

John 2:23-3:15

Introduction

Last time we were in John, we saw Jews who were hostile to Jesus. When Jesus drove out of the temple the money-changers and those selling sheep and oxen, the Jewish authorities never challenged the moral “rightness” of Jesus position, but only His credentials: “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus’ response anticipates the fact that the hostility of these Jews would grow to the point where they would finally put Him to death: “Destroy this temple [referring to His body], and in three days I will raise it up.” One response to the person and claims of Jesus is that of hostile unbelief. But in the context of John, there’s another, much more common response. We read, now, in chapter two, verses 23-24.

I. John 2:23–24a — Now when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them...

At the end of chapter one we saw Andrew and another unnamed disciple (probably John), and Peter, and Philip, and Nathanael all “*believing*” (*pisteuo*) in Jesus (cf. 1:35-51). And it was in response to this believing that Jesus *did* “entrust” himself (*pisteuo*)—give Himself, offer Himself—to them. “What are you seeking... Come and you will see... Follow me... You will see greater things than these... you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Here Jesus “entrusts” *Himself* to those who had believed and trusted in Him. I think of Jesus’ words in the sixth chapter of John”

➤ John 6:37 —Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

But here at the end of chapter two, what do we have? We have people *believing* “in His name” and yet Jesus refuses to entrust Himself to them. So we assume there are different kinds of “believing in His name.” One kind Jesus rewards with more of Himself. Another kind is just a one-way street that never truly lays hold of Jesus.

John says that “many believed in His name *when they saw the signs that he was doing.*” Isn’t that the point of signs? We read at the end of this Gospel: “These [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). And yet many people saw the signs without really penetrating to the true meaning of those signs as revelations of the true glory of Jesus – full of grace and truth (cf. 1:14). Is this deficient “believing” only a blameworthy thing? Is it not any better than the hostile unbelief of the Jewish authorities? Not at all! There is a sense in which it’s “better” than nothing. “The Evangelist does not say that they pretended to be believers... They believed in Jesus as a man sent from God... they did this because, unlike many of the Jewish leaders, they did not question the genuineness of Jesus’ miracles...” (Ridderbos). Would we have immediately been able to tell the difference between the *many* who believed and the *few* who believed? They almost certainly would have looked the same to us in many cases. But what does John say of Jesus?

II. John 2:24–25 — 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.

Jesus knows what is in man far better than man knows what is in himself. Jesus knows what is in us far better than we know what is in ourselves. Jesus knows absolutely and infallibly what is in you and what is in me. In other words, Jesus was not judging externally based on the outward appearance of their faith—which at this point might have told us nothing at all. Jesus judged the kind of believing based on what He knew was in man – based on the heart that this believing flowed from. It’s the condition of the heart that determines the nature of our believing. It’s the condition of the heart that determines whether our believing is of the kind that Jesus freely rewards with more of Himself (entrusting Himself to us) or whether it’s a one-way street that never really lays hold of Jesus in the Gospel. So we go on to read in chapter three:

III. John 3:1–2 — 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, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Like so many others, Nicodemus saw the signs that Jesus was doing in Jerusalem and he, too, believed in Jesus’ name. He believed that Jesus came *from God* in the sense that He came with *God’s authority* and that *God* was with Him. Apparently, Nicodemus believed that even when Jesus “cleansed” the temple, He was acting as one sent by God (compare this with the response of the other Jewish leaders!). The believing of Nicodemus might have been indistinguishable to us from the believing of a Peter and a Philip and a Nathanael. So does Jesus give Nicodemus a new name – as He gave to Peter? Does Jesus say to Nicodemus, “Follow me” – as He said to Philip? Does He say, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit” – as He said of Nathanael? Does He affirm the faith of Nicodemus as He affirmed the faith of Nathanael?

