

April 27, 2014
Community Baptist Church
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 3:1-15.

1. Why did Jesus answer a question (or so it appears) that Nicodemus did not ask?
2. Describe the character of Nicodemus at this point in his life, based on the scant evidence found in our text.
3. What did Jesus mean when He taught, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5)?
4. Do you think Nicodemus experienced regeneration during this conversation with Jesus? Defend your conclusion.

I DON'T GET IT John 3:1-15

Starting with chapter three, we find Jesus, who knew what was in man, entering into several conversations with individuals, and sometimes groups of individuals, as He draws to the surface what is truly in the hearts of those people.

In Jesus' conversation with a teacher named Nicodemus, He spelled out in clear terms the promise of eternal life through faith in God the Son who gave Himself as the sacrifice for sins. It is the truth. It is the greatest message ever told. It is something a teacher of Israel should have known. It is the message you must know—the message to which you must respond.

You Must Be Born Again (vv.1-8).

A ruler came to share an observation with Jesus. John tells us that he was a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night. *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night (vv.1-2a).* That he is identified as a Pharisee means that this man named Nicodemus was a member of the conservative ruling party that put much stock in keeping the traditions handed down by the scribes. More than that, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the leaders who made and enforced rules for the Jews. Looking way ahead in the story, we know that along the way something in his heart changed because we know from later evidence that he came to understand Jesus and was even found at the crucifixion.

But that will be later. There is little belief in the man's heart in this story. He came to Jesus by night. There seems to be a common opinion that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he was afraid of being found out by the other rulers. At this point, it does not seem that there was the deep contention between the leaders and Jesus that would develop in a very short time. Possibly he came at night in order not to imply that his curiosity represented the entire Sanhedrin. Or some people propose that the word *night* as it is used here is a figurative term used to describe the man's spiritual condition, a spiritual darkness in his soul (which was true). At the same time, there are people who say the term points to the fact that Rabbis commonly discussed and debated issues long into the night. It seems most likely that this was an important man in Israel who wanted to have nagging questions answered, questions that flowed from his spiritually dark soul.

This Pharisee acknowledged that Jesus was a unique teacher. *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” (v.2b).* Nicodemus addressed Jesus as Rabbi, which was simply a term of respect acknowledging that the person was considered to be a reputable teacher. He confessed that *“we” know that you are a teacher come from God.* First of all this was not a reference to Jesus' divinity. Nicodemus wasn't at that point in faith yet. And the other Pharisees would never get there. And that he was speaking in some way on behalf of others is clear in that the teacher did acknowledge that the issue involved “we.” We has to refer to some other members of the Sanhedrin. Though at the same

time it is doubtful that Nicodemus was an official representative sent by the entire ruling body.

He acknowledged that “We know that you came from God.” That is to say that they believed that in some way Jesus was God’s special teacher. There is no hint in this acknowledgment that they thought Jesus was “the Prophet” or “Messiah” or the “One who is to come.” Or even that He was Elijah! Rather, it seemed obvious to the leaders that Jesus’ miraculous signs confirmed that He had some kind of special relationship with God (*having come* from God). Apparently, members of the Sanhedrin saw some of the “signs He was doing,” and those signs attracted attention. That was the purpose for Jesus’ signs, and the sign gifts Jesus gave to the apostles. Those signs caused a certain amount of “belief” but no genuine commitment (2:23-25).

It appears that the teacher barely got the words out of his mouth when Jesus answered a question that Nicodemus didn’t ask (vv.3-8). He abruptly said, *You must be born again. Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v.3)*. Nicodemus had asked no particular question, but he did imply one. We can surmise that if he would have asked a question, he would have asked, “Who are you?” or “What are you?” Did he also wonder if Jesus was “the Prophet”? If so, his question would be similar to the kind of pressing question that people posed to John the Baptist when he had aroused so much attention.

By his opening assessment of Jesus, Nicodemus was saying, “We can obviously **see** some evidence of a God - kind of relationship in You.” This conclusion was not very unlike many people today who have a certain interest in religious things. Many religious folks are aware that the Bible teaches that Christ the King is returning to the earth one day. They even believe that unsettling signs probably portend that return. Therefore, they are prone to ask questions about the Christ coming from God again. And we would do well to answer that, apart from faith in Christ unto salvation, any speculation or debate on when, how, or even why He will return is of no value. If the speculators are not interested in becoming holy through the sacrifice of Christ to forgive their sins, what concern is it of theirs that He will come from God to earth again?

