

Gospel of John Study Session 8

In the last session we were introduced to a Pharisee named Nicodemus and a conversation he had with Jesus. Nicodemus realized that Jesus, in some manner, had come from God, yet he had no idea how radical Jesus' teachings would turn out to be. Rather than giving Nicodemus the culturally expected pass that all Jewish people, at least those faithful to God, could be part of His eternal kingdom one day, Jesus told him plainly that he needed to be born again. Gaining admittance into God's kingdom had nothing to do with one's genealogy but rather everything to do with a personal cleansing and renewal that changed the entire person's life from the inside out. The session ended with Jesus explaining to Nicodemus the working of the Holy Spirit in this cleansing and renewal. When the Spirit of God blows into a person's life, there will be unmistakable evidence. The single, unmistakable sign of the new birth is faith in Jesus. A person does not have respect or even have a good opinion or admiration for Jesus. Nicodemus had these things but not the new life. As John has been teaching, this faith is a wholehearted trust in Jesus. Like a tornado passing through an area, the Spirit will uproot the former life but there will be new life springing up in its place.

In this session we will continue and conclude with this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. It becomes evident very quickly that Nicodemus still does not have a firm handle on the meaning of Jesus' teachings to him on the new birth. Jesus, being the loving and patient teacher, will continue by bringing another Old Testament story to illustrate how this new birth comes about.

[John 3:9-13]

Nicodemus' question in v.9 gets translated, "*How can these things be?*" but this misses the actual struggle Nicodemus is having. The question should be translated, "*How can this happen?*" or "*How can these things be possible?*" Remember, Nicodemus had been taught and has taught others that entrance into God's kingdom had conditions where a faithful Jew had to be obedient to God's commands, possess a devotion to God and be submissive to His will as expressed in the Law. Yet now Jesus is smacking him with the truth from God and that is that the one condition for entrance being born from above. Nicodemus was skeptical that a new birth could actually take place. His question shows just how deep his unbelief in Jesus' statements go as he is in essence stating that it is not possible for a person to be born-again.

When Jesus hears Nicodemus' response, He responds fairly sharply. As Israel's teacher, Nicodemus should have understood these things. They were clearly laid out in the Old Testament (the Scriptures Nicodemus and the other Pharisees had committed to knowing and living out). As a recognized master and leader among other teachers, Nicodemus should have known that Jesus' teachings on the new birth were built upon the Old Testament.

Q: At the end of v.10, what is the "these things" to which Jesus refers? (*being born again*)

In v.11, Jesus speaks the pronoun "we" three times. The question for us is who is the "we" Jesus is referring to? Jesus is mimicking Nicodemus' own words back in v.2. Jesus' "I" at the beginning of v.11 turns into "we" in an attempt to let Nicodemus understand that He knows

things as well. Jesus is turning Nicodemus' disbelief of a new life into a question about the Messiah. He's using Nicodemus' same language to make a point that He needs to be understood. Nicodemus has approached Jesus with a certain amount of respect but had no appreciation for who Jesus truly was. At the heart of Nicodemus' problem with Jesus was not a failure of intellect but a failure to believe. The failure to believe is far worse in God's economy than the failure to understand since Jesus is seeing in Nicodemus a true failure to grasp that Jesus is the Messiah after hearing His explanation of the need for a new birth.

We know unbelief is what Jesus was chiding Nicodemus about because at the end of v.11, Jesus told him that he doesn't believe "our" testimony (actually Jesus' testimony). Belief is the key ingredient to the new life and Nicodemus is trying to wrangle this concept mentally instead of using faith in God. Actually, Nicodemus' great learning and intellect was getting in his way to accepted the truth that he needed to be born again. We'd call this "analysis paralysis". Jesus told him that internal transformation rather than external conformity is the essence of the new life. (In chapter 4 we are going to see a completely different scenario at work. Jesus is going to encounter a Samaritan woman at a well and unlike Nicodemus, she is going to take the little bit of knowledge Jesus gives her and engage Jesus by faith and we'll see the difference then.)