Jesus sees what we cannot see. Jesus sees not just our believing, but the heart from which that believing flows and which therefore determines the true nature of our faith. Jesus knew what was in man; and so:

IV. John 3:3 — Jesus answered [Nicodemus], “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Why does Jesus preface these words with, “Truly, truly, I say to you...” The reason isn’t the relative “importance” of these words compared to other things Jesus says, but the innate offensiveness of these words to all our natural, human sensibilities. Jesus knows from the beginning the stumbling block these words will be to Nicodemus, given what was “in him.” **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews. Pharisees weren’t all the blatant hypocrites that we see so often in the Gospel. Nicodemus certainly wasn’t. He believed the Scriptures. He believed in the God of the Scriptures. He believed that Jesus was from God and that God was with Him. And yet when Nicodemus says what he believes, Jesus responds by challenging one of his most deeply held assumptions in the most confrontational way possible.

We can assume from what Jesus says that one of Nicodemus' most deeply held beliefs is that he will one day be among those who see the kingdom of God – who enter into the life of the age to come. And on what basis is Nicodemus so deeply convinced of this? Apparently because of his commitment to the true religion of his fathers – because he, like so many of his colleagues, was a man devoted to God and to the law of Moses as God's gracious gift to His people. Nicodemus wasn't a blatant hypocrite or legalist. He was very much "sincere" to the extent that he could be. And yet if Jesus' words are to be believed, Nicodemus must now re-evaluate the very ground he's standing on. If Jesus' words are to be believed, Nicodemus, for all his apparent "sincerity" and "devotion," may still be excluded from the kingdom of God. "Unless one is born from above," Jesus says, "he cannot see the kingdom of God."

To be "born *from above*" is the same thing as to be "born *of God*" (Jn. 1:13) and apart from this super-natural birth there can be no entrance into that eschatological life of the age to come (the "kingdom of God"). "Eternal life" (cf. 3:15) is literally in the Greek, "*age* life." In other words, it's that life specifically associated with the age to come. But the quality of that life is of such a wholly different character from the life associated with this age that in order to enter that life one must quite literally be *born into it*. Just as we were once "born of man" into the life of this age, so also, if we would "see" the life of the age to come, we must by an inescapable, necessary law be born from above – we must be born of God into that life. And it's in this simple, but radical reality that all of Nicodemus'—and all our—self-sufficiency and self-assurance is laid bare.

V. John 3:4 — 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?"

Notice the emphasis here on what man can or cannot do—on what Nicodemus can or cannot do. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can *he* enter a second time into his mother's womb and [cause himself to] be born?" Nicodemus knows very well that that's not what Jesus means by being "born from above" (cf. 3:31; 19:11, 23; Mat. 27:51; Js. 1:17; 3:15, 17),* but he's so alarmed and so unsettled by Jesus' words that he pretends ignorance. And in any case, if it's impossible for any man to enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born a second time, how much more impossible must it be for any man to cause or in any way bring about his own birth *from above*? Since this is an impossibility—equally as much for himself as for any other human being—Nicodemus reasons, it must not be necessary for being granted entrance into the kingdom of God. It must not be. It cannot be.

VI. John 3:5 — Jesus answered [Nicodemus], "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus argues that what Jesus says is impossible, and so Jesus responds by saying again, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." Only this time, since Nicodemus has pretended ignorance of what Jesus means, and since he's shifted the focus to man's initiative and man's abilities, Jesus chooses to be more specific. Instead of "unless one is born **from above** he cannot **see** the kingdom of God," now He says, "unless one is born **of water and the Spirit**, he cannot **enter** the kingdom of God."

* Even if *anōthen* should be translated "again" Nicodemus would have known that Jesus was speaking of a categorically different "kind" of birth.

This time Jesus uses language that Nicodemus can't pretend to misunderstand because it's drawn from the same Scriptures that he'd spent his whole life studying. In the Old Testament, water symbolized both spiritual cleansing (cf. Ps. 51:7-10; Isa. 1:16; 52:15; Jer. 2:22; 4:14) as well as that which brings new life to God's people (cf. Isa. 35:1-10; 41:17-20; 43:19-21; 51:1-3; Ezek. 47:6-9). It was in both of these ways that the symbol of water found its true substance in the life-giving, cleansing, and regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. So we read in Isaiah, and then in Ezekiel:

- Isaiah 44:3 (cf. Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28-29) — For **I will pour water** on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; **I will pour my Spirit** upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.
- Ezekiel 36:25-27 — **I will sprinkle clean water on you**, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And **I will put my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

