

Covenant Response: Before Belief

series: What Is the Gospel?

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We continue in God's Word together as we go through this advent series of covenant response. We've spent this fall looking at the covenant itself as the Lord reveals it from the beginning to the end of his word. We looked at the Covenant Maker as we examined who God is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And now in this advent season we pivot to what does it mean to respond to the covenant that God has demonstrated through the work of his Son: the new covenant itself. Last week Pastor PD gave us a beautiful picture of what it means for the incarnation, to recognize that the Lord has come in our response to that reality of the incarnation.

We now pivot and look at. . . In light of that it seems very important for the writer John—because there is nothing that is out of place in the Gospel of John. We learn later on in the Gospel that he says these things are written that you may believe. And we can see that because John is the most theologically self-reflective of all the gospel writers. It is very different than the other—as we refer to them—the synoptic gospels that follow similar themes and follow a similar timeline. Not so with John. John has a different purpose. And that purpose is seen in the way in which he lays things out. And we've already seen in John Chapter 1, as in many ways, John is writing in gospel form—rewriting Genesis. “In the beginning,” we hear John say. And what he's doing is he's writing what does it mean to be in the beginning of Christ who has come.

And so we come to Chapter 3. And what we're going to look at over these next several weeks is the response that is belief in the Lord Jesus. This week it is “Before Belief.” What is going on in the life of this man, Nicodemus, that is representative of us as human beings before we believe. So we turn to John Chapter 3. We're going to be looking specifically at verses 1-8.

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” [NIV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me this morning? Now we ask, O Lord, that by the work of your Holy Spirit, which is spoken of here by your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, may you come in and may you blow mightily through our lives, and that you may open our minds, our hearts, our souls, to who Christ is that we might worship you and find refuge in Christ and new life as you call us to respond in belief. Help us, O Lord, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As we look at these few verses in John Chapter 3, you'll see in your outline as we understand and look at who Nicodemus is. We hear of Nicodemus in no other gospel, and we hear of Nicodemus only three times in this gospel. We'll get to that as we go along. But what I want you to see in this particular passage that John has recorded for us, is this interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus. And what we will see is, we will see Nicodemus's trust in **Accomplishments**, in his **Intellect**, but ultimately how all of those form a grand **Resistance** to who Jesus is. And Nicodemus, while he was a particular man from a particular place, he is in some sense a representation of all men and women. We will see that, I hope, as we go along.

But we will see first, as we look at Nicodemus and his **Accomplishments**. Again, I want to tell you there is not a word out of place in John. He states and presents Nicodemus because there is something he's wanting us to see. Let's look together again at verse 1. "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council." So first and foremost he wants us to pay attention to this person that's not mentioned in any of the other gospels. And so he brings us up and he says, "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus ." He's wanting us to understand what's happening in the life of this particular man, who was Nicodemus. Nicodemus, as he says here, was a Pharisee. Now that doesn't help us a great deal, because in many ways—as we've talked about before—the Pharisees in our day as we look back, and particularly among evangelical, gospel-believing churches, the Pharisees are largely seen as synonymous with hypocrites. And in many ways we've sort of lumped them in to sort of be this homogenous, monolithic block of people, and that is largely seen as negative. But that is not how John is presenting Nicodemus as a Pharisee. Seen positively, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, because that was a unique position, and only 6000 men were representative of this party or this group within the nation of Israel.

Pharisees were a group of people that would largely be seen today as the political conservatives of their era, of their culture. They were given to one particular area of expertise, and that was the ethical culture of the nation of Israel. They were called to study the ethical implications and the ethical code of the law. But in addition to having the written law, they also had all of the implications they believed that went along side or parallel with the law. So as they studied the law and as they applied it within their given culture throughout the years, they had had a written code in addition to the law, as well as an oral tradition. And these laws were studied, they were memorized, and they were enacted within the nation of Israel. They were the ethical guardians of their day. They had given themselves to lifelong study of God's Word, as the law.

But we see something else about Nicodemus. He wasn't just a Pharisee. He had great position, as well. It tells us here that he was "a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council." In other words, there was an inner circle to the inner circle. Nicodemus, then,

was not only a man who was a Pharisee, he was also likely—and we learn this as we go on in the Gospel of John—he was a man of great wealth, as well, because he would have had to have been to be part of the Jewish ruling council. And so he had political power that even set him apart from other Pharisees. He had great influence. In fact, we know he had great influence beyond just being a Pharisee, because later on in the Gospel of John we learn that actually it's Nicodemus who comes to Jesus's defense and says that he ought to be listened to. He would not have had that kind of influence unless he had political power over and beyond just being a member of this ethical Jewish cult. (And I mean cult not in a squirrely way, but you get my point.)

