

## **Watchman Nee**

### **(1903-1972)**

Watchman Nee (Ni Tosheng) was one of the great Christian leaders of the twentieth century. Like George Muller and Hudson Taylor before him, Nee sought a life of abandonment and faith that few know. Eventually he came to head up a dynamic movement of the Spirit known as the "Little Flock," which was one of the early efforts to forge an indigenous Chinese Christian witness independent of foreign missions and the traditional denominations. It flourished in the 1930s and 1940s with large gatherings of thousands in Shanghai and elsewhere. Perhaps it succeeded too well, for it was severely criticized by the more static missionary establishment.

In 1952 Watchman Nee was arrested by the Chinese Communist government on trumped-up charges and was sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment. The fifteen years were actually extended to twenty and in all those long years he never betrayed his Lord. On June 1, 1972, while still in prison, he passed into the welcoming presence of God.

Like all of us, Nee made mistakes. Most notably, his "one locality, one church" principle led him into separatism and a denunciation of all churches other than his own, and this inevitably caused deep division in the Christian community. On the other hand, his use of vocational migration evangelism – in which every believer was viewed as an unpaid worker, and the home of every person moving to a new city became a place of prayer and a fresh center of witness – was sheer genius.

Leslie Lyall wrote of Watchman Nee, "When the history of the Chinese church comes to be written it will be impossible to ignore the life and work of an outstanding leader whose influence will last and whose legacy may well be a Christian fellowship (Little Flock) which will survive the fires of persecution and the attempts being made to destroy the Christian church in China" (in the foreword to Angus I. Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee*, Fort Washington, PA, Christian Literature Crusade, 1973, p. ix).

## WHAT SHALL THIS MAN DO?

### *Leading the Individual Soul to Christ*

How do people press into the Kingdom? We have considered at some length how a preacher of the Gospel needs to be personally prepared in spirit for the task. But what of the hearers? What is the minimum requirement in the sinner if he or she is to find the Lord and be saved? This question now claims our attention, for it is as important for us to know what we are attempting to do as it is for us to be prepared in spirit to do it.

In the discussion which follows we can only deal with a single point in the preaching of the Gospel. I take it for granted that you know the facts of redemption through the atoning death of Christ, and that you are also born of the Spirit. I assume also that you know how to present those facts clearly and with power. I am concerned here not with the substance of your preaching, but rather with the principles that should guide in the actual task of leading the individual soul to Christ.

What is necessary for a person to be saved? How can a person be prevailed upon to come to the door of the Kingdom and enter? How do we bring people who have only the absolute minimum of knowledge or desire for God into a living touch with Him? These are our questions, and I am going to lay down four guiding principles that will, I hope, be found to go a long way towards answering them.

### *A Threefold Provision, and One Condition Demanded*

God has made, from His side, a threefold provision for every person in that person's hour of crisis: Firstly, Jesus has come as the Friend of sinners; secondly, it is He personally (and no intermediary) whom we are called to meet; and thirdly, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, to bring to pass in us the initial work of conviction of sin, repentance, and faith, and, of course, all that follows. Then, finally, from the side of the sinner, one condition and one only is demanded. We are *not* required – *in the first place* – to believe, or to repent, or to be conscious of sin, or even to know that Christ died. We are required only to approach the Lord with an honest heart.

This last statement may at first startle you, but as we go on, I think you will see how helpful it is. We will, however, take these points in order, beginning from the side of God's provision.

### *The Friend of Sinners*

In the Gospels the Lord Jesus is presented as the Friend of sinners, for historically He was found, first of all, moving among the people as their Friend before He became their Savior. But do you realize that today He is still in the first place our Friend, in order that He may become our Savior?

It is clear from the New Testament that the Lord Jesus came as a Friend, *in order to help sinners to come to Him*. Our coming to Him was made possible by His first coming to us. At the hour of crisis there are many practical difficulties that face the sinner. For example, in the Scriptures we are often told to believe. The Word lays stress on the necessity of faith. But you say, "I have not got faith." A girl once said to me, "I can't believe. I would like to believe but I can't! It is no use; I haven't got it in me. The desire is there, but I find faith lacking. It is *impossible* to believe." "That is all right," I said, "You can't believe. But you can ask the Lord to *give* you faith. He is prepared to help you to that extent. You pray: 'Lord, help Thou my unbelief.'"

### *What the Savior Is at Hand to Do*

Or again, the Word tells us that we are to repent. What if we have no desire whatever to repent? I met a student once who said it was too early for him to come to the Lord. He wanted more time in which to taste the pleasures of sin and to enjoy himself. He said to me, "The thief on the cross was saved, but he had his fling, and it was high time that he repented. But I – I am young." "Well, what do you want to do?" I asked him. He replied, "I want to wait another forty years and have a good time, and then I will repent."

So I said, "Let us pray." "Oh, I can't pray," he answered. "Yes, you can," I said. "You can tell the Lord all you have told me. He is the Friend of unrepentant sinners like you." "Oh, I couldn't say *that* to Him." "Why not? Whatever is in your heart, you tell it to Him. He will help you." Finally he prayed, and told the Lord that he did not want to repent and be saved, but that he knew he needed a Savior; and he just cried to Him for help. The Lord worked repentance in him and he got up a saved man.