What the prophet Ezekiel is saying is that salvation is always a sovereign work of God's own initiative and of His almighty power from beginning to end. It's a super-natural work by which our innermost person is totally and radically remade. This isn't just an outward reformation, but an inward transformation of our whole person – so that our *minds* are enlightened in the knowledge of Christ (that's our thinking), we're given new *affections* (new desires), and therefore even our *wills* are renewed (our choosing) so that now we embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the Gospel; cf. Baptist Catechism). Apart from this radical inner transformation of our whole person—mind, affections, and will—*no one* will see the kingdom of God. Apart from this transformation no one can have a saving *knowledge* of Christ. Apart from this transformation no one can *desire* a saving knowledge of Christ. Apart from this transformation no one can *choose* a saving knowledge of Christ. Even faith itself is simply the first and most fundamental expression of this transformation that God alone can work in us.

- 1 John 4:7 — Whoever loves has been born of God [There's a logical order and a cause and effect relationship here: We love *because* we have been born of God].
- 1 John 5:18 — Everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning [we do not keep on sinning *because* we have been born of God].
- 1 John 5:4 — Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world [we overcome the world *because* we have been born of God].
- 1 John 5:4 — And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith [our faith overcomes the world because our faith is the first and most fundamental expression of our being born of God].
- 1 John 5:1 — Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God [we believe savingly *because* we have been born again].

The only way to enter into that life associated with the age to come is to be born into it, and this birth can only be the supernatural, sovereign working of God's own initiative and of His almighty power. Jesus says in verse six:

VII. John 3:6–7 — “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

Like gives birth to like. Therefore: The natural man born from below is totally helpless to begin, or to initiate, or to contribute in any way to his being born from above – because the natural man **is** natural; because that which is born of the flesh **is** flesh and therefore all of our thoughts and affections and choices are determined and conditioned by this “natural,” fleshly existence (cf. Ridderbos). Not only does this prove our total helplessness and inability, but it also proves the necessity of the very thing we’re so totally helpless to bring about. The life associated with the age to come is “spirit” – a life wholly fitted to and conditioned by the things of the Spirit of God (cf. Carson). Therefore, isn’t it obvious that if we who have been born only of the flesh would enter into that life associated with the age to come, we *must* be born from above?—we *must* be born of the Spirit? This is an absolute *necessity*.

Are we left, then, to despair? Not at all. Because that which is impossible with us is possible with God (cf. Lk. 18:27). Jesus goes on to say in verse eight:

VIII. John 3:8 — “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.”

Imagine the mystery that the wind must have been to the ancients. Without any knowledge of low pressure or high-pressure systems the wind must have been wholly beyond their comprehension. Where did it come from? Where was it going? Who could direct or control the wind? Who could predict any of its movements? In a similar way, Jesus says, the working of God’s Spirit in causing a person to be born from above is so completely free and so infinitely powerful as to be beyond all our comprehension.[†] This isn’t meant to work in us a kind of fatalism that sits back and wonders if and when the Spirit will ever work in *me*.

“The freedom of the Spirit to go where he pleases is not capriciousness but power that nothing can hold back. And the Spirit’s untraceability is not anonymous incalculability but possession of means that humans cannot have but are possible with God.”
(Ridderbos)

What, then, is this knowledge meant to work in us? It’s meant to work in us true faith – true faith in the free and almighty power of God, in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit to cause us to be supernaturally born from above—born into that “new” life associated with the age to come—and in this very act of believing to know, indeed, that we *have been* born of the Spirit. And yet there are many for whom these very words, rather than working faith in them, are only a cause for stumbling.

IX. John 3:9 — Nicodemus said to [Jesus], “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus has been born only of the flesh; therefore, he stumbles over the stumbling block. Nicodemus has been born only of the flesh; therefore, he does not yet truly see or accept the

[†] “Strictly speaking it is not the Spirit but the one born of the Spirit that is compared with the wind. The one that does the work and the work are telescoped, so to speak” (Ridderbos; contra Morris, Carson, etc.)

things of the Spirit of God. And yet even in the face of this unbelief, Jesus doesn't write Nicodemus off. It was, after all, Jesus Himself who just spoke these words: "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." And so:

X. John 3:10-12 — Jesus answered [Nicodemus], "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?"

Jesus doesn't write Nicodemus off, does he? But neither does Jesus "soften" His message to make it any less of a stumbling block to the natural man. In fact, you could really say that this is in a sense the final blow.

