

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Win the Day – So What?

Dr. Dick Foth

Hello again, NCC friends. There you are and here I am and one of these days I get to be back with you, Lord willing. But it's great to be with you to talk about something that's been on my heart for some time and it has to do with this idea of what we believe about what really matters. And one of the things that matters is Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever. And I know Pastor Mark just came out with this book on 'Win the Day' it was part of it. And I called him and said, "You know, I had that idea before you did it." I didn't but I just tossed that out there just to be cute. And I just want to be able to share these thoughts with you and hopefully they'll be an encouragement in a day when we're grappling with a lot of different things. Hopefully, this will be an encouragement. God bless.

So I'm a 28 year old church planter, sitting in my office, about a mile from the University of Illinois, the year is 1970. Like now the world was in upheaval, there were riots and protests and all kinds of cultural things going on in society. And I was about to be taught a lesson that I've carried to this day. It began when my telephone rang. When I answered it, the voice on the other end had a challenge in it. And the challenge was framed as a question. And I'll come back to that just a little bit.

I want to talk to you about the one thing that matters in life. The one thing that matters that shapes virtually everything else is what I believe. You say, "About what?" Oh, about everything. What we believe determines what we do, how we act. It's simple as that. What we believe is the engine that powers virtually everything, all of my actions in all of my life, with all of my life, through all of my life.

We're looking back at this year 2020 what high drama, what crazy dynamics from March until this very moment and it's been framed by what people believe. What people have believed about the pandemic about the virus politics, economics, masking, vaccines, all of those things, and what's true and what's not true. So, where does that believe engine live? Well, the believe engine lives right here in the five and a half inches between my ear and this three pound thing called my brain, which is about the size of my two fists together and if you were to take my skull off it'd look like a walnut. And there are 100 billion neurons and a trillion supporting cells, and it needs oxygen, 2% of my body mass, but 20% of my blood supply needs to fuel that every second of every day. It's my whole world all of my thoughts, all of my feelings, all of my perceptions run right from here. So the question is what should I believe? If I was in DC, I'd say thanks for asking. How about let's believe what's true. The question of this hour or any other is from creation until this moment is what is true.

In a few weeks, I begin my next step in the grand adventure. I'll have my 79th birthday and will begin my 80th trip around the sun as I like to say it. And looking back on my prior 79 trips, I've discovered a number of things to be true. Like, when I was a kid, I found out that mothers do actually have eyes in the

back of their heads. Or you can't hide broccoli and a glass of milk, it's a failure. As I grew, I got more realistic about what's true. I found that gravity always works the same way; that two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen is water; that unless I choose alone for solitude, alone becomes lonely, and it's a toxic place. I know it's true that we're designed for relationships, and that life is insipid, without them. But for our purposes in these three messages, two crucial truths, one from Scripture and one from my experience. The one from Scripture is this, many of you know it. *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."* That comes from Hebrews the 13th chapter. Hebrews is toward the back of the New Testament toward the end, and it was written to Hebrews to Jewish believers that is thought. We don't know who the author was, but the audience probably, are the Diaspora scattered Jewish believers across the Middle East, and they're under persecution. And the message of Hebrews is this; Jesus is superior to everything else, to things, to systems, to programs, to other people. He is the complete truth. He's the once for all sacrifice for our sins. He's the ultimate priest King. He's the builder of all creation. He is the greatest glory, and the greatest humility. And right there at chapter 11, it says, you really need to believe this. We call it the faith chapter. And you come to chapter 13 and it's fascinating. What the late Paul Harvey would call potpourri page four. And it's just a collection of practical instructions on attitudes, hospitality, money, sex and marriage, solid teaching and leadership.

And then right in the middle of that passage in chapter 13, you get this - Hebrews 13:7 & 8, <sup>7</sup>*"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.* Imitate what they believe, that's the operational word - believe. And then <sup>8</sup>*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."* That's the foundational thing I came to believe as a seven year old missionary kid. I tell people I gave as much as I understood it myself to as much as I could understand of Jesus and that started my journey and looking back for 71 years. Since then, I found that to be absolutely true.

