

“Belief”

(John 3:1-15)

October 23, 2011

Order of Worship for October 23, 2011

Pre-service Song

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Angel Tree

Call to Worship: Hosea 14:1-9 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“There is A Hope”

Overhead

“The Deep Love of Jesus”

Overhead

“O How He Loves You and Me”

Song # 349

“I Worship You, Almighty God”

Song # 146

“Joy of My Desire”

Song # 744

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “Whoever Believes” (John 2:23-3:21)

by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “We All Bow Down”

Overhead

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening in the Word
Hebrews 13, Preparing for the Coming Kingdom
5:30 to 7:00
The Henneker Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

October 9, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Sheryl Jackson at William Carey Academy, Daka, Bangladesh: faculty and students form healthy and spiritually open bonds for the new school year; new families are drawn to the school, the Lord will ensure continued safety from hostile forces; good food and clean water and adequate funds are always available

President Obama: the Lord will open his eyes and heart to the realities of spiritual truth as well as the practical needs for righteousness if our nation is to recover and remain a free and prosperous people

Women’s Ministries: that the women of EFC would be united in prayer for all women who claim the name of Jesus, and that our prayers would extend to the lost and needy of our community and throughout the world. That we would be effective ministers for the Kingdom. That we would know God and love one another as Jesus loves us. That we would not neglect to come together to encourage and strengthen one another for good works.

Military or Public Service Personnel of the week: County Sheriff, Al Billington

(husband of Debbie Billington): for safety on duty and for balance and rest at home.

Young Adult of the Week: Alyssa Holland at Butte College (daughter of Fred and Diane Holland): the she keep focused on God’s direction in her life, for patience as she builds her clientele at her new job at Friends Hair Studio

“Belief”, a little bit different than the title in the worship bulletin because I ended up narrowing down what I wanted to say, drawing it out of this portion of John’s word: John 3:1-15. But what I want you actually to do is to take and put your eyes on chapter 2:23-25. These verses form a transition, they are transitional from Jesus’ confrontation with the Jews concerning his actions in cleansing the temple, to His personal and rather confrontational meeting with one of the leading members of the Sanhedrin. That is chapter 3. We usually think of chapter three as the message about being born again, and that is true, but it comes in the context of Jesus talking to one of the members of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of Israel, the highest religious and political authority in the land.

John makes one of the most important statements in the whole gospel in these three verses, and that is why I want us to stop, look at it and think about what that really means. These are the verses themselves. Read with me if you would: *“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name. . .”* (That is the first thing we are going to have to pay attention to: what does that mean. But we will go on.) *“...when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”* Those verses, 24-26, are the ones we want to pause and be certain we have grasped their implications.

It is possible that we would be somewhat taken aback, because the dominant message we get across the land is that God loves us and He loves us immensely. We therefor readily conclude that because of God’s unconditional love for us that truly it must be a non-judgmental love, and an uncritical love, and a love which would lead Jesus to want to throw himself in the midst of us and stand with us. But that is not what it says. It does not say that. What it says is Jesus knows us too well and he does not entrust himself to us.

What is important here is to look first at this issue of what it is people believed. Notice what it said again: *“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name. . .”* We want to understand it is they could have believed at this point. We know from John’s account of Jesus’ baptism and calling the first of his disciples in chapter I that already Jesus is gathering disciples. They are following after him. In fact, he has drawn disciples away from John the Baptist and John the Baptist has said, amen, that is where they should be: Follow Jesus. Clearly John is of the opinion that he can say they believed in his name. That is what he says, he writes it right down. Yet at the same time we know necessarily at this point not one of them has what you and I would say is necessary in order for them to have a true belief in God. What is that? They have not been born again. The power of the Holy Spirit has not been released. Not a single one of their hearts has been touched and changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The crucifixion of Jesus on the cross has not occurred; the resurrection of Jesus has not occurred. So you have to come to grips when you read these passages; you don’t want to read them as if history made no difference. The first understanding of these verses is necessarily in the historical context: what did they believe?

