



John 3:1-17. Jesus is The Way

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Since the dawn of man, he has sought God. Every civilization, modern or ancient, has shown strong evidence of this search. The reason for this is simple: man was created in God's image, with an eternal and indwelling personal spirit that has the capacity to know God and to have a relationship with God. When a person does not have a relationship with God, he/she has, as some have metaphorically described, a "God-shaped hole" in their hearts. All people have been created with a need that only God can fill. Consequently, man has always been obsessed with filling that need, and has sought to do so through limitless methods. One common method has been to recognize that God is good, and to form some methodology of rationalized goodness that would seemingly enable one to be acceptable to God. This method of works-based theology, one that prescribes how a person can be good enough to be accepted by God, is the predominant non-Christian world-wide religious doctrine. Its precepts can be found in virtually every religion formed by man. However, man is universally sinful,¹ will never match the perfection of God, and will never by his own works be able to be worthy to have a relationship with God. Man's inherent sin nature keeps him from a relationship with God and no work of man can remove that sin nature.

Since man cannot find a remedy for sin through any works of religion, God chose to reach down to man and provide the way that a relationship with Him can be found, a way that provides forgiveness for that sin nature. God's plan is simply to provide forgiveness for all who will place their trust in Him. Because of this, many have argued that Christianity is not a religion, but rather, it is a faith. Unlike a religion that contains a system of rules and regulations, true Christianity contains only a tenet of faith: salvation is obtained through responsive acceptance of God's nature, purpose and plan. It is through belief in who Jesus is, and accepting Him for who He is that salvation is obtained.² This act of faith in God transforms an individual by filling that "God shaped hole" with the love, peace, and joy that come from the knowledge of salvation and the experience of God's working in one's life. This radical change is often referred to by Christians as being "born again," since in many ways the act is much like a birth as one enters a new life in a new family. Jesus and the scripture authors often referred to the results of a profession of faith in God as being "born again."

Because of this, there is no group of Christians who are not "born again." All Christians are born again. Those who call themselves Christians who have not

¹ Romans 3:23, 6:23

² Romans 10:9-10.

yet experienced this rebirth because they have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are not yet part of the family of faith. Without faith it is impossible to find a relationship with God, and those who have rejected that faith have rejected the eternal salvation that God has promised. It is important that all know that the rebirth experience is the only way to salvation, since forgiveness for sin is found only through the blood that Jesus Christ shed on the cross of Calvary. This is the message of John, Chapter 3, as Jesus taught this simple but profound principle to Nicodemus.

John 3:1. *There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:*

We do not know a great deal about Nicodemus, but his presence is central to John's gospel as he appears at three very significant events: Jesus proclamation of the new birth,³ his defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin,⁴ and his presence at the crucifixion and entombment of Christ.⁵ He is not mentioned at all in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We know that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, dedicated to the protection of the oral law, and very trained in the written law and prophets. It was his sect that was Jesus' most powerful human enemy. As a "ruler, an *archon*, of the Jews, Nicodemus was further set apart as a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews that was formed of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees, and the High Priest. Members of the Sanhedrin were also sometimes referred to as "Chief Priests."⁶ Nicodemus was also well known as a teacher of the law, and most likely one of high regard. Jesus referred to him as "The Teacher in Israel." We also know that Nicodemus was a man of great wealth, indicated by the expense that he incurred when preparing the body of Jesus for burial.⁷

As the story of Nicodemus unfolds, we are never clearly shown that Nicodemus became a believer in Jesus. However, his loyalty to and defense of Jesus grew as Jesus' ministry continued. We might look at Nicodemus and see a little bit of ourselves as his skepticism turned to questions, and answered questions turned to loyalty, but did they result in faith?

John 3:2. *The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.*

We see that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Much has been written about the timing of his visit. Did Nicodemus come by night for fear of being seen? As a

³ John 3:1-15.

⁴ John 7:50-52.