The second thing I believe is from my experience, and some of you have heard me say this before. Life is what happens when you expected something else. That's what it is. Life is what happens when you expected something else. So I'm going to approach yesterday, today and tomorrow, this way with three other questions. About yesterday, I'm going to say so what? Today, now what? And forever, what if? Just a little perspective.

In the late 60's and through the 70's, when Ruth and I lived in Urbana, Illinois, near the University of Illinois, I loved going to their football games, but the fighting Illini then were terrible team, my whole 11 years but at least they had a tremendous band and so I'd go to their games. And one day, a high school backfield football coach, Paul McGarvey, who's still living now he's about 93 years old, wonderful, dear friend said, "Let's go to the game." I went, he said, "Let's sit in the end zone." I said, "I want to sit at the 50 yard line. Why would we sit at the end zone?" He said, "Because when you sit in the end zone, you can see the plays open up, you can see how the teams are thinking and what they're doing." And so, for these messages, I want to sit in the end zone and see how things open up from God's perspective.

So yesterday, reflecting on yesterday, and the question is, "So what?" My whole life with the exception of this moment is yesterday. William Faulkner, the writer, Southern writer of some years ago said, "The past is not dead. It's not even the past." And some of you are saying, "Well, that's not good news." Well, you know, some of us wish to forget the past. Others of us wish to live there again. And neither of those actions makes me healthy. You say, "Yeah, but there's good and bad and ugly back there and I don't like that." Well, when you reflect on the past, you put the bad in its place. And you get to revel in the good, and that's delightful.

But let's look back at a moment in Israel's history that changed everything for them. I think it's a good metaphor for me, for us in this moment. It centers on a fellow about my current age. His name was Moses. Moses, as a baby survived a kill order by an Egyptian Pharaoh. He was brought up and trained in Pharaoh's palace. He became a leader of people and of the nation. And then in the fit of anger, when he was about 40, he killed a guy and had to run for his life and ended up instead of leading people leading sheep for the next 40 years, for Pete's sake. And in Exodus three and four he has this moment where there's a burning bush experience, literally. And he goes in the desert and there's a bush that's on fire, and it's not being consumed. And in that moment, the voice from the bush, as we'll see, calls him to literally save a nation, save a nation and later to give them the 10 commandments. He was the law giver.

Interestingly enough, Moses is central in America's history. If you were to walk with me into the US Capitol, which has been the focus of so much attention for several different reasons over the last weeks, if you walk into the house chambers, there are 23 marble relief images above the gallery doors. I think they're about 28 inches square. And they're of historical figures noted for their work in establishing principles that underlie America, America's laws, and its society. One of them is Moses, the law giver. So if you're sitting on the dais in the speaker's chair, and looking to the back door directly over that door, you're looking at Moses. Why is that meaningful? Well, for Moses, for example, what happened yesterday does matter. His yesterday when he's standing in front of the burning bush ain't great if I can say it that way and we are mostly yesterday. But if it's a bad thing that happened, I think the story says, it doesn't have to be the end of things. Sometimes we feel if we made a mistake yesterday it's a disqualifier. But God, Yahweh, he specializes in forgiveness and redemption, transformation, restoration so many of you watching this know that, you've experienced that.

So it's just a tremendous exchange between God and man. If you're, if you're a teenager, in negotiations with your parents, you need to read Exodus three and four. If you're in government, you need to read Exodus three and four. If you're in corporate America, read Exodus three and four. It's the great negotiation.