The reason this is important is because this history repeats itself over and over and over again. How many people do we know who have grown up in churches, and if you ask them [what do you believe], what do they say? You ask them, “Do you believe in Jesus?” They say, “I believe in Jesus.” And then later on you find out they never come to personal faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. You say to yourself, “Were they lying?” They were not lying. Belief is a spectrum. There are different depths of belief. There are different things we believe. Even when it comes to saying “I believe in Jesus,” not all are saying the same thing when they say “I believe”, even when they say, “I believe in His name.”

What is it that these people, both his disciples and those now who gathered around him and are responding to seeing the signs – you can see that in verses 23 and 24 – what is it they are believing? Here are three things that they probably did and actually needed to have believed in Jesus’ name at this point. First they understand that he is a true man of God. They resonate with that. They see him, they hear him and they affirm, “this is a man of God, this is a man who loves God.” That they believe. Secondly he has presented himself as a prophet of God. They hear

him speaking and they see him performing acts of power and they say, “This is a prophet.” If you go back into chapters 1 and 2 that was the whole conversation. So they believe he is a true man of God and they believe he is a prophet of God. The third is this, already Jesus has engaged in enough teaching that they say, “this is a man who knows how to handle the word of God.’ So those are three things which are affirmed, of which I can say, “I believe in Jesus, I believe he was a true man of God, I believe he was a prophet sent from God, and I believe he handled the Word of God correctly.” But that does not mean I believe in him as the Son of God who died for the sins of man and rose up again in the affirmation of their justification and is the One who gives to us His Holy Spirit that our hearts might be changed. That is a very important thing to remember as we think about conversations we have with those who say “I believe.”

Twice in these verses John tells us Jesus knows human beings for what they are. In verse 24 John is not of course saying that Jesus actually knows every single person. This is what it says in the English Standard Version: “*But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to [the ones who believed in his name], because he knew all people. . .*” He says what we want to hear more clearly in v. 25: “*. . .he himself knew what was in man.*” Jesus knows our character, he knows our dispositions, he knows our attitudes, he knows our strengths; he knows our weakness. But ultimately what he knows is that we are not to be trusted. We are not trustworthy: that is what he knows. He knows better than to entrust himself to men.

This may not sit well or easily with us, but we should not be surprised. You have to go back to one of the most fundamental statements that Jesus makes. Who did Jesus come to save? Sinners! How many of you know sinners? How many of you know that sinners are not to be trusted? That is correct. How many of you are disappointed because somebody you knew [who] was a believer fell short of your expectations? That is right! And if you forgot that sinners fall short you are in danger of becoming embittered and thinking that somehow God has failed. But God has not failed, because God loves sinners, and God takes sinners and scoops them up, sets them on their feet, blesses them, forgives them, restores them, renews them, because that is what sinners need. Jesus came to save sinners, not to recruit the already saved ones, the “already saints.” This is what makes a mockery out of those people. . . Did you ever talk to somebody who says, “You know, I am not quite ready yet to come to faith. I have to clean up my act.” “You have to clean up your act? Don’t you know what Jesus does? He will clean up your act. You will never be clean enough. You are a filthy bum! You are not able to clean what needs to be cleaned.” What needs to be cleaned? The heart, the inner man, the hidden thoughts: that is what needs to be cleaned. I can’t get at that stuff. I can rearrange that stuff. I can make everything look really nice outside. But I can’t [clean out] the inside stuff: only God touches that.

Is it not significant. . .look at your Bibles for a second and say to yourselves, “I am going to get rid of chapters and I am going to get rid of verses. Do you notice something? There is no break between verse 25 of chapter 2 and verse 1 of chapter 3. There is no break, so read it that way. [John] says here beginning the sentence in v. 24, “*. . .Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man. . .*” Do you see that? “*Now there was a man. . .*” What kind of man? Well he is a Pharisee for we just read that, it is the next word. But we already know what the man is; we just had a definition of the man. The man is not trustworthy. You need to draw that connection in order to understand the unfolding of everything that goes on between Jesus and Nicodemus thereafter. Sometimes the versification and the paragraphing of the Bible are helpful and sometimes they are not, and in this case I don’t think it helps us very much.