Now Jesus sets up a contrast between earthly things and heavenly things. Like just about everything else in this conversation, we have to set some ground rules to get at what Jesus was actually communicating to Nicodemus rather than just making blind guesses.

The thing one truth we need to continue to keep at the forefront of our work to properly interpret v.12 is that Jesus had just stated that Nicodemus was having a failure to believe what He was teaching him, despite being a man of great learning. Also, the earthly things are things that Jesus was just teaching Nicodemus about - not the illustrations Jesus was using.

1) It would be easy to label things like wind and natural birth as the earthly things but everyone believes in those things. This wasn't what Nicodemus was failing to believe.

2) A better interpretation is that the earthly things refers to the new birth from above. Earth is where the new birth takes place. It is where the basics of what Jesus has been saying are experienced. Also the "earthly" reference is in line with it being an elementary teaching, a basic truth to grasp. So if Nicodemus was coming to Jesus to ask about the truths about God's kingdom - what it was like, etc. - Jesus is telling Nicodemus since he is stumbling over the basic points of it's true nature and how to be gain entrance into it, he could never hope to understand these deeper truths. Jesus is in essence saying, *"What's the point in Me explaining the splendors and glories of God's kingdom when you can't seem to even understand the basics of how to gain entrance into it?"*

In v.13 the NIV and several other translations garble this verse because they translate a word "but" as "except". While "except" is a suitable translation for the word, it can lead to hardships in getting the right meaning. In English we tend to use the word "but" or phrases "but rather" or "but only" and they are to be preferred here (as in Revelation 21:27).

In ancient Judaism, many stories were circulated about saints who had ascended into heaven and received special insight, usually from Moses and then returned to earth to share that

insight. Jesus is insisting in this verse that no one has ever ascended into heaven in such a way as to return and talk about heavenly things. Heaven is where true wisdom is found but only Jesus can speak of it as He is the One who has come from heaven and descended to speak of it. Jesus is the revealer of heaven, the kingdom of God.

Q: Why do you think that Jesus makes the statement he makes in v.13? *(This verse explains that Jesus is the One who is authoritative to speak about heavenly things.)*

[Numbers 21:4-9]

Q: What were the people in this passage doing that angered God? *(vv. 4-5 - the people became impatient with God and began complaining against Him and Moses)*

Q: What did God do to the people? *(v.6 - He sent fiery serpents among the Israelites and they bit the people and many died due to their bites. The word "fiery" refers to the bright red spots these snakes had and are common in Arabia and are highly venomous.)*

Q: What did the people do? *(v.7 - The people cried out to God in repentance for their complaining and asked for deliverance from the venomous snakes.)*

Q: What did God tell Moses to do in response to their request for deliverance? *(v. 8 - He told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on top of a pole.)*

Q: In what way did this bronze snake bring deliverance from the snake bites? *(v.9 - Anyone who went and looked at the bronze snake lived but those who didn't look at it after being bitten died. It was an act of faith in doing what God told them to do. If a person had faith in God, they would make the trip to the center of the camp to view the snake. If they didn't have faith in God's plan, they would remain where they were and die. Their faith in God, not the bronze snake restored their lives.)*

[John 3:14-15]

Here's the trick for interpreting this passage. We need to answer the question as to how does this passage connect with the previous verses Jesus just spoke? There are two points of connection.

1) First, Jesus is moving from the "water - Spirit" explanation of the new birth used in Ezekiel to another well-known Old Testament account that deals with life - the one we just read in Numbers concerning the bronze snake.

Q: What did the bronze snake on the pole do for the Israelites in Numbers? *(It was the means by which God gave new life to the Israelites who were bitten by real snakes which had been sent to punish the people for their persistent murmurings.)*

So if God's provision for new life was graciously given when they cried out for it in the wilderness, why then should Nicodemus think it strange that the same God would provide a new

spiritual life, indeed, an eternal life, to those who come to Him by faith?