Jesus’ reply would have been a bit unsettling to any inquirer. John had preached that the people needed to repent because the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Matt. 3:2). His message was that Jesus the King of

the kingdom had come. It is only fitting that Jesus would preach the same message (Matt. 4:17). That the kingdom of heaven was at hand was good news to devout Jews. They believed that when Messiah came to establish the kingdom and sit on David’s throne, all Jews (other than the worst of sinners) would automatically enter the kingdom.

In their humble opinion, the leaders believed that a man like Nicodemus would no doubt occupy a special place of leadership in the kingdom. He had tried diligently to keep the law all his life. He kept all the rituals and traditions. He had become a Pharisee, the strictest party of the Jews. He was even among the rulers of the Jewish people. How shocking to hear, after such work and carefulness, that everyone was kept out of the kingdom unless they had undergone a special “rite.”

Jesus told this teacher in no uncertain terms that *unless one is born again*, he would not get into the kingdom. The word translated “again” (*anōthen*) means “from above.” For example, Jesus used this word when He told Pilate that he would have no power at all except that it had been given him “from above” (John 19:11). The word also means “anew” or “again” as in the case where the Galatians desired to turn “again” to elementary things (Gal. 4:9).

Jesus’ point was that, apart from being born again, no one can see the kingdom of God. Wait a minute! According to common opinion, Nicodemus and his peers were shoe-ins for the kingdom. Now suddenly this Teacher, who obviously had some kind of “God” connection because he was **able** to do amazing works, informed the teacher of Israel that he was **not able** to see the kingdom unless he was born again. That he would not “see” the kingdom meant that he would not experience or participate in the promised coming kingdom. Apart from a new “begetting,” the teacher’s future was hopeless.

That would have rocked the confidence of Nicodemus quite a bit. Therefore, he posed a question that drew an explanation of spiritual birth from Jesus (vv.4-8). The question: *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v.4)*. Obviously, this teacher of Israel is incredulous that Jesus would place a severe restriction on entering the kingdom. He was quite sure that he of all people would enter and even be among the leaders of the kingdom of God. The problem is that Nicodemus had an errant view of the kingdom. He assumed that it was merely another earthly monarchy. He also struggled with the fact that he held an inflated view of himself.

Therefore, Nicodemus responded to Jesus' teaching about the need for a new begetting with a question that borders on sarcasm. He knew it was impossible for a person to be physically born again. The man was totally confused and probably a bit put off by this Teacher from the hills of Galilee. Yet this is the condition of many of our peers. They naturally believe that they can gain God's favor, resulting in eternal life, by doing good things. When they hear terminology like spiritually dead, naturally sinful, offense against God, need of a payment for sin, faith in Christ's sacrifice, they are confused and incredulous. They wonder why all that stuff is necessary and even how one goes about it.

Jesus explained that everyone who will get into the kingdom must be born of the Spirit (vv.5-7). *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (v.5)*. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless born of water and the Spirit. Because Jesus was talking about **one** birth (the new birth or the birth from above), the phrase, *born of water and the Spirit*, has to refer to that same one birth not two separate births (i.e. physical and spiritual). In fact, that very idea was made very clear in the Old Testament as God used the picture of water and the Holy Spirit together to describe inner cleansing from sin. Through Ezekiel God declared, *"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" (Ezekiel 36:25-27)*. In the Old Testament, just as it is in the New Testament, God taught that salvation is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit as He washes us with the water of God's Word. Because that teaching is found throughout the Old Testament, Nicodemus—being the teacher in Israel—should have known this.

Why must it be like this? Jesus gave the reason when He said, *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v.6)*. That which is born of flesh (i.e. every human) is characterized by all the sin and weakness of the flesh—so all children of men. That which is begotten by the Holy Spirit (only Jesus Christ and then Christians in the new birth) is spiritual—so all children of God.

Entering the kingdom of God requires the miracle of the new birth which is the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, Jesus told the teacher, *"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'" (v.7)*. That flesh cannot inherit heaven, and that every person is born in the sinful flesh, explains why a person must be born again to have eternal life. Natural born, flesh- and-blood people, are not the same as Spirit-born spiritual people. Becoming a "new creation," as Paul called the new birth, is critical. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)*.

Not content to leave the instruction there, Jesus said, as it were, "Let Me illustrate." The illustration Jesus gave is that trying to explain being born of the Spirit is like explaining the wind. *"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" (v.8)*. Before modern technology that measures wind came along, wind was invisible (still is), uncontrollable (still is), and not well understood. We can observe the effect of wind, but we can not command the wind.

So is the work of God the Holy Spirit in salvation. You must be born again in order to enter eternal life. You cannot decide when or how that will happen. You must respond to the work of the Holy Spirit when He convicts you. That idea was contrary to everything Nicodemus had been taught. That idea is contrary to everything our peers naturally assume. Okay, but how does one go about doing this thing with the Holy Spirit?