So as we look at the life of Nicodemus, he has much to commend himself. He has a great deal of accomplishment. He had power. He had money. He had the position. But isn't it interesting—and we ought to pay attention to this—that he comes to Jesus at night. Now that's important for the Gospel of John—and you've heard this before—because John, since he is theologically very reflective in his Gospel, he has this interplay between light and darkness. So what's interesting is [Nicodemus] had so much confidence in his own accomplishments, he did not want to risk that by coming to Jesus in the daytime to be seen by others. He wanted to be able to come to Jesus, while at the same time protecting all that it meant to be who he was and what he was able to do. So in some sense he was coming to Jesus with a cloak. Yes, we see it at night, but there's something else. He's wanting to protect himself. In other words, he's building what we see as a part of the resistance of the human heart.

And we ought to take great comfort in the fact that sometimes even when you're face to face with Jesus, it doesn't mean suddenly your walls come down. Now if you are a Bible-believing Christian and you confess Christ as your Savior, I'm sure there's somewhere in your journey with Christ that you've wished, *Oh, if only Jesus were here, that would change everything*. But we can see over and over again that simply the physical presence of Jesus didn't automatically change people's lives. In fact sometimes it caused the resistance and the hardness to grow harder. Is that what's happening with Nicodemus? Let's find out. So we have his accomplishments.

Let's look at his **Intellect**. His intellect is important because in verse 2 we see it. It says, “He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know...’” What does he know? “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” I say that's a sign of his intellect because of the way in which he presents himself to Jesus and what he is presenting to Jesus about what he knows. So when it comes to Jesus and he says, “We know...” in some sense that's a sign that Nicodemus, while recognizing the value of something unique to Jesus, perhaps he sees himself as on the same level. Remember, Pharisees are teachers of the law and the ethical code. He's coming to Jesus, and he says, *We know this about you*. And I want you to remember that phrase ‘we know.’ In just a moment I'm going to come back to that, because again, not one word in John is out of place. But for this moment what we see is that he thinks he has Jesus, at least, understood. What does he think he understands? Well, what we know is that he sees Jesus as somebody who is a teacher who has a powerful message. So he recognizes that Jesus has something to impart.

Secondly, he sees that Jesus has performed miracles. And they demonstrated that Jesus was, at least, from God. He says so. Now the performance of miracles would not have set Jesus

apart alone. There were others who performed miracles, too. Jesus wasn't the first one to come along and to demonstrate some sort of spiritual power. But at least there seems to be enough evidence for Nicodemus to say, *OK you are from God.* Again, not by accident. You are from God. Let's remember that. So he believes he not only has Jesus, and what he teaches is something perhaps he needs to pay attention to, he says you perform miracles and I know where you are from. In other words, I know what has prompted you. In some sense he's saying, *I think I know you. I think I understand you.*

He's doing what we would all do. He's observing the facts, and he is a man who believes in facts. He's a studier of the law and of their implications and of their teaching. He is a man who likes facts. He likes the sturdiness of knowledge and reason. We know who you are, Jesus. He's saying it in a respectful way, but he's still coming to him at night. But he says something else. I'm going to come to you at night. I know who you are, or he at least acknowledges that yes, Jesus is a powerful teacher. Yes, he has performed miracles. Then at least if he's from God then he's someone who needs to be listened to. He's willing to at least admit that much.

But there's something else that is there for us in plain sight that's another part of his intellect. To be a member of the Pharisaical party and of the Jewish ruling council you had to be Jewish. (Duh.) So why is he going by a Greek name? It means that there are a couple of things we know about Nicodemus. He not only understood Hebrew, he also had a penchant for Greek. So much so, he must have really dug his name in Greek. You know why? Nicodemus means 'victor.' It means 'conqueror over all.' Now, a Jewish man who is a Pharisee, who is a part of the Jewish ruling council, making himself known by his Greek name which means victor and conqueror over all. . . Can you perhaps see why he might have had a healthy degree of confidence in his intellect. And so when he comes to Jesus he says, 'We know.' But he comes to him at night, in essence saying, *What do you got for me? Is there something worth listening to?*

All right. So we see Nicodemus. He's a man of great accomplishment. It seems to illustrate that he is a man of great intellect. But there is something that we need to see as a part of this naming and who he is and that is this. And I am going to build this connected to what I just said a few moments ago. That having a lot of facts about Jesus or about God does not lead one to belief. Having Jesus in the room does not axiomatically lead to belief. Because you can know a lot of facts, but it depends on where those facts land—not in your intellect, but the way you understand the world. In other words, the frame.