2) The second point of connection between vv.9-13 and vv. 14-15 was the act of being “lifted up”. Moses lifted up the snake on a pole so that all who were afflicted in the camp might look on it and live. In the same way, as v.14 says, the Son of Man must be lifted up.

The Greek word for “lifted up” is used 4 times in John. Every time this word is used by John it combines the notion of physically lifting Jesus up on the cross with the notion of exaltation.

[John 8:28-29]

[John 12:28-33]

[John 12:34-36]

Notice the word “must” in v.14. This word means a need which has to be fulfilled.

Q: What is the need Jesus is referring to by the word “must” in v.14? (*He must be crucified and then exalted*)

The crucifixion supplies the guilt offering necessary for the cleansing that all people need, the “water” reference in Ezekiel. The lifting up also links Jesus’ action on the cross with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. While the exaltation that comes after the crucifixion is what supplies the power that leads people to Jesus and the new birth (John 8:28, 12:32).

Now Jesus would not have expected Nicodemus to understand both of these connections at this point in time. However, He did expect Nicodemus to understand the first connection as it would be clear. Nicodemus was being challenged to turn to Jesus for the new birth in much the same way that the ancient Israelites were commanded to turn to the bronze snake for salvation from death from the venomous snakes. So Jesus who was the One who could reveal heaven to mankind due to having descended from there is now revealing clearly that Jesus, when He is lifted up and then exalted will be the One to look to for the new birth.

Q: According to v.15 - what is the purpose of Jesus being lifted up? (*To everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life*)

Now there is an important difference between the bronze snake and Jesus. Eventually the bronze snake had to be destroyed (II Kings 18:4) because people treated it like it possessed some magical powers. The object that saved the people from the threat of the desert snakes was God’s grace, not a bronze snake. The bronze snake was only the means by which faith in God was displayed. However, Jesus was much more than a mere lucky charm. The Father granted the Son to have life in Himself.

[John 5:26]

[John 11:25]

Q: Why is this fact significant? (*Because God is the only source of life. If Jesus is also the source of life, then He too is God.*)

Q: So what was Nicodemus' question back in v.9? (*How can this new life happen?*)

Now Jesus can expect Nicodemus to see the answer to that question. The kingdom of God is entered, the new birth experienced, and eternal life begins, through the saving work of Christ on the cross and all of this is received by faith in Jesus Christ. V.15 is the first time that the phrase "eternal life" appears in the book of John. It literally translates "life of the age [to come]". The eternal life begun by the new birth is nothing less than the life of the eternal Word.

[John 1:4]

This is why it's important to keep the prologue in mind at all times when reading through John. It unlocks and give depth to the other passaged John brings up. If you recall John's purpose in writing this gospel, he wants to show the Jesus is both the Son of God and the Messiah and by putting your faith and trust in Him, a person can be born again. Jesus had revealed to Nicodemus the portion about being born again, now He is in the process of revealing who He is to Nicodemus.

Before we get to this last section of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, we need to ask a question about God the Father.

Q: How do you think that most people view God in our culture? How do they picture Him?

According to a fairly recent poll from Time magazine, one of the most common responses to that question was that God was "*an older man who can get angry with us.*" God is the white-bearded father who is unhappy and gets angry with us from time to time. This is the picture many have of God in our culture. However, it's not the God as portrayed in the Scriptures. To get a true picture of who God is, we need to go to His Word and this next section of this passage gives us a great view of who God really is.

[John 3:16]

This is probably the most famous verse in the entire Bible. It's the gospel in a nutshell. It also gives us some valuable teaching on God and salvation but keep in mind that it is not a stand alone verse.

Q: What is the first word of John 3:16? (*For - this word suggests that what follows is the continuation or end of a thought from earlier.*)

The first word of the verse shows us that it links with vv.14-15 before it. From the human perspective, the new birth, which is how we acquire eternal life, has been grounded in

Jesus being lifted up. From God's perspective, the new birth, which brings us to God eternally, is grounded in His great love for us.