And Moses has a yesterday that haunts him but Yahweh, I am that I am, is going to give him a today to overwhelm that yesterday. This is how it reads, in Exodus, the third chapter. And God is saying to him I want you to go set the people free. <sup>10</sup> *So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the*

*Israelites out of Egypt.” Verse 11, chapter three, Exodus... "But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go (who am I) that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”<sup>12</sup> And God said, “I will be with you.” And then he goes on to explain how he will be with him. And Moses says<sup>13</sup> But “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” Cause there are a gazillion gods in that time and place. <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, “I am who I am. That is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”<sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”*

So there you have it the two great questions. Moses says, first one is, who am I? And the second one is, who are you? So who am I? Well, I'm a fusion of people and places and experiences. I am my yesterday, like we're talking about. You know, there aren't too many advantages; I give you this, to getting older there just aren't. But one of them is as you go on this journey, and hopefully start climbing to the heights a bit and get past your challenges even though you face new ones you're able to turn around and take a long look on occasion at what Louis L'Amour the western writer would call 'your back trail. You see the rivers crossed, deserts and quagmires endured, the places you wandered off the trail, and then you found it again. And you ponder the people and the places who are embedded there.

You have two parts to your back-story. You have your diary, which is events, its places that are on your calendar; you say on that date, something happened. And then you have your journal, which I think is the most important part, which is how you interpret that diary. For example, I'm six years old in 1948, with malignant malaria in South India, what they call in West Africa, Blackwater fever. It's a virulent kind of malaria that has a better chance of killing you than some other strains but it doesn't stay with you as long. And I had 106 degree temperature for three days and three nights. And one night, then there's a knocking on the door. And my mom goes to the door of this little place high up in the tea plantations, and a single lady missionary Anglican lady said, I was praying for Dickey and I thought, I should come here and pray. And she walks in, kneels down by my bed, my mother said, put her hand on me and prayed a simple prayer and left. And that night, my fever broke. I choose to interpret that experience through the eyes of the Most High God. And say God, Jesus was in that place at that time because he's the same yesterday, today and forever.

And I don't just have a story, I am a story. God knows about story - 42% of his book is story. So our story is yours and mine are our yesterday and Jesus was there. Yes, we can't change a minute of the past. But Jesus was there in the good times and the bad. I have scars. Yep. Jesus knows about scars. He has scars. That's who he is. And he's the Great I Am who saves me from being I was. He wraps me in his arms with his scarred hands with a grip like all eternity, and brings me into this moment.

So where and when did God I am that I am enter your story? Where was that? Because that's the place like Revelation 12:11 says that in this Great War between heaven and earth, *"they overcame by the*

*blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.*" This is what Jesus did on the cross and this is what he did in me. Those two pieces go together as a witness to the generations.

London, May 1742, a young 16 year old guy, Robert Robinson running with the wrong crowd happened to; I don't know if he stumbled into a service where a young 37 year old preacher was speaking, his name was George Whitfield. And he heard the good news about Jesus. Robert didn't respond then, it took three and a half years to respond. Some of us know how that works, right? And three and a half years later, he believed in that Jesus and three years after that, at age 22, he wrote the words to what has become one of my favorite hymns. It goes like this.

Come thou fount of every blessing  
Tune my heart to sing thy grace  
Streams of mercy never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise  
Teach me some melodious sonnet  
Sung by flaming tongues above  
I'll praise the mount I'm fixed upon it  
Mount of thy redeeming love

Here I raise my Ebenezer  
Hither by thy help I come  
And I hope by thy good pleasure  
Safely to arrive at home

Ebenezer means stone of help. It's where Samuel the Prophet after a big battle put up a stone that said, The Lord has helped us to this place. So I'm this young pastor in Illinois, we had Sunday night services then as well. I'm leading its back when you lead songs, and we're leading this song and a professor from the University of Illinois raised his hands when we got to that line about Ebenezer and said, "Excuse me". And I stopped folks singing. He said, "What the heck's in Ebenezer?" And I got to tell him about Samuel in this part. That's the first question - Who am I?

The second question is who are you? Yahweh answers in one phrase, I Am that I Am. That name leads them out of bondage to freedom. That name has a cadence like the beat of a drum. It has the haunting sound of a violin in the darkest night. I am that I am the most secure name in the universe. Clearly he's not a Western God that would be 'I do that I do' this is 'I am that I am'. The most stable when I need to stand firm, the most powerful when I feel overwhelmed with weakness, the most cleansing when I look at my scars. When you bring Jesus into your life, he brings with him the family name, I AM. Foth is my clan name, Richard is my identifier in that clan but when I step into Jesus, I get the family name. Richard, I Am Foth. You say is that on your driver's license? No, but it's in my heart. It's where my ID really is in my heart. So the moment in my story when that step was taken, might have been like yours.