Let me give you an example. In 1940 if a friend of mine had introduced me to another group of folks and he said, *You know, Randy, he's a gay person. He's a gay man.* What would that have meant? It would have meant that I'm jovial person, I like to have fun, and so forth and so on. But if you say that now, it would not mean that. Is that because the word changed or because of our framing of what that word means? In other words, how we understand the world begins to be the interpretive framework through which we bring a lot of these facts. Which is why Nicodemus says, "You are from God," not how Jesus had said, "I am" or how he had presented himself. Nicodemus sees the world in a closed system. He might have recognized that Jesus maybe even is a messiah, but he would have been a Jewish or political messiah, not a divine Messiah. The Pharisees did not believe in resurrection. So they had a very closed frame about what the Divine is doing and what he will do. And most certainly Nicodemus had a framework to say this cannot be the Son of God.

And so what we begin to see is through his accomplishments, through his intellect, through his name, we see within, inside the human heart—not just Nicodemus—about how all of us in some form or fashion build a **Resistance** against God. Resistance is a very powerful thing. We see it today in our everyday lives. We're already being counseled that we ought to be careful how often we use anti-microbial soap. Why? Because our bodies can build up a resistance to its effectiveness, and germs can actually begin to change and we can actually become susceptible. We build up a resistance to the effectiveness of the antidote, making us exposed to danger and disease. Now think about Nicodemus's accomplishments and his intellect like the use of anti-microbial soap. He's been washing his hands his entire life in the antiseptic power of the soap of accomplishment and intellect and position and politics and knowing of facts and of naming and all of these things. But guess what? It's just a framework through which he's keeping Jesus at arm's length.

And resistance isn't just for those who don't believe yet. It can be a powerful thing even in the life of the believer—that we want just enough of Jesus but still have life the way that we want it, because of the framework of expectations. Even though we hear the facts that our whole lives are to be given wholly to Christ and we hear the word, we can build up a resistance, because we're afraid of what it might mean. It might mean we need a new antidote that might hurt.

Jesus, seeing this on the part of Nicodemus, has a very interesting response, because Jesus doesn't address Nicodemus in the way Nicodemus actually expects. We don't have recorded for here any question for Nicodemus yet, but Jesus's response to him is this, as you've already heard: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” In other words, Jesus is getting around Nicodemus's resistance. We know this because Jesus understands human beings. It's not to say that Jesus was reading Nicodemus's mind. He understands that this man with great accomplishment and great intellect is still coming to me at night, believing he knows who I am and where I'm from. And this is actually building on the thing that John just said a few verses earlier when he says about Jesus, “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them,” meaning men, “because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in a man.” Jesus knows the resistance that Nicodemus and you and I put up.

And so he tells him, Nicodemus, I tell you as a man who has studied God's word, you don't even understand what the Kingdom is. When Jesus says to him, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again,” that is a hard thing for Nicodemus. *What do you mean I don't understand the kingdom?* So now Jesus is getting around his intellect. And so Nicodemus responds, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!” What you see there is you see his frame. *God wouldn't do that.* He can only see things on their literal, factual basis within a closed system. *What do you mean being born again? I can't go back into my mother's belly!*

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 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.” So how are we to understand Jesus's response to Nicodemus's resistance? I want to say it is there for us in

two words: First the word, 'born'; the second, which is translated for us in this translation as 'again.' And then we'll wrap it up together.

First, this word 'born.' When Jesus says to him that "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again," what it means there, the word that is translated 'born,' it doesn't mean the literal process of being birthed again. No, it means more than that. It means when you are conceived, when you are sired. But one step further. The word that is translated there 'again,' I believe, is not the best translation. It could be translated one or two words. The word in Greek that means 'again' is the word *palin*, but the word that means 'from above' which is here is *anōthen*. And it follows what Jesus says about the Spirit. Follow. What he says is this. If you want to understand and see the kingdom of God, then you must receive new birth—not by man's accomplishment or will, but by God's doing. You must be conceived from above.