Q: How do you think the word "so" is being used by John in this verse? *(Does the word "so" denote how great and vast the love of God is, its intensity OR does the word "so" denote the manner of the love demonstrated by God. While it could mean either, the natural way of translating the word is usually "in this manner" or "in this way" but due to the context either or both could be intended.)*

Q: According to v.16, why did Jesus have to be lifted up or publicly executed? *(Due to the great love of God being shown for our new and eternal life)*

John, more than the other gospel writers spends a lot of time explaining the love relationship between God and man. This love that God has for mankind and in particular the love He has for those who are Jesus' disciples, is a special self-giving, sacrificial, love. The world, composed of fallen and rebellious human beings, does not and cannot love God.

The Jews, Nicodemus being one of them, were familiar with God loving the children of Israel. However, in this verse we are confronted with another major revolutionary truth that Jesus is bringing to Nicodemus. God has a great love for all races, every person in the world. When it comes to God's love, we are not to admire God's love because the world is so big and includes so many people. Rather, we admire God's love because the world is so bad and wicked that for God to love it means it must be a type of love beyond our natural capacity to show.

[I John 2:15-17]

Q: What does God prohibit us from loving? *(The world - the wickedness and sinfulness which comprises the world)*

Q: How did God demonstrate His love in v.16? *(He gave His only begotten Son for our new birth)*

[Romans 5:8]

The scope and intensity of God's love is so vast and awe-inspiring it leads mankind, even in his sinful state, to recognize the giving nature of God. It contradicts head on the old, angry man perception of our culture head on. Instead we see a God who is full of love for a world of people who desperately need this cleansing and new birth.

Q: According to v.16, what did God do for the world because of His love? *(He gave Jesus, He had Him lifted up for our salvation)*

The fact that God gave Jesus, His only Son, let's us know that believing in Jesus involves accepting a gift.

Q: What is required, according to v.16, in order to have eternal life? *(belief in Jesus Christ,*

God's Son)

If you recall from last week in 3:2 we were confronted with Nicodemus having an unspoken question for Jesus. He understood that in some way Jesus was from God but had no details, now Nicodemus is confronted with the truth that Jesus is the unique son of God, the revealer of heaven, and the Messiah that must be lifted up for the sins of the world.

Q: According to this verse, who may come to possess eternal life? (*Whosoever believes in Jesus*) (I didn't count but how many times has John made this exact point so far in the gospel?)

[I Timothy 2:3-6]

Q: According to this passage, who does God desire to be saved? (*all people*)

Q: Which people did Jesus give Himself as a ransom for? (*all people*)

The key to note here is that while God knows who will and will not be saved, He doesn't choose winners and losers. He has opened the door for any and desires for everyone to come to know Him and be saved and enjoy the new birth. Not everyone will come to faith in Jesus Christ.

The next point in this conversation is Jesus telling Nicodemus His mission or reason why He came to earth in the first place.

[John 3:17]

This verse is actually just a clarification and expanding on v.16.

Q: What reason was not Jesus' purpose in coming to earth? (*He did not come to judge/condemn the world*)

Q: What reason did Jesus give for Him coming to earth? (*He came in order that the world might be saved through Him*)

[John 9:39]

Some people have trouble reconciling **3:17** and **9:39**. One says Jesus didn't come to judge people while the other verse says He did and both verses were spoken by Jesus Himself. The fact is that the Son of Man came not into a neutral world but rather into a world which was already lost and condemned by sin. His goal wasn't to save a few and condemn others. He came in order to save all that would come to Him by faith. God's purpose was to make salvation possible to all even though He knew that not all would accept this gift of eternal life. So **3:17** focuses on Jesus and His mission to save some while **9:39** focuses on the fact that some will not accept Him by faith and remain condemned. Those mentioned in **9:39** were disbelievers from the start. Jesus has the authority to act as judge over mankind, an authority given to Him by the Father, yet He

wasn't utilizing this authority at this time except to reveal the hearts of those who were not right with the Lord. The "blind" in 9:39 are those who, like Nicodemus, should have understood spiritual truth and the Scriptures yet are judged by Jesus to be remaining in their sin due to their stubborn refusal to accept Him as the Messiah and Son of God to be saved.