⁵ John 19:41-42.

⁶ John 7:32.

⁷ John 19:38-40.

member of the Sanhedrin he was well-aware of that council's firmly established position against this itinerant teacher, whom they considered to be blasphemous and traitorous. Perhaps Nicodemus perceived that his visit to this despised prophet would compromise his position with the council and his respect as a teacher of the law. Perhaps he came by night so as to have some quiet, and uninterrupted time with Jesus, away from the noisy crowds. Some have argued that the word used for "night" is a reference to his spiritual darkness: like all who come to Jesus, he came from the darkness that permeates the soul of the lost. Jesus would later use this same metaphor of darkness as he taught Nicodemus.

What attracted Nicodemus to Jesus? According to his testimony, Nicodemus had heard that Jesus was a teacher come from God, a prophet. He had also heard of the miracles that Jesus had performed. As a teacher of the Law, Nicodemus was in a position to recognize a prophet, and specifically to recognize the Messiah. He knew the prophecies as well as any man, and seeing Jesus as a prophet after 400 years without one, Nicodemus was motivated to visit. We will also find from the following verses that Nicodemus had an alternate motive. Perhaps he felt that there was something lacking in the Law. Even though he was learned in the law, and probably quite adept at keeping it, Nicodemus could feel like all who are lost, that the "God-shaped hole" in his heart went unfilled. The law could not fill it, as he had been promised by his peers. Like all who attempted to keep the law, he understood his own hypocrisy that was revealed by his failure to keep the law he defends.

The first step to salvation is to come to Jesus, and Nicodemus had taken that step. People may come to Jesus for a variety of reasons, and any reason that would bring someone is certainly a valid one. For the ancients, Jesus' position as a prophet opened doors for people to seek Him out. Jesus was known as a healer of the sick and infirmed, and people sought Him for healing. Jesus was, and is, dedicated to meeting the most important needs in a person's life, and when people realize this, they will come. What can Jesus do for people today that will draw them to Him? Nothing has changed since the visit of Nicodemus. Though Him, and only through Him, can salvation be found.

John 3:3. *Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

John does not record any question from Nicodemus. It is certainly clear from Jesus' statement that He knew Nicodemus' true need. One does not need a degree in theology to come to Jesus. As we can infer from this scenario, one does not even have to know the questions to ask. Jesus simply has the answer, and that answer can be couched in a simple, yet profound metaphor. Nicodemus dedicated his life to the Jewish Law so that through it he would come to see the kingdom of God. This was what he had been taught from his childhood, and was a principle that he taught to others. He believed that righteousness could only be

obtained through the keeping of the Mosaic and Traditional Law. However, he also understood that no person was able to keep the requirement that every part of the law must be obeyed, so each was faced with a dilemma with no solution. So, Jesus' statement hits the target of Nicodemus' concerns when He said, unless you become *born again*, you cannot enter the kingdom.

Jesus did not tell Nicodemus that the event of rebirth was a way to find righteousness, as if there were others. Jesus makes it clear that rebirth is required for salvation. Our world today considers such a theology to be exclusive and intolerant. Christians are despised for their insistence that Jesus is the only way to salvation. However, this is an uncompromisable tenet of the faith. Jesus Himself stated this requirement for salvation in a clear manner. Nicodemus could stand for all of those today who despise Christians for this "exclusive" view, since his world view allowed only for a salvation by keeping the works of the Law. Others have been taught alternative paths to heaven in the same manner that Nicodemus was. It is not Christian tradition or law that declares the necessity of new birth, it is the clear demand of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, Yahweh in the flesh. Salvation is found only through new birth, and that new birth only comes through faith in LORD, Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus shared this good news with the lost of His day, Christians must continue to share this good news with those who still reject Jesus today.

So, what does it mean to be "born again"? This metaphor certainly grabbed Nicodemus' attention.