But there's something else that's going on in this word *anōthen*. It does carry with it this idea of repetition. But it doesn't mean just the bare repetition of an act. It means this: that you must be born from above, from the very same source. One writer put it this way. It is like two people standing on stage with one sheet of music. The way *anōthen* used is this: that if Caroline came up here and played a piece on the piano and then I sat down to play that very same piece, that would not be what *anōthen* means. *Anōthen* only means that it must be played again, but by the same person. That is to say, remember—for John, he's thinking about retelling the Gospel of Christ much like the Book of Genesis. What do we learn about man and woman in Genesis? They were born by God's will. He blew air and wind into their lungs. They were born from above by God's creative, powerful, sovereign hand.

Now let's connect it. Nicodemus, you cannot be born again by your accomplishments or by your will. You must receive new life from above, from the Father, through the agent of the Word working with the Spirit. You must be born from above from the very one who is the source of all life. It must happen in you, not by you. It's not done from you. You are to receive it. So he's saying to Nicodemus much like what we hear when Paul says in Romans Chapter 1: "For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. He is saying—Paul is—that human beings can build up such a resistance that they believe that they can understand who God is and who they are and can get to God by their own accomplishments or by their own intellect. And Jesus says, No. No. It isn't something you do, Nicodemus. It is something that God has done and only God can do.

And he says this: "No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and Spirit," pointing to the bringing of a person into faith through the work of the Spirit. And 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.'"" He's calling Nicodemus up short. In other words, this should not surprise you, Nicodemus. If you really knew who God is, you would not be so futile and foolish in your thinking, that you believe what I'm talking about is literally getting back into your mother's womb. No, friend. You know that salvation comes only from the Lord and it is not of your doing or your choosing. It is first and foremost God coming into you through the seed of his word acting with the beauty of the gift of faith and blossoming there into a new life from the inside out. No, Nicodemus, your accomplishments—as Paul would find out later—are

meaningless. Your intellect is fine, but it is resisting who I am. I am not just from God, "I am."

And it would be here that Jesus would go on to give the famous . . . the recording of Jesus that you hear in John Chapter 3, when we hear these words: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his own Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him." He's leading Nicodemus right to himself. And he's saying, Nicodemus, what you're resisting, you're trying to hide in the dark, I'm bringing into the light. Do you believe in me?

There's no response from Nicodemus, it seems. It seems he walks away as a person not believing. But the story goes on, as I said. He becomes a defender of Jesus, that he ought to be listened to, and then ultimately along with Joseph of Arimathea, as being the ones who would provide the necessary means for which Jesus would be buried. It seems that Nicodemus finally capitulated in his resistance. There is varied debate on it, but I believe Nicodemus bowed the knee and was born from above.

But I leave you with these words from a much more able preacher than myself. James Montgomery Boice says these words. "Thus does Jesus speak to you, whoever you may be. If you are one who has never believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, you must realize that you will never be able to enter God's family by any achievements of your own. The work is God's alone, and it was accomplished objectively through the death and resurrection of Christ. If you are a believer, you should find encouragement in the fact that all people of God, from Abel on down to the last believer, will ever live and are born again by the same process and are therefore in the family of God through God's initiative and activity. This should be your confidence if you are a Christian, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). Moreover we know that what God has promised he has power to do (Romans 4:21).

In this Christmas season I would simply ask you what is the framework—if you do not yet believe—that you are using to resist Jesus, that he's asking you to give up. Not to check your mind at the door, not to be ungrateful for your accomplishments, but to see how and in what way you have resisted the love of God in Christ. Today can be the day that you can be born from above anew from your heavenly Father through His Spirit and Word. Christian, be encouraged. Your faith is a gift. It is a gift that God has given to you by his power and will maintain by his grace and mercy. You walk not in your own accomplishment or strength, but by His mercy and grace alone. It is the Lord's work from beginning to end. May the Lord work great faith and mercy in us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise for the work of Christ, who by Spirit and Word comes into us around our resistance, showing us our need for new life from above that only you can give. Lord, I pray you would work this in us, strengthen us, and give us grace to see that Christ alone—Christ alone is the one who is the way to the Lord. Indeed, he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Make us mindful of our frameworks that we use to resist you, Lord Jesus, and may your grace break our resistance down and give us the antidote that we need. Grace, grace, marvelous grace of our loving Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.