I repeat these incidents just to emphasize that what the sinner cannot do the Savior is at hand to do for him. It is for this reason that we can tell people that they need not wait for anything, but can come to Him immediately. Whatever their state, whatever their problem, let them bring it and tell it to the Friend of Sinners.

### *Meeting Christ*

What is salvation? Many think that to be saved we must first believe that the Lord Jesus died for us, but it is a strange fact that nowhere in the New Testament does it say precisely that. We are told to believe *in* Jesus, or to believe *on* Him; not to believe *that* He *died* for us. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," were Paul's words. We are to believe first of all in *Him*; not specifically in what He has done.

I *do* believe in the necessity of His atonement. I trust you will not misunderstand me therefore when I say that the appreciation of that work may not be the *first* step in the sinner's initial contact with the Lord. That appreciation must follow, but the main question is whether or not we have the Son, and not, first of all, whether or not we understand the whole plan of salvation. The first condition of salvation is not knowledge, but *meeting* Christ.

I have come to see that all that is needed for the *initial* step is that there should be a personal touch with God, and when that is so the rest will surely follow. It does not matter, therefore, which verses God elects to use for that first step. After all, we do not need to study the theory of electricity and to understand it thoroughly before we can turn on the electric light. The light does not say, "I am not going to shine for you, for you know nothing of the principle on which I work." And God does not set understanding as the condition of our approach to Him. "This is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

### *It Only Requires a Touch*

Let us take three examples from the Gospels. First, the thief on the cross. When he asked the Lord to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom, Jesus did not remind him of his evil life, nor did He explain the plan of redemption – no, the Lord had only one answer: "Today you shall be with me in paradise." The thief recognized who Jesus was, and he *believed in the Lord*, and that was enough.

Consider the woman who was bleeding and was trying to touch Jesus. There were many pressing in on Him, but only one was healed. She was healed because with a special intention she "touched" Him. And it only required a touch; for in her it represented a reaching out in spirit to God for help in her deep need.

Or recall the incident of the Pharisee and the publican at prayer in the temple. The Pharisee understood all about offerings and sacrifices and tithes, but there was from him no cry of the heart to God. But the publican cried out, "Lord have mercy upon me!" Something went out from him to God which met with an immediate response, and the Lord Jesus singles him out as the one whom God reckoned as righteous. For what is it to be reckoned

righteous? It is *to touch God*. That is why our first object must be to lead people to meet Him.

### *A Cry From the Heart*

We have said that a cry to God from the heart is sufficient. Because the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all mankind, a cry is enough. I always believe that the Holy Spirit is *upon* a person when I preach to that person. I do not mean that the Spirit is *within* the hearts of unbelievers, but that He is outside. What is He doing? He is waiting, waiting to bring Christ into their hearts. He is like the light. Open the window-shutters even a little, and it will flood in and illuminate the interior. Let there be a cry from the heart to God, and *at that moment* the Spirit will enter and begin His transforming work of conviction and repentance and faith.

Perhaps the biggest condition of success in bringing people to Christ is to remember that the same Holy Spirit, who came to our help in the hour of darkness, is at hand waiting to enter and illumine their hearts also, and to make good the work of salvation to which, in crying to God, they have opened the door.

### *Not a Question of Points*

We come now to the single requirement demanded from us. Quite often people preach the Gospel to a person by using a number of "points," only to find that the next day the person will say, "I have forgotten the third point. What was it?" Salvation is not a question of *points!* Salvation is not even a question of understanding or of will. It is, as we have seen, a question of meeting God – of people coming into first-hand contact with Christ the Savior. So what, you ask me, is the minimum requirement in a person to make that contact possible?

The basic condition of a sinner's salvation is not belief or repentance, but just honesty of heart towards God. God requires nothing of us except that we come in that attitude. For it is a *fact* of the Gospel, making possible the initial touch with Jesus Christ, that saves the sinner, and not the sinner's understanding of it.

## BIBLE SELECTION

Mark 5:25-34 (NRSV)

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

## BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus, touch (insert name)..."

(Exhale) "... in his/her deep need of your friendship."

## JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Reflecting on your journey to faith in Christ, which of the three provisions of God – the friendship of God, the personal touch of Christ, or the convicting work of the Spirit – was the most significant for you? Describe how this provision played a pivotal role in your spiritual journey.
2. In his teachings, Watchman Nee aimed to enhance our effectiveness in sharing our faith with others. What aspects of his teachings do you find helpful as you endeavor to draw people to Christ?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Pray for God to guide you to individuals who are in need of knowing Jesus as their Friend. Following Nee's advice, allow Jesus to meet them exactly where they are. Share with them that Jesus is their Friend, who understands their lack of faith and their lack of desire to repent.

## REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

*Watchman Nee was a great evangelist. He was a faithful witness to Jesus Christ through years of abounding and years of abasement. In twenty years of imprisonment he never betrayed his Lord. He endured to the end as seeing Him who is invisible.*

*Throughout his life Nee retained a passion that people would meet Jesus. I like that. It becomes easy in our sophistication to miss the simplicity of inviting people to Jesus Christ. We do not need elaborate plans or erudite speeches. We need only love.*

Excerpts taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.)