John 3:4. *Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?*

We can see that Nicodemus was more of an engineer than a philosopher. Failing to see the metaphor, he was envisioning the birth process. How can a mature man re-enter the womb? His limited understanding was a product of his world view, a view that is common in today's culture. Human nature and its resulting world culture is self-centered, or homeocentric. The power for accomplishment and change is believed to come only from within a person, taking place only by one's own personal resources. Some, particularly those leaning toward New Age philosophies, take that concept so far as to equate the inner-man with God Himself. Unfortunately, the truth is that the inner man is no closer to God than "dead man's bones."⁸ It is man's focus on himself that often keeps him from seeing the truth. Like that of Nicodemus, a self-centered world view can blind one to the truth of God's Word. Paradigms are those sets of rules that define a person's view on matters. **"Paradigm Paralysis"** can refer to the condition of blindness that comes with a refusal to think "outside the box" of one's

⁸ Matthew 23:27.

viewpoint. It is necessary that the Holy Spirit break us of this paradigm paralysis before we can be saved. Nicodemus' world view needed to change.

John 3:5-7. *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

Jesus is beginning to show Nicodemus, and us, the change in understanding that must come before salvation. God has created us in His image. As a property of this creation, we are made physical creatures, subject to the physical properties of this universe. As such, all people have experienced a physical conception, entering a new world of light, sound, and experience. This Jesus refers to as being "born of water."

One may erroneously read into this a position that life starts at birth, and by so doing, justify terminating a life prior to the birth process. However, no such distinction is made here. The word that Jesus uses can also be translated, "conceived." We may be reminded of God's words to Jeremiah, "I (intimately) knew you before you were formed in the womb."⁹ Human physical life begins at conception. Human spiritual life is eternal.

Some have taken this verse out of context to defend a necessity of the submission to the act of baptism for salvation, since baptism involves water. However, baptism by itself is powerless, as John the Baptist made clear in his defense to the Pharisees when his ministry was challenged. Baptism is a form of public testimony, but if one would add this act to the requirement for salvation, then they have added works to the faith-based gift of grace that God has given us. Since this verse is not exploring the ordinance of baptism, we will not pursue this argument further here.

Nicodemus had no problem with the concept that one had to be born. Where his world view challenged him was in this second characteristic of man that God describes as the property of his own image: man is also given the life of spirit, a characteristic that separates him from all other created beings. Just as man is physical, due to any number of reasons, death can occur in the womb, and that individual is never born. Likewise, man is spiritual, and due to the rejection of God in the womb of this lifetime, spiritual death can occur. Just as a person has to be conceived of a mother and father, a person has to be born of the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God.

⁹ Jeremiah 1:9.

Those who are born of the flesh understand and interact with things of the flesh. Those who are born of the Spirit understand and interact with things of the Spirit. It is in the rebirth spiritual birth God's purpose is understood.

Jesus tells Nicodemus to "marvel not" at his statement. We should not be greatly surprised by the truth of Jesus' statement, though we usually are. The wonder of that truth comes from an ignorance that is based upon the view of this world that rejects the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is very easy for us to ignore what the Holy Spirit is saying to every person: "listen to me, follow me." The paradigm paralysis we suffer deafens our ears to the Holy Spirit's call. However, if we could shed the barriers that we have built between ourselves and God, turn to him, and in doing so become fully submissive to Him for the LORD who He is, instead of demanding our own self-centered and prideful position, we would begin to hear from God. When we are willing to take this step, we are in a position to be blessed.

Nicodemus had heard this message before:

2 Chronicles 7:14. *If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*

The "You" in John 3:7 is plural. It is referring to all people. The kingdom of God cannot be attained by any person without the experience of spiritual birth that Jesus refers to. This demand of God is not exclusive, nor is it intolerant. It is a gift that is offered to all people without regard to their physical state. It is a gift that is offered to all people without regard to their ability to obey any set of laws.

