

“THE RIGHT TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD”

Jn 1:4-13; Jn 3:1-21; I Jn 1:5-7

I. DARKNESS DWELLERS LOST

- A. John the Baptist witnesses: “darkness did not comprehend;” Nicodemus (wealthy Pharisee, member Sanhedrin) illustrates man’s spiritual plight
- B. Darkness represents Ignorance (not knowing truth), derailing belief; how revealing that most crimes (theft, murder, adultery) occur in darkness; Nicodemus came at night—why?
 - 1. **Invincible** Ignorance—explainable? excusable? how rightly judged?
 - a. Personal: inherited IQ, mental capacity; biological maturity (“age of accountability)
 - b. Cultural—nurtured/enculturated: familial biases; cultural perspectives; superstitious religions—barbarous practices of Aztecs, Iroquois, Hurons et al.
 - 2. **Slothful** Ignorance—needs rightful remediation (via education, experience)
 - a. Personal—too lazy to research, think, especially re divine realities; procrastination
 - b. Cultural
 - 1. Acquired patterns of acquiescence (e.g. scientists et al. in USSR)
 - 2. Acknowledging and following “authorities” without examination
 - 3. **Willful** Ignorance—needs repentance
 - a. Personal—unwilling to open mind (e.g. physicists re Big Bang implications; biologists (e.g. Richard Dawkins & Richard Lewontin) re Design; abortionists re fetal development
 - b. Cultural—political (Maoist) & sociological (speech codes) propaganda; well-funded disinformation (e.g. USSR endeavors);
 - 4. **Vincible** Ignorance—thus hopefully preaching Gospel (lighting candle in darkness)
 - a. Personal—Nicodemus ultimately embraced Light
 - b. Cultural—Barbarians converted by Christian missionaries throughout centuries
- C. Darkness also represents worldliness (loving lesser goods than God)—I Jn 2:16 re antichrists’s lies
 - 1. Lust of the flesh—carnal indulgences (lust; gluttony)
 - 2. Lust of the eyes—curiosity without humility
 - 3. Pride of life—self-sovereign commitment to one’s own way (“I did it my way”)
- D. Final Judgment: Impenitent Unbelievers perish amidst evil deeds

II. LIGHT-LOVERS SAVED

- A. John the Baptist proclaims—Light has come; St Paul’s conversion & ministry illustrate
- B. Light represents awakening to reality, coming alive to truth
 - 1. Helpful analogies
 - a. Plato’s cave re education potential
 - b. “Aha” light-bulb moments—class discussions; children’s awakening
 - 2. New Birth via power (from above, Jn 1:13) of Spirit (elusive/mysterious as wind blowing, Jn 3:8)
 - a. Not of blood—ancestry, aristocracy (thus Nicodemus’ status irrelevant)
 - b. Nor will of flesh—self-empowered (thus Stoics & self-control impaired)
 - c. Nor will of man—utopian strategies (thus visionaries from Plato onward wrong)
 - d. But of God—adoption; regeneration, supernatural new life
 - 1. Jesus’ Incarnation—“from above” “He who came down from heaven”
 - 2. Jesus’ Passion—as serpent lifted up in wilderness (Num 21:5) He too lifted up
 - e. Jesus insists “water & Spirit” necessary—thus illuminating importance of baptism (both water and Spirit)
 - 3. Great Gospel Text: Jn 3:16—1) God loves; 2) Christ saves; 3) We believe; 4) Eternal Life begins
- C. Encouraging testimonies throughout the centuries
 - 1. Classic: Justin Martyr; Augustine; John Newton
 - 2. Recent accounts: Andrew Flavin, *The Great Good Thing*; Sally Read, *Night’s Bright Darkness*; Sohrab Ahmari, *From Fire, by Water*; Chuck Colson’s *Born Again*, et al.
 - 3. Billy Graham’s unique evangelistic career with “born again” emphasis