Notice the last two words in v. 17 - "through Him". In order to be saved this verse also teaches us that we needed something supplied to our lives that we could not supply ourselves. No amount of human wisdom, ingenuity or work would ever bring a soul to salvation.

Next Jesus discusses the result of belief .

[John 3:18]

Notice that in vv. 16-17, Jesus speaks about the world as a whole. Now He breaks the world down into two groups.

Q: What are the two groups of people in v.18? *(Those who believe in Jesus and those who don't believe in Jesus)*

Q: What happens to those who believe in Jesus? *(This person will not be judged.)*

Q: What happens to those who do not believe in Jesus? *(They have been judged already)*

What John is getting at with his use of verbs in tenses we might not expect is that everyone is in need of a Savior. Those who don't end up believing have just compounded their own guilt by not believing in Jesus as that needed Savior. The lost have been judged already doesn't even need to wait until the day of judgment to receive their final condemnation. They have set themselves up for it already by their disbelief. So we see that the mission Jesus undertook to save people came with the effect that those who fail to believe have condemned themselves already - even before the final judgment.

[John 3:36]

Now back to the beginning of the verse, that verb is in the present tense. In other words, the condemnation and judgment of the person who does believe in Jesus has already been removed. There is no anticipation of a condemnation on the final day of judgment along with those who are lost. God has removed our guilt and does not cast us into final judgment. This is all in the backdrop again of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. It is the power of the cross to remove not only the penalty of sin but also the guilt and shame that go with sin. We are truly free so that sin is no longer the force running our lives.

[Romans 6:5-14]

[Romans 8:34]

The final section of this discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus comes to a close here with Jesus explaining the need for a response from man.

[John 3:19-21]

It is important as we read this last section to remember that condemnation is a result of a person's refusal to accept God's gift. People will face the penalty of their sin, not because God's gift of His Son is insufficient to save but rather because they refuse to turn from their sin and trust in Jesus to save them. If a person rejects Jesus, they have no one to blame but themselves. Notice that Jesus is describing Himself as Light. This refers back to **John 1:4-5** in the prologue. Jesus is the revelation of God and the objectification of divine holiness and purity.

Q: In this passage, why did men not come into the Light? *(They preferred the darkness.)*

Q: Why are lost people afraid to come into the Light? *(They are afraid their deeds will be exposed and that will lead to shame and conviction.)*

The phrase "practices the truth" (v.21) is an expression that means to "act faithfully" or "act honorably". The person who acts in this manner is happy to come into the Light and live in the Light. This does not mean that one can act or work their way into the Light. Those who live in the Light are those who have already put their faith in Jesus. Those who live in the darkness are all the lost. Those who live in the light are secure in their own skin and are comfortable living fully exposed lives in the light knowing that God loves them enough that He sent His only Son to die in their places. They understand that they are living in the Light, not by their own goodness or good works, but rather so that their lives will be seen by those who are lost and encourage them to seek out the Light as well.

[Matthew 5:14-16]

The purpose of these final three verses is not to put people into pre-determined categories based upon their works or some cosmic divine pre-selection but rather to encourage those who read these verses (and passage) to understand there are only two groups of people in God's eyes. Each person is either a person who enjoys living in the darkness or the Light and that decision is based upon whether or not they have believed in Jesus. Those of us who live in the Light are to live openly so that others will see this witness and come out of the darkness into the Light.

Q: So according to this entire passage (John 3:1-21) how does one come to possess eternal life? *(one believes in Jesus and makes a conscious decision to receive the forgiveness offered for the new birth.)*

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?