John 3:8. *The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

Jesus compares being born in the Spirit with the blowing of the wind. The words for Spirit and Wind are similar in both Hebrew and Greek. One can see the work of the wind without being able to see its source. Likewise, one is able to see the work of the Holy Spirit and feel His power without being able to see the source of that work.

John 3:9-10. *Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? ¹⁰Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

A great and horrific paradox is revealed by the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Jews. As people of all nations across the world come to faith in Jesus, it

is still the nation of the Jews who have the hardest time recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. If there is any group of people who should be able to apply the prophecies and recognize the Messiah for who he is, it is the Jews. For those Jews who do turn to faith in Christ, a special blessing is received, as upon the receipt of the Holy Spirit, all of the scripture that they have studied explodes with meaning when its fulfillment is realized. The Gentiles have no common ground with Jesus from which to respond to Him in faith other than their most basic need for salvation. The Jews were given the gift of God's revelation of himself to Abraham and his descendents, and yet it is those very people who rejected Jesus. As the "Children of God," Israel became self-centered and arrogant, declaring that they were the special people of God, to the exclusion of the rest of the world. However, God's purpose for Israel was that they would be a nation of priests¹⁰ who would show the world the way to God. It was also God's purpose that through them all the nations would be blessed. It was God who fulfilled that part of His plan through the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, Jehovah, Yahweh, the descendant of David, the descendant of Abraham.

John 3:11-12. *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.¹² If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*

Here Jesus reveals his grave disappointment with Israel for rejecting the message of God's grace. Jesus refers to their knowledge that is capable of showing them the truth, yet they have rejected it. Further, Jesus refers to that which is not academic: the testimony of God's working in their daily lives wherein the truth of God is revealed, and they rejected that also. People refuse to hear the truth with little regard to their teaching and experience. The truth of the Gospel is not a plan of man, so it is inconsistent with what man expects the truth to be. Man wants to ask, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" as many did when they came to Jesus.¹¹ There is nothing that we can do, for the real question is, "What has God done that I might inherit eternal life?" It is only God who has the power to save, and it is to Him we can turn.

John 3:13. *And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.*

Nicodemus had referred to Jesus as a prophet and a worker of miracles, yet Nicodemus' world view was still earth-centered. Here Jesus reveals to Nicodemus that He is far more than what Nicodemus is even imagining. Jesus often referred to himself as the "Son of Man," and this instance He states that the Son of Man came down from Heaven and that without Him, no one can "ascend"

¹⁰ Exodus 19:6.

¹¹ Matthew 19:16, e.g.

to it. Because He came down from eternity, Jesus has the authority to speak of it. No man has ever done this before because Jesus is the One Messiah. John reminded us in the first chapter of this Gospel that the One who descended is the Creator and Judge of all, a description of Yahweh, and only Yahweh. The One who created all things, the One who talked to Moses in the burning bush, Jehovah Himself, came down from heaven.

John 3:14-15. *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: ¹⁵That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

Jesus employs an illustration from a history that Nicodemus would know. When the children of Israel were engaged in their 40 years of wandering following their release from Egyptian bondage, they experienced a plague of snake bites that was brought upon them by God because of their sin. God commanded Moses to erect a pole, and place on it a bronze serpent, so that anyone who would "look upon it," an idiom for "place your trust in it," would be healed.¹² The prophetic significance of this event is described here by Jesus. Just as the serpent was lifted up on a pole to heal people of the consequences of their sin, Jesus must also be lifted up on a pole for the same purpose: to heal people, once and for all, of the consequence of their sin if they will simply look upon Him, or trust in Him, for that healing. Jesus is to be lifted up for that purpose: that whoever would believe in Him (note: not "believe about" him,) would not be lost, but would have eternal life. Those who would look to Jesus for their remedy from their sin would find themselves saved from an eternity of separation from God, given an eternity with Him. Jesus is referring to his own crucifixion, His submission to the penalty of sin that all people deserve, and as the "Lamb of God," the final and perfect sacrifice for that sin.

