images of any living thing. And so there’s like a rule broken here where a snake is

supposed to be made, I think out of bronze and placed on a rod and held up, and anyone who looks upon this image is healed miraculously. And this is what Jesus says: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so will the Son of Man be lifted up. That everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him.” Do you see that image of the cross, that anyone who looks to the cross receives salvation from the Lord. And that’s all they need! That’s all they need! That’s it. To fix our eyes upon the cross and nowhere else.

And then it comes, and this is John’s words: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him won’t even perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” What good news is that. God is not here to condemn you! There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you don’t have to worry about laws, about breaking rules, about being perfect, you just do your best and forget the rest.

You think about these powerful words to somebody like Nicodemus who’s like it’s not the law, it’s the spirit of the law, it’s being born of wind and water. Wow. What would that be like? Instead of regulating everybody’s girdles all the time what if you were born of wind and water – a new life.

And you don't see in this text yet what happens to Nicodemus. But you do see later on that when Jesus is brought on trial before the Sanhedrin, it's Nicodemus who stands up and says you guys, you let Him speak now. He stands up for Christ. And when Jesus is actually crucified, He's the one who pays for the embalming. We don't have much more information in the Bible from that, but the apocryphal stuff tells us that he ended up being in the twilight of his life in his 70's or 80's, maybe, just getting saved, he ended up being one of the most powerful men of God. There's some speculation even from modern historians that this Nicodemus is the same Nicodemus ben Gurion, who's in the Talmud that was acclaimed to be a miracle worker, who could go around healing the sick and raising the dead. I like to think that's true. Nicodemus is venerated, and rightly so in the Eastern Orthodox church.

Maybe you resonate with Nicodemus today. Maybe you're listening and you're like my whole religious experience has been bullies. It's been people telling me that I'm junk, I'm nothing, I'm a sinner, I'm worthless, that God can't wait to throw me in hell. Wow. But what does the scripture say? God so loved you that He gave His Son for you. That God thinks about you. God's looking at you even now, not with judgment, not with wrath, but with love and compassion, and I believe with the hope and expectation that you'll come and follow Him and know what it means to be born again, being born from above, to be born of water and of wind and of spirit.

That's what happened to me. I think like so many, I believed for so long that to be a believer was like a cultural thing. My dad was a pastor, my grandpa was a pastor, I'd certainly heard the gospel. But it was going into a totally different tradition, which is what I think I needed, a bunch of Pentecostals at the convention center here in Anaheim full of 10,000 people worshipping God in a different way, I just wanted that. I remember before that, looking in the mirror and feeling empty on the inside and looking in my own eyes and thinking gosh, my eyes, I look empty. They say the eyes are the window to the soul and I remember looking in my own reflection, just feeling like there wasn't anything there.

It was at that event that I decided no, I'm going to know Jesus personally. No one can know Jesus for me. No one can live as a disciple of Christ for me on my behalf. God wants to know me! And it was that realization and that decision about a year later, I remember after a night of worship and after I had received Christ, I looked in my own eyes and I saw a fire and life and passion that wasn't there before. And that's what the Lord wants for all of us.

So, how do we go to heaven? We proclaim the cross and the resurrection and receive the cleansing of sin and new life that we're made into a new creation. Very simply, we just say yes to Jesus. We don't make it too complicated and too difficult, and all the rights and rituals and things that we do sometimes, they're good, but at its heart, if you know Jesus, He's going to let you in.

So I think it's like this. You know, a lot of people say, and there is a hell. I mean a lot of people say how can a loving God send people to hell? And I don't have time to get into that, our understanding of hell is, I think, messed up a little bit, but there is a hell and I think that the reason that happens, it's a lot like the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was a throne of God, and if good, law abiding Jewish men or women touched the ark, they would die. And I think that when sin as a substance is on our spirit and we haven't received the cleansing of the cross, you just can't be in God's presence. It's like chemistry. And I actually believe, if you would get in a time machine, if a baptized Christian went and put his or her hand on the ark of the covenant, they'd be just fine. They'd actually probably receive a great touch from God. That's what I think. That's not in the Bible or anything, it's just Bobby, okay? It's just my own personal thing.

But God's created a way for all of us to receive that forgiveness. So if you want to go to heaven, you just must confess Jesus is your Lord and Savior. That's what Romans says.

Number two: seal it with baptism. Make a public confession before your friends and your family that this is for real; this is a hundred percent your decision and you want to do this.

And finally, and you've heard me say this before, as Christians, we confess our sins when we come to salvation and we should, but as saved believers, we ought to confess our righteousness. We ought to confess

our justification. Paul never once in the scripture tells us to confess our sins. Did you know that? James does one time, John does one time, and those are latter books. What Paul tells us is to confess our justification. He who knew no sin became sin so that we should be called what – sinners? No, that we should be called the righteousness of God! Wow! There is power in being the kind of person that when you're tempted to sin, to harm others, to steal, to do whatever it is that you struggle with, substance, that you proclaim not over yourself judgment and shame, and beat yourself up, but you proclaim He who knew no sin became sin, that I be the righteousness of God. Just say it. I'm the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, and proclaim it over your life. And that's for all believers.

Okay, I want to invite you to be a Christian. Every head up, everybody looking around. Everybody looking around, look at your neighbor, I want the anxiety to go really high right now. I'm going to invite you in a minute to stand. I'm not going to have anybody come down today. We'll just stand in our seats but I want the whole church, everybody, to see that today you're standing for Jesus. If you've done this before recently, you don't need to do today, but if this is your first decision or maybe after years of being away from the Lord, you want to come back, I'm going to invite you in a moment to stand.

Jesus tells us anyone who acknowledges before men, I'll acknowledge before my Father, but anyone who does not acknowledge me before men, I will not acknowledge before my Father. It's so

important. If we cannot stand up for God in a church, how are we going to stand up for God at work, at school, in the life that we're doing.

And so, I want to invite you now if today you want to become a Christian, I want you to stand just right where you are. I think, thank you guys, but keep standing. If today you want to become a believer, or maybe after years of not following God you want to get your life right, I want you to stand. I know that very often in times like this, the enemy will kind of tell you, just do it later. Just do it some other time. I'm not going to hold you here. I just want you to stand.

Hold your hands like this, and everybody, we're going to say this together, because we all need this: Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Because of the cross and resurrection, I am the righteousness of God. I am justified, forgiven, heaven is my home. Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life. Jesus, teach me your ways and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Heaven is my home, in Jesus' name, amen.

Let's give everybody who stood a hand. Thank you, friends.