

## Chapter 3

The Gospel of John: July 3, 2016

### Bible Study Session 3

This chapter opens with a visit from a man named Nicodemus. While he is not mentioned in any of the synoptic gospels, we do learn later on in John that he is a member of the Jewish governing body called “The Sanhedrin” which is headed by the High Priest, the highest authority in first century Israel. This being the case, Nicodemus would have been a highly respected authority on Jewish law and scripture. For the most part, these people would have been very suspicious of any “reform rabbi” such as Jesus. Moreover, his actions in the temple could have been understood as seditious. This would not normally have been a sympathetic character in relation to Jesus.

However, in his question—or rather a statement that implies a question—to Jesus, Nicodemus demonstrates a degree of openness to the presence of God rather unexpectedly, given who he is. That is, while he doesn’t actually say he saw God’s presence in Jesus, he does admit that no one can do the signs Jesus does apart from God’s presence. He goes further and says, “...we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” This says as much about Nicodemus as it does about Jesus. He does not discount the obvious for political or religious reasons. There is a degree of faith in his heart—of openness to God—that does not exist in most other authorities. What this means is that Nicodemus is ready and capable of learning more.

Faith is something that grows one step at a time. It begins with an open heart for God. God, as he is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is not someone about whom we can understand before coming to faith. In other words, we don’t know God first and then come to trust him. Rather, we can know God only in and through faith. The only thing we know prior to faith is our own ignorance and unfulfilled desire. Openness to God means having admitted to our ignorance and our desire to learn. This is the first step in coming to a faith that is actually capable of recognizing the presence of God in some sense. As St. Anselm put it, “Faith seeks understanding.”

In the case of Nicodemus, it was the miraculous signs that pointed to the presence of God. It’s not that he “saw” God’s presence yet. It’s that he concluded it must be there in Jesus’ ministry. So while he had yet to come to faith, he was in a spiritual place where faith was a possibility.

Many of Nicodemus’ contemporaries would never have gotten this far. And this is true because--by and large--human beings do not appreciate having their spiritual convictions called into question. Jesus represented a challenge to the authorities, and the teacher of the law in particular. Therefore, to entertain the idea that perhaps he might actually be an authentic teacher with knowledge of God—this could have been disturbing to those who did not want their spiritual assumptions

questioned. No one undergoes a transformation in their religious assumptions without having some sense that they don't have all the answers, and that they are open enough to change if that becomes necessary. In short, Nicodemus was unique in this regard.

However, Nicodemus is also worried and concerned about what he's thinking. John observes that Nicodemus comes to Jesus after dark. Two things can be said about this. First, Nicodemus does not want to be seen with Jesus. Were others from the Sanhedrin to have seen him having a private conversation with a controversial figure, this would have given rise to suspicions. Nicodemus's life would have been under a cloud, and this he wanted to avoid.

Secondly, in John's gospel, light and darkness serve as symbols for faith and unbelief. Faith "sees" God. God comes to light in a person's heart when he/she has faith. An unbelieving heart cannot "see" God because God can be apprehended or perceived only by faith. Faith is the perceiving organ of the heart, the "eyes" of the heart. A heart that has no faith is therefore blind. The person with an unbelieving heart lives in darkness and therefore is unable to "see" God.

This describes Nicodemus for the time being. While he questions the possibility of God being present in Jesus, nevertheless, he does not yet see the presence of God. For him, the presence of God in Jesus' ministry is a question for which he seeks an answer. The fact that Nicodemus has gotten as far as to question the possibility of God's presence in Jesus leads Jesus to make some pointed observations.

First, Jesus basically acknowledges that Nicodemus is struggling to "see" God's presence by telling him what must happen if he is ever going to achieve this ability. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This is the only reference in John to "the kingdom of God." It means the rule or power of God. Jesus uses this terminology because of the fact that Nicodemus referred to the signs. These were acts of God's power done through Jesus, but it means the same thing as "seeing God."

This verse has, in my opinion, been much overemphasized and, as such, misinterpreted. The notion of being "born again" has gained a lot of traction among those whose tradition has rejected infant baptism. Historically, this started with the "Anabaptists" of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but from there, it spread to many other groups, particularly certain Baptist groups. At the time of the Reformation, the issue was whether baptism rests on a promise from God, given unconditionally to the baptized (Luther's view), or whether it is a sign of the baptized person's faith. If the latter were the correct biblical view, then infant baptism would be inappropriate. Baptism would be rightfully offered only to those who were capable of confessing their faith in Jesus Christ. Some groups who believed in this position later adopted a "born again" view of coming to faith.

But it wasn't only those traditions that rejected infant baptism that eventually embraced a "born again" view of the initial development of faith in the human heart. New England Puritans, for example, who hailed from a Calvinist background, required church members to tell the story of their conversion. Such stories were often embellished with dramatic details of how the Holy Spirit changed their hearts. Experiences such as these resulted in the birth of a new identity.

Getting back to what Jesus truly said according to John: The phrase he uses is "...being born from above." "Above" here is clearly a reference to God's Spirit. Jesus follows this up by restating his point. "... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is Spirit."

The point here seems clear. The formal sacrament of Baptism (water) and the gift of the Spirit are together. Water by itself is nothing other than water, and therefore results in nothing of spiritual value. However, if through water baptism the spirit of god is gifted to the baptized person, then a new person comes into being. This process of being born anew through the gift of God's Spirit describes what Jesus means by "entering the Kingdom of God." This is simply another way of saying that the person is given the spiritual ability to see God.