John 3:16. *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

This verse is, without doubt, the most quoted verse in all of biblical scripture, whether Old Testament or New. We now have an opportunity to look at this verse from within the context it was written. These were words of Jesus to Nicodemus as He was teaching about God's plan for man's salvation from the penalty for sin: eternal separation from God. In one short sentence, the plan for God's salvation of a sin-sick world is revealed. We can see that the motivation for God's act of grace is His love. God was willing to send the Messiah, the Christ, the Deliverer to man through the life of a human child who would be able to provide mankind with first-hand knowledge of the Kingdom of God, and God's plan to gather the faithful into it. Furthermore, all of the prophecies and sacrificial

¹² Numbers 21:6-9.

laws would serve to illuminate the act of vicarious sacrifice that would take place on the cross when Jehovah would take upon himself, like the lamb of atonement, the sins of the world. Like the sacrificial lamb, Jesus' blood would be shed for the remission of sins for all those who would place their trust in Him.

There is only One Messiah, and there was only One Sacrifice that served to provide forgiveness for the sin nature of man. It is because of this that Jesus is the one Way, the one Truth, and the one Life. No other event in all of human history provided for people what God provided for them when Jesus died on the cross. Unlike any other man that ever died, Jesus was resurrected soon after his death, never to die again. His resurrection appearances to his faithful followers solidified their understanding of what had taken place, and empowered them to serve as bold witnesses to His ministry, His purpose, His death, and His resurrection to the end of their days.

This world has many religions that attempt to bring people to God with forgiveness for their sin nature. However, no religion can serve that purpose. Forgiveness is found only through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary, and give to those who trust in Him for that forgiveness.

John 3:17. *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

Most people are far less familiar with this verse than the previous one. However, the two are a single sentence. God's purpose for Jesus' coming is herein clearly revealed. Jesus' purpose was not to come and condemn all sinners, but rather to serve them in a manner by which they can be saved. Sometimes the church gets this mission backwards. Often the people of the church see their purpose as condemning sinners and avoiding contact with them, (as if they are not sinning themselves by so doing.) Much of the world is lost because the church fails to fulfill Jesus' commission that the church would serve as a conduit through which people would be saved. The church needs to appropriate for the lost the same love that Jesus has for them, so that it will see its purpose as Jesus' commission intended: rather than condemn the world, Christians are to bring the lost to Jesus so that they can be saved.

There is a tremendous penalty for the failure to turn to God in faith. What is that penalty? To end one's days on this earth without ever turning to Jesus is to enter eternity as separated from God in death as in life. However, in this life even the lost have experienced the power of God in their lives through the blessings He continually provides to all people. An eternity separated from God will have a distinct difference. Imagine a place where God no longer interacts, a place where the Holy Spirit is no longer blessing, a place where Satan has complete power. There is no God to turn to in such a place, only the presence of the darkness of evil, an evil that saturates all that is there, and does so for eternity.

As people made in God's image, we have been created as physical flesh, but also given an eternal spirit. It is the nature of the flesh that turns us away from a God who is calling all people to fellowship with Him. If we live and die by that nature, we will be forever lost. Jehovah stepped down from heaven, and came into this world so that we can turn from our self-centered and sinful nature and turn to God in faith so that through Jesus we can find the righteousness that we can find no other way. A new birth in Jesus will not remove the sin from our lives, but it will usher into our lives the influence of the Holy Spirit who can work in our lives to take away our desire to sin, and by so doing replace it with the peace and joy of fellowship with Him.

The world is much like Nicodemus, searching for the peace and joy that comes from no earthly source. It will only be when Jesus is lifted up before the lost world that people can come to know of him. Rather than condemn the lost, all of the faithful can love them, minister to them, and seek to bring them to Jesus. Such an act is not exclusive, nor is it intolerant. It is the Way.

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