This is what we are told:

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God [one of the three things they believed] . . .for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him [that, by the way, is an affirmation that he is a prophet; the power of God was working with him. So you know he is a teacher, he is a prophet].’ (v. 3) Jesus answered him [Now here is the surprise.] ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is

born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born? Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’”

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’”

You cannot read that passage from the beginning of the chapter to the end and fail to realize that we are using the word believe in different ways in terms of what in fact is being believed. The general message of these verses is clear; all of us I think know it well: you must be born again to be saved. But please notice that before Jesus says you must be born again to be saved, that is to enter the kingdom of heaven, notice again what he says in verse 3. He says you must be born again to see the kingdom of God. Then lastly, when you come all the way down to the fifteenth verse, you will see that he gives the affirmation that you must believe in Jesus if you are to have eternal life.

What are we supposed to gather in great depth from these verses than just the basic message you must be born again? For starters we should not miss that relationship between chapter 2 and chapter 3. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were devoted to observing the Law. They sought both personal obedience and personal purity in their devotion to God. They desired to be, and especially to be seen as godly. And by the way, some of them were deeply devout and godly men and women. We know from the gospels and the rest of the New Testament that many of them however had drifted into legalism and the hypocritical self-righteousness that goes with it. Later on you are going to find that the Pharisees cooperate with the Sadducees, two groups dominant in the life of Israel. There was no love, however, between them. The Sadducees were the priests dominating the temple; the Pharisees were those who actually dominated the popular religion of the day. The Pharisees tended to look upon the Sadducees as corrupt. They were. The Pharisees saw themselves as the righteous ones. That is a problem. But later on as things unfold we will find that the Pharisees would rather stand beside the Sadducees against Jesus than to stand with Jesus against the corrupt priests. That is a very telling identification. There is a flaw in the Pharisees. There is a flaw in what they believe.

By the end of this Gospel we have another glimpse of Nicodemus. Those of you familiar with the Gospel realize that. It tells us a great deal about this man. Our hearts should be drawn to him. He is presented as a man who is truly seeking to know what the truth is, but he does not yet know it. By the end of the Gospel he has become a believer and he works alongside of Joseph of Arimathea (you might recognize that name). Joseph and Nicodemus are the ones who go, they take Jesus off the cross, they prepare him for burial and they put him into the tomb.

Jesus’ response to Nicodemus contrasts remarkably with nearly every other encounter that he has with the Pharisees. It is safe to assume that Jesus saw this as a man with sincere though limited faith. He comes to Jesus with honest motives. When Nicodemus says God must be with Jesus (3:2) that is what he means. He says, “I think you are a prophet. I think you really have God with you.” But according to what Jesus proceeds to say, we realize that Nicodemus is only a man, and that he cannot see the kingdom of God. We are familiar with the teaching that only those who are born again can enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says that in v. 5. Here Jesus is speaking of seeing the kingdom. Did you ever notice that? You cannot see the kingdom. This is a knowledge issue. What do you see? Knowledge is in some sense the objective, the end point of witness: “I hope you can see this. I hope you get the picture. I hope you grasp the point. Presently you cannot see, but I am hoping you will be able to see what this

witness is about.” There is a tremendous significance to this. If someone is blind, which is the other way of saying you can’t see, it means you cannot know the truth. If you cannot see, you are ignorant, you are blind, you do not know the truth.

Those are statements, those are implications, of the utmost importance to a man like Nicodemus. Who is Nicodemus? Jesus refers to him in his self-understanding: a teacher. You are the teacher of Israel. You are the teacher of Israel and you are blind and you do not know the truth! Nicodemus is not a fool. He knows how to think. We should be very impressed with Nicodemus at this point. Rather than taking offense at the implied judgment of Jesus that “you are blind and ignorant,” Nicodemus picked up directly on what is the heart of the matter, this whole business of being born again. What can this mean, he asks. Is Jesus referring to some kind of second physical birth? Well now, folks, Nicodemus does not in fact think that Jesus is referring to a second physical birth. He knows full well that is not going to happen and cannot happen. So he is saying two things at one time. He is saying to Jesus, you need to explain yourself because what you are saying right now does not make any sense. And the other thing is saying is that if in fact one needs to be reborn physically then what you are talking about is impossible and we may as well end the conversation. But in verses 5-8 Nicodemus perhaps got more answer than he was prepared to hear. Listen again to what Jesus answered.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born? Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