How? (vv.9-15).

Shouldn't a teacher of Israel know these things (vv.9-10)? John pointed out that the teacher was confused. *Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (v.9)*. To the man who believed that salvation was obtained by keeping the law, Jesus' teaching was incredible. Probably he spent his adult life teaching others that the way to salvation was to do what pleased God, be faithful to God's commands, and keep the traditions passed down by the elders. Now he hears that salvation comes only through a miraculous spiritual birth.

That was pretty hard to believe and Nicodemus said so. He was so like our friends, neighbors, and relatives. If they ever think about salvation, they connect it with going to church, saying prayers, and reading their Bibles sometimes. Those who are really devout truly believe that when they get to God's judgement bar, He will weigh their good works against their bad works to determine if entrance to heaven should be granted. Most religions, most preachers, most "churches" teach this very thing!

But, of all people in Israel, Nicodemus should have understood. *Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (v.10).* Jesus' response to Nicodemus' incredulity seems rather sharp and unkind. The teacher showed up with curiosity about Jesus and almost immediately Jesus went directly to the point of salvation and exposed the common error Nicodemus and other teachers in that day taught. The fact that Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel presupposed that he should have had his theology right. *The teacher in Israel* is a title that indicates that this man was a recognized authority whose teaching the people should respect and embrace. Jesus made it clear with no uncertain terms that because the man was an authority on the Old Testament, he should have known that salvation comes from the miracle of the new birth, through regeneration by the Holy Spirit and the washing of the Word. Why was he unaware of the truth? Why did he teach error?

Actually Nicodemus was a good illustration of what was wrong spiritually in Israel. The people were plenty religious (like America). But they replaced the truth of the Bible with their own religion (like America). If we don't get the gospel right, no one has any hope of eternal life.

Of course, Jesus always got it right. He explained eternal life (vv.11-15). He told Nicodemus that God revealed truth through God the Son. Indeed, He spoke truth and people didn't accept it (v.11). *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 (v.11).* *We* refers to the message of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, who bring new birth through the washing of the Word. So the pronoun *we* as it is used here is contrasted to the *we* of Nicodemus which referred to the conclusion of the Sanhedrin. Jesus virtually said, "You people teach the error of legalism, but WE speak what we know." Of course God the Son

and God the Holy Spirit know perfect truth. They bore witness to the truth of the gospel which plan they laid in eternity. Here was perfect, eternal, absolute truth—and all the "teachers of Israel," the people who ought to teach truth, rejected it.

Early on in Jesus' ministry, the stage of conflict was set. It was the conflict between God's eternal truth and humanity's error which is rooted in the sin of Satan. The great error is that I am good enough, devoted enough, faithful enough to win eternal life. The truth is that Jesus is *the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).*

Therefore, Jesus explained that if we reject earthly explanations, what will we do with heavenly truth? *If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (v.12).* Nicodemus believed that Jesus had a special connection with God. But his faith was so human bound, earth bound. He could not begin to grasp the truth Jesus would teach about His divinity, His sacrifice for sins, His resurrection from the dead, His ascending to heaven to intercede for believers.

We have to understand and embrace the *heavenly things* because heaven is the source of that heavenly truth. Jesus told Nicodemus, "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*" (v.13). No mere human came from heaven to bring the teaching about what he had seen there.

Jesus, the Son of Man, came from heaven. Listen to Him. That is how God introduced the ministry of Jesus the Beloved Son. When He came up out of the water of baptism, *a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35).*

And this is the truth! *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 (vv.14-15).* God gave pictures in the Old Testament for a reason. When the Israelites sinned against God, He sent snakes into the camp to bite the people and many people died. The people repented of their sin. God told Moses to make an image of a serpent, attach it to a pole, and erect the pole in the center of the camp. God's rule was that everyone who was bitten by a snake needed only to look on the snake on the pole and have faith that God would heal them according to His promise. In each instance God healed the believer.

That was a picture of Jesus Christ being lifted up on a cross where He paid the penalty for sin. Everyone born has been bitten by the serpent of sin. Everyone bitten faces the certainty of eternal pain and agony because of the infection of sin. But God, our Creator who we offend with our sin, accepts the shed blood of Jesus Christ as the payment for our offenses. Do you believe it? God established the plan in eternity. God the Son came from heaven and completed the plan. God freely offers the covering for sin to all people. Those who believe God, those who trust what He has provided and what He says about what He has provided, will be saved from sin unto eternal life.

There is no greater truth or message to tell. It is not an earthly message rooted in human wisdom, but the message from heaven, brought by the Spirit of God.