"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ... If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe [if you do not believe the most elementary things concerning how an earthly man born of the flesh may enter the kingdom of God], how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things [how can you believe if I tell you the even deeper and more wondrous things of the kingdom itself; cf. Carson]?"

Nicodemus comprehends intellectually, but he doesn't understand. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." So Nicodemus himself is proof and evidence of the truth of Jesus' words – "You must be born from above." And yet Nicodemus is the one who opened the dialogue with these words: "Rabbi, **we know** that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Nicodemus thought he *did* understand. As the teacher of Israel – the one responsible for teaching others the things of God, this was one of the things he was most sure of. And yet Jesus is calling Nicodemus to see that all that he "knows" is actually no "true" knowledge at all because he's still only "of the flesh" – because he hasn't been "born of the Spirit." How can he possibly believe, or understand, or speak truly of the things of God and of eternal life unless he himself has been born into that life? Nicodemus does believe, but his believing is fundamentally deficient because it flows not from life in the Spirit, but only from the "natural" life of the "natural" man born only "of the flesh."

Did you notice the plurals that Jesus uses? "*We* speak of what *we* know [presumably Jesus and His disciples], and bear witness to what *we* have seen, but you do not receive *our* testimony." Why does Jesus do this? We have to remember that "we" is preceded and followed with "I."

"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?"

Jesus isn't putting himself on the same level with His disciples, but He is saying that His disciples "know" far more truly than Nicodemus knows because they've seen what Nicodemus has never seen – they've seen the kingdom of God (3:3). In opposition to the "we know" of Nicodemus—the "we know" of the natural man born only "of the flesh"—Jesus sets the "we

know” of those who have been born of the Spirit – of those who have been born into the life of the age to come.

After His *inclusive* “we know” Jesus now transitions to the uniqueness and *exclusivity* of what and how *He* “knows” and what this means for Nicodemus – and for us.

XI. John 3:13–15 — No one has ascended into heaven [or *can* ascend 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 may *in him*[‡] have eternal life.

We’ll come back to these wonderful verses next week. But for right now we see that it’s only “in Him”—in Jesus, this very one speaking with Nicodemus—that we can have this eternal life – this *life* that belongs to the kingdom of God in the age to come. So after Jesus has emptied us of literally everything, He calls us to believe. He calls us to receive His testimony and therefore to put all our trust in Him—who descended from heaven *so that* He might be “lifted up” for sinners – first on the cross, and then in resurrection life to the right hand of God. What so far has only been for Nicodemus an offense and stumbling block is ultimately intended by Jesus to be a *means* by which the Holy Spirit sovereignly works in us saving faith. This is a super-natural “believing” that’s able to say “we know” not as Nicodemus said “we know” but only as those can say it who have been born of the Spirit and who have received the testimony of Jesus – not only His testimony concerning us, but supremely His testimony concerning Himself.

Are you seeing just *how* absolutely necessary it is that we be born from above? Will you believe in Jesus who came down from above so that all who see Him “lifted up” may “in Him” have eternal life?

[‡] Cf. NASB; NIV; ASV; NCV. The Greek here is *en auto*. *En auto* [in him], *en emoi* [in me], or any other *en* with a dative never modify “believe” [*pisteuo*] anywhere else in John’s Gospel. Everywhere else in John’s Gospel these expressions always have a “local” meaning (dative of sphere; cf. Jn. 1:4; 20:31). For other absolute uses of *pisteuo* see John 6:47 and 20:31. Everywhere else in John that “belief” is said to be “in” someone (in the sense of the object of belief) the preposition used is not “*en*” but universally and without exception, “*eis*” (36x’s; John 1:12; 2:11, 23; 3:16, 18, 36; 4:39; 6:29, 35, 40; 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48; 8:30; 9:35, 36; 10:42; 11:25, 26, 45, 48; 12:11, 36, 37, 42, 44 [3x’s], 46; 14:1 [2x’s], 12; 16:9; 17:20).