My observation is that generally in conversations and as well in preaching situations that we tend to get really stuck in trying to figure out what is meant by being in the water, and what is meant by the Spirit and what role do they play in being born again and how can we sort it all out? Well, I don’t think it is all that important for it is not the main thrust. The easiest way to understand it is that the water refers to physical birth, the Spirit refers to spiritual birth; both have to occur if you are going to be saved. After all that is what Jesus proceeds to say in v. 6. Far more important is what Jesus has to say in verses 7 and 8. Listen again to what he said in verses 7 and 8. *“Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.”’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”* If I was Nicodemus listening to that, I would think to myself, “What on earth is that supposed to mean? Let’s get back to babies! That we can probably figure out.” It probably helps a little bit to know that in Hebrew as well as in Greek the word for “Spirit” and the word for “wind” is the same word, so you can see there is a play on words here. But actually it doesn’t help very much. Jesus is associating the action of the Spirit our being born again with the blowing of the wind. What he says is whether you think of the moving of the Spirit or the moving of the wind, you don’t know anything. We are equally ignorant of the origin or the cause and we have no power over them.

Beloved, John 3:7-8 are about as clear a statement of the divine sovereignty regarding being born again as you can possibly find. You may not like that doctrine, but the problem is, it is written down. I suspect you and I can identify with Nicodemus. What am I supposed to do with that? I know a multitude of good folk who respond in exactly this way. “I mean, for heaven’s sake if it is just up to God, why should you and I bother doing anything?” Did you ever hear that? “Why should I pray, why should I witness, why should I open my Bible? I mean, God has got it all figured out. God is going to do what He wants to do and it makes no difference what I do.” Do you know what happens to people like that? They either go to hell or they live in hell for the rest of their lives. Because in their arrogance they shut God off. That is the way a Pharisee responds. Why do I say that? Pharisees: for a Pharisee religion was a man centered effort to be holy, and by being holy to gain God’s approval, what you and I might call getting right with God. “It is, after all up to me, and I will do it.” But what if you can’t? The affirmation of the word of God is, you cannot.

That, as we can see in verse 9, is exactly Nicodemus’ response. See what he says: how can these things be? How can it be the wind? How can it be so uncertain? How can we have so little to do with it? Jesus’ response does not imply that Nicodemus should have already known about the second birth through the action of the Holy Spirit. That might be what we think and people often do. Rather, I think we need to recognize that Jesus chides Nicodemus – he judges Nicodemus as a matter of fact – because Nicodemus has failed to see that salvation, whether personal or national, always begins with God; it is always at God’s initiative. How could he have known this? Well, I would assume that he knew about Adam. Who was Adam? Adam is my future son-in-law, and he is going to marry my daughter, and my daughter wants to rule the world and she is going to begin with her husband! No, no, no! Actually that would repeat what happened in the Garden. That is what Eve did; she took over control of the situation. And why did she do that? Because her dumb husband did nothing! And the consequence of him doing nothing was the fall. And what was the proper response of God to the fall? Execution! But what was God’s real response to the fall? “Let’s do this again.” That is grace. What about Abraham? The basic fact about Abraham comes out here and there and the reality is that that man was an idolater. He was not looking for God, but God came and knocked on his door. Perhaps the most beautiful of all the examples was when God said to Abraham, “Take your son Isaac and sacrifice him on the mountain, and when he got to the mountain and he was prepared to sacrifice his son, all of a sudden the angel said, Stop, God has provided the sacrifice. Abraham did not bring the ram along just in case. Perhaps the last two will be the most startling: Jacob the deceiver is the one whom God decided would carry the promise, and Moses the murderer became Moses the deliverer. Never forget Moses’ first great act was to murder the Egyptian, taking upon himself the right to judge the life of another. “Are the teacher of Israel and you do not know these things?”