ANDREW KLAVAN'S CONVERSION

Some books I not only read and relish but wish everyone could enjoy the enlightenment and beauty they afford. Such is Andrew Klavan's *The Great Good Thing: A Secular Jew Comes to Faith in Christ*, wherein a gifted writer speaks persuasively, reaffirming the perennial allure of the the Incarnate Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. Klavan is well-known in the literary world, considered by Stephen King a "most original American novelist of crime and suspense." But rather than keeping us in suspense Klavan, in *The Great Good Thing*, tells us about his conversion, culminating with his Christian baptism at the age of 49. "No one could have been more surprised than I was," he says. "I never thought I was the type. I had been born and raised a Jew and lived most of my life as an agnostic. I believed in the fullest freedom of thought into the widest reaches of fact and philosophy. I believed in science and analysis and reasonable explanations. I had no time for magical thinking of any kind. I couldn't bear solemn piety. I despise even the ordinary varieties of willful blindness to the tragic shambles of life on earth." In short, for half-a-century he'd been a hard-boiled realist—"a worlding by nature" (p. xiii).

Flourishing as a writer, Klavan "was one of the men of the coasts and cities, at home among the snarks and cynics of these postmodern times" (p. xvi). Yet here he was, confessing "that Jesus Christ was Lord" and accepting "the uniquely salvific truth of his life and preaching, death and resurrection—this it seemed to me even in the moment, was to renounce my natural place in the age, to turn against my upbringing and my kind. It felt, so help me, as I were flinging myself off the deck of a holiday cruise ship, falling away from its lighted ballrooms and casinos, from the parties and the music and sparkling wine of Fashionable Ideas, to go plunging down and down and did I mention down into a wave-tossed theological solitude" (p. xv). In a sense it made no sense! But in a deeper sense, it was a coming together of the central themes of his novels wherein his "heroes were always desperately on the run desperately trying to get at a truth that baffled their assumptions and philosophies" (p. xvi). They wanted to make sense of the world but couldn't find the key.

Slowly, through much reading and writing and personal experience, he discovered the key—the answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"—could be found only in the message proclaimed by *The Gospel According to St. John*! Jesus Is the Truth! Klavan's spiritual journey, rather like C.S. Lewis's, took place over a number of years wherein he moved from agnosticism to belief in God. He'd begun praying and found his life improved by the discipline. He'd "become like a character in one of my own stories, desperately trying to unknit the fabric of fact and perception, to separate the warp of psychology from the weft of objective truth, before time ran out" (p. xix). He fully understood the risks entailed—a successful Jewish writer, safely ensconced in an up-scale Santa Barbara suburb, daring to declare himself a Christian. What would that mean? "'Oh, God,' I prayed fervently more than once, 'whatever happens, don't let me become a Christian novelist!'" (p. xx). "Would I descend into that smiley-faced religious idiocy that mistakes the good health and prosperity of the moment for the supernatural favor of God?" (p. xx). And in becoming a Christian he determined not to forsake his Jewish ancestry and culture. Could it happen?

Well, it did. He found Christ—or, in that paradoxical mystery of redemption, Christ found him! Consequently, he found himself "rejoicing. I was convinced and fully convinced: my mind was God's, my soul was Christ's, my faith was true. How had that happened and why? Given the spiritual distance I'd traveled, given the depths of my doubts, given the darkness of my most uncertain places, and given, most of all, the elation and wonder I felt at the journey's end, it seems to be a story worth telling" (p. xxv).

It's a story worth telling—and for us it's a story worth reading! Klavan recounts his early years in Great Neck, New York, "a wealthy town, a well-tailored suburban refuge from the swarming city," where he was immersed in an upper-middle-class, secularized Jewish community, the son of a successful New York morning drive radio personality. But as a child he was inwardly unhappy and spent much time day-dreaming, constructing elaborate fantasies featuring himself as the invariably tough-guy hero. Much of his school-time was devoted to fantasizing rather than studying. He seemed to be a good student, "but it was all fraud. I could read well and write well and talk glibly and even figure out math problems in my head. So I could bluff my way through subjects I knew nothing about, and neither my teachers nor my parents, nor even my friends, were aware that I was hardly doing any schoolwork at all" (p. 28). In fact he learned nothing—"no historical facts, no mathematical formulas, no passages from the books we were supposed to have read" (p. 28).

In time he realized: "You cannot know the truth about the world until you know God loves you, because that is the truth about the world" (p. 236). Tasting the reality of love, he sought Love! He began slipping into churches and even attending services and finally confessed Christ. Consequently: "My personality was so transformed I hardly recognized myself" (p. 211).