Jesus' point to Nicodemus is more simple than it may at first look. While Nicodemus concludes on the basis of the signs Jesus performs that God must be present, nevertheless, Jesus knows that Nicodemus cannot yet "see" God's presence. Being open to god is one thing. Actually being able to "see" God (enter God's Kingdom) is another. The only way a person can "see" God is if God gives that person the ability to "see" God. This God accomplishes by sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Moreover, the gift of the Spirit (And that's what it is—a gift. It's not something with which we are rewarded.) effects a spiritual birth. Later on in John, this spiritual birth is referred to as "faith".

Faith is a gift of God's grace (God's Spirit). As such, faith is that through which we are enabled to know and be assured of God's presence in our lives and in the world. This is also why the knowledge of god comes only by a "revelation". We cannot know God through reason, observation, or any kind of investigation, scientific or otherwise. Only God can make himself known.

Furthermore, the knowledge of God is not objective knowledge. It's not like scientific knowledge or the knowledge we have by perceiving the objects in our field of vision. Rather, it is knowledge that changes the heart. God's Spirit, through which we become aware of God's presence, is poured into our hearts. And, because God's spirit is best described as the Spirit of love, this knowledge produces in our hearts the "fruits of the Spirit." (Paul, Galatians 5) These are "faith, hope, love, peace, patience, generosity, and self-control, among others.

So, coming to faith is the same as being given the ability to know God. To know God is to become a spiritually new person because the spirit of God dwells in our hearts. And this, in turn, results in a changed heart—a heart that is growing in its ability to be freed of guilt, shame, fear, and despair. Instead we have what Jesus called “the treasures of heaven”: what Paul called “the fruits of the Spirit. All of this, John says, comes to us in Jesus Christ, “full of grace and truth.”

Unfortunately, while Nicodemus is ready to hear this message, having become a seeker after God, (no small task for a man who otherwise would have been convinced he already knew everything needed to know about God—an attitude that describes many a believer and atheist alike today) he is incapable of rising to the level of Jesus meaning. Jesus is speaking on a “spiritual” level. Nicodemus remains mentally on a literal level. Therefore, when he hears Jesus talk of being born anew, he responds, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” This happens again and again in John’s gospel. Jesus confuses his hearers because he is speaking of “heavenly things.” (3:12) Not having received the gift of the spirit, Nicodemus remains stuck on earthly things. For this reason, Jesus confronts him on his lack of ability to teach anything about God. “How can you be a teacher of Israel?”

The bottom line reason for Nicodemus’ ignorance is that he “...does not receive our testimony.” (V 5:11) Only Jesus can deliver on the knowledge of God because only Jesus has “...descended from heaven...” Others, such as ourselves, can have this knowledge only by “receiving his testimony.” That is, by putting our faith in God’s Word.

John then enters into his most famous discourse. In the book of Numbers 21:8-9, the story is told of how many Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes in the desert. God tells Moses to lift up a bronze serpent so that, by gazing at the divine instrument, those who had been poisoned could be healed.

Jesus uses this story to refer to his being lifted up on the cross. Just as the Israelites were given life by gazing at the uplifted serpent, anyone who believes that Jesus’ death by crucifixion atones for their sin receives eternal life.

John 3:16 is perhaps the single most familiar verse in John, if not in the Bible as a whole, with the possible exception of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The purpose of the verse—and by the way, this looks to be John’s commentary rather than words of Jesus—is to explain the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. (And his whole ministry for that matter.) The death of Jesus on the cross is an expression of God’s love. Love is understood as an act that is done solely for the benefit of another. The person who loves does not act in order to gain a benefit for the self. It is an “other-directed” act.

Moreover, the measure of the love given is a factor of the sacrifice required. In other words, the sacrifice defines the measure of the love given for the sake of the other. Therefore, God’s love for everyone who believes is measured by the fact that he gave his only son to die in order that we might receive something in return. But the value

of a Son cannot be measured. It is beyond measure and therefore infinite. God's love for us is infinite.

Moreover, according to this verse, the benefit we derive from God's infinite love is that our ultimate existential threat, namely, death, is eliminated. We receive eternal life. Separation from God (Sin) results in a life that is perishing. Like all animate matter that exists in space and time, it returns to its original elements, namely, earth. However, reunion with God would result in eternal life because only God lives eternally.

Looking at this assertion in conjunction with Jesus' discussion of the Spirit with Nicodemus, and in context with the New Testament as a whole, this means that the spirit of God is poured out on humanity as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection. Recall that the Baptist said Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus lived in union with the Spirit of God. In the synoptic gospels, the Spirit descends upon Jesus when he is baptized. That same Spirit is released to us through Jesus' death and resurrection. It is as if the gospel writers were saying that the Spirit—which is God's love—was released to us precisely because Jesus sacrificed his life for ours. Because of Jesus self-sacrificial love, we receive God's Spirit of love and thereby also eternal life.

John further explains his meaning in the verses that follow. Contrary to those who picture of God as a judge who condemns, (This is a fantasy constructed by a trouble conscience.) Jesus shows us a God who saves out of love. Judgment therefore does not come from God. Rather, people who reject Jesus reject God's gift of life and thereby condemn themselves. Such people live in darkness because deep down, they know their lives are lived in alienation from God. People of faith live in the light because, being loved and forgiven, they have nothing to hide.