In verse 11 Jesus contrasts Nicodemus’ knowledge with his own and that of John the Baptist. Jesus’ knowledge, he says, is one of experience: he has experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. John would be the same, even though John cannot be born again, we know that he is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit from before birth. Nicodemus is limited to what you and I would call head knowledge or book knowledge. This too should have been apparent to Nicodemus. The Pharisees and the Sadducees knew that God had not spoken through a prophet for four hundred years. They knew that and they were saying to one another, when is a prophet going to come? They knew that, they were looking for that when John the Baptist arrives on the scene. Do you remember what the conversation was? Well, which prophet are you? Does Nicodemus know that Jesus is a prophet? He knows that he is a prophet. He has said so: “We know God must be with you; nobody can do what you have done if God is not with you.” Now notice what Jesus says: *“Truly, truly, I say we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.”* Now consider what that means. What that means is if I say Wayne Bell is filled with the Spirit of God, he is a prophet of God, but I prefer not to listen to what he has to say. Oh! I see.

Jesus says in verse 12, *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”* And Jesus goes on and makes this definitive claim regarding himself which I am going to deal with later on, being the Son of Man. Nicodemus’ problem is not that he is ignorant either of scripture or history. The problem is that Nicodemus’ focus is wrong. Nicodemus commits two errors. First, he ignores and mistakes the evidence for God’s active rule and presence. Second is that he refuses the testimony of those who do pay attention to God. If we follow what Jesus says when we come to the twelfth verse, this is the question we have to ask: how can we get others to believe what we say when we speak about earthly things? Because, you see, if people will not believe us regarding earthly things, why will they pay attention to us regarding heavenly things? Please turn in your Scriptures to I Peter 2:9-12, 15; 3:1-2 & 13-17. Notice what Peter says, and keep this in the context of getting people to believe what you say about earthly things. This is the context: how can we get people to listen to us when we talk about earthly things:

Peter says:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were

not a people, but how you're God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, [In whose eyes must I appear honorable? In the eyes of unbelievers, that is correct, I have to be honorable in the eyes of the Gentiles, those who do not understand the covenant, who do not understand the grace of God, who do not believe in and practice the righteousness of God: I need to appear honorable in their eyes. Because if I don't have any honor in their eyes are they going to believe what I have to say about earthly things? Of course they're not because they know I am a sinner! They are sinners; they know what we are like.] "...so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds [whose good deeds? Our good deeds! Who sees them? The Gentiles.] so that, "...by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

"Likewise, wives, be subject to you own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives—when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?...and ready to defend ...the hope that is in you [even under conditions of persecution.]"

Do you wonder why the church in China is growing by hundreds of thousands and the church in America is shrinking? It is because the church in China has a believable testimony because people are willing to suffer and die for the faith. Therefore people are willing to believe what they have to say about spiritual things because they see that they are in fact honorable and will pay the full price. If you follow Jesus through to the end, what balances the sovereignty of God's grace in the salvation of the souls of men and women is the challenge that you and I need to receive that we are to live in this world in such a way that others have a reason to say, "Why do you live like that? Why are you willing to do what you do? I can trust what you say, I know that you are honest, I know that you are consistent, I know that you have integrity, I know that if you say you will do something you do it, I know that you meet your obligations, that in all things I can trust you. And therefore I will also trust you when you speak to me about the love of God and His mercy and His grace and the forgiveness that can be mine, which I know deep within myself I desperately need from the Living God.

Let us pray: Our heavenly Father we give you thanks for Your grace and goodness to us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We pray that we might walk out of here in the power of the Holy Spirit and letting him instruct us and press home Your truth to our understanding. Amen. Go in peace.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What do you see as the relationship between love and trust? Must you trust someone if you love them, or is it a contradiction to say you love someone but don't trust them?
2. There is a difference between faith and saving faith. Many people have faith in Jesus as a man of God, a good man, a true teacher, a prophet. What must a person believe to be saved?
3. Has faith in Jesus enabled you to "see" the kingdom of God? If so, what would be some of the things you have seen?
4. Christians generally know personal purity is an important part of being saved. How important do you think it is and why, and what is included in personal purity?
5. What are some of the Biblical examples of God's initiative in salvation? Could Nicodemus have known these examples?
6. Since Nicodemus admitted that God was with Jesus, based on Jesus' deeds, why did he not believe what Jesus taught?
7. How can we get others to believe us when we speak of earthly things?
8. What instructions does Peter give so that people will believe what we have to say? (See 1 Peter 2:9-12, 15; 3:1-2 and 13-17)