It could be a baby step, it could be high drama. But it brought Jesus into my life, the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So I look at my yesterday and I say so what. When Jesus showed up, sin was gone, brokenness mended, a new life began. Can't change a minute of the bad, but he handles it. I wouldn't want to change a minute of the good that he gave me.

So more than 1,000 years before Jesus Moses 80 year old stuttering shepherd stands in front of a burning bush, where God showed himself to be real. 3,000 years later, I'm a 28 year old church planter sitting in my office. I'm a stutterer, still in Urbana, Illinois. And I had a moment where God showed up too when my telephone rang. I picked up the phone and it was voice on the other end said, "Mr. Foth?" I said, "Yes, sir". He said, "My name is Harry Snow. I believe you know, my son, John." His son, John, eight months before he had called from a fraternity saying that some crew guys that comes through there. And this is the spring of 1970, it's a crazy time when there's huge upheaval like there is now. And several guys had started following Jesus and it changed their lives. And he said, "My son's life has totally changed in the last eight months." And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "He says it's God, Mr. Foth." And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "What do you say?" I said, "I say, it's God." He said, "I want to talk to you." And he had this edge in his voice, and I'm thinking, "Oh, man." But then he said, I want you to come to my house for dinner. Well, when you put food on the table, even if you're scared, you're going. So I get in my car, and I go.

What I haven't told you about him is that he was a full professor of journalism at the University of Illinois. He'd won the Pulitzer Prize in 1963. He was a political cartoonist for the Boston Globe newspaper, and he was a Harvard fellow - real smart. And here, God takes this pipsqueak preacher 28 years old, and puts him in a car going this guy's house. He says, "Why don't we put the 28 year old stutterer in the home of the Pulitzer Prize winning author, and see how that works." Long story short, I had a wonderful Southern dinner, came out, sat in the front room, and Harry was sitting over there. And Martha was sitting over there, and John was sitting over there. And he turns to me and says, tell me about this God that John talks about. And I started telling him about I Am that I Am. I am the God who provides. I am the God who goes before you. I am the God who heals. I am the one who is the bright and morning star. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the one who forgives. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the beginning and the end. you know that God, I Am that I Am. And after I'd done that for a few moments, I just blurted out, do you want to know him? And he turns to me and says, without batting an eye, "I would". And it threw me off because I was used to doing the church thing people raising their hands. I had never done this in my in my life. And I said, well, "Let's do that." He said, "How do we do that?" I said, "Let's pray."

And the stutterer says to the Pulitzer Prize winning author, "Would you, would you like me to help you?" And he said, "I would." "I'm gonna say some phrases," I said, "And you follow me." And I said, "Dear God." He said, "Dear God," "You know my heart." "You know my heart." "You know my anger."

"You know my anger." Because the people at that time the kids had spit on everything this man stood for. "You know my rage." "You know my rage." "Forgive me of my anger." "Forgive me of my anger." "Forgive me of my sin." "Forgive me of my sin." "Make me a new man." "Make me a new man." "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus." "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Amen." And I looked up at him and he wasn't looking at me he was looking at his boy and tears were streaming down his face and he got up and he started toward his boy. They met right in front of me and threw their arms around each other and I'm just watching. And they just held each other and wept. And then he pushed his boy away. And he looked at me and said, "Dick, do you understand what's happening here tonight?" I said, "I think I do, Harry, but why don't you tell me." And then the Pulitzer Prize winning author came out. He said, "I believe that 2,000 years ago, God gave His Son to me but tonight, my son gave me God." Then I start bawling. I get up and I put my arms around him and a few years later, he went to be with that Jesus that he had believed in, the Great I Am. He had found out that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever and it was real to him. When you follow the Great I Am he leads you places you never dreamed you could go. He gives you ideas you never thought you could have and he gives you friends and family that last forever. That's what I believe. God bless you.