

John 3.1-21 Sermon / COB / 02.23.14

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Title]** Good morning! We will begin today in John 3.1, so please turn there in your Bible.
- † While you are turning, think of something you are expert in doing or a topic about which you know more than most people. Now suppose I come up to you and tell you that you are all wrong about it! Suppose I went to Kevin – who is an expert cabinetmaker – and started telling him of revolutionary ways to make cabinets, which made all his methods seem false. Or suppose I went in to teach the youth today with Carolyn Stoltzfus – who has been teaching the Bible for many years now and is quite insightful – and I told her that everything she thought about the biblical topic was wrong. How would y'all react to someone telling you that?
- Today in our passage, we will see something similar. A man named Nicodemus is going to come talk with Jesus. Jesus will refer to him as the top teacher in Israel, but then Jesus will blow his mind with spiritual concepts Nicodemus has never considered, and then Jesus will tell him he should already know these things from his study of the Old Testament!
 - As we read this scene in our narrative, we will learn important aspects of Jesus' identity and important facts about how we should respond! Let's pray and then we will begin...

[Slide 2: 3.1-2] John 3.1-2 [NET]: Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

- † What can we learn about this man? His name was Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a denomination of Judaism known for teaching the Old Testament in the synagogues, which were like local churches.
- He also was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Your translation might say he was a "ruler of the Jews," but remember we learned before that the apostle John often refers to the Jewish religious leaders simply as the Jews, so here he is saying Nicodemus was a ruler of the religious leaders, very high up, probably in the Sanhedrin.
 - We see that Nicodemus is polite, calling Jesus "Rabbi," which means teacher, saying that at least some of the ruling council understand that Jesus is a prophet from God who can do miracles.
- † But there are four clues here that not all is as well as it seems on the surface. First of all, while Nicodemus does recognize Jesus as a teacher and prophet, he does not acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, as proclaimed by John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples.
- Second, while Nicodemus doesn't actually ask a question here, the way he begins the conversation suggests he is visiting to assess more about Jesus. That is not a bad thing to do, but it shows he is not as confident in Jesus' identity as are the disciples or John the Baptist.
 - **[Slide 3: at night]** Third, Nicodemus comes at night. There might be many practical reasons he came at night, but if there were, probably the apostle John would not bother mentioning it. You might remember from when we studied the book of Ruth, that in Bible narratives, the author

has been selective in what he includes or excludes, and so there are always clues to the significance of what is going on. In this gospel, the apostle John repeatedly contrasts walking spiritually in the darkness and walking spiritually in the light, to symbolize going from spiritual death to spiritual life. John tells us Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. As the NET Bible note says, “Out of the darkness of his life and religiosity Nicodemus came to the Light of the world.”

- † **[Slide 4: now]** The fourth hint, which will support this one about darkness and night comes from the Greek text. If you look at John 3.1, about half the English translations begin with “Now” and about half jump right into telling you about the man named Nicodemus. The “now” that either is or is not included translates the Greek word *δέ*. *δέ* can mean “but,” “and,” “now,” “then,” or a few other things. But we have learned in the past few years that *δέ* also served a function in the language beyond being just a word.
- What *δέ* often does for us is signal a shift to a new topic, but one that is related to the previous topic. So look at vv.2.23-25: We learned last week that when Jesus did some miracles, people started to put faith in him, but that this was just a reaction to their experiences, not the deep faith that comes from trust in who Jesus really is and what he offers us in salvation. And Jesus would not entrust himself to them, because he knew what was in the heart of each person.
 - Now, in v.3.1, we have *δέ* – which is like saying, “on a related note”! – this fellow Nicodemus came to see Jesus. In other words, the apostle John is signaling to his readers that Nicodemus is one of those who saw Jesus do miracles and believed in Jesus as being a prophet from God, but still did not have saving faith. That fact sets the tone for our whole passage today.
 - My explanation might have bored some of you to sleep, but it excites someone like me, and it should excite those of you who like to grow in your Bible knowledge. Don’t let that big 3 that someone put in your Bible hundreds of years after it was written deter you from seeing the connection between what we learned last week and what we are studying now.

[Slide 5: 3.3-4] John 3.3-4: Jesus replied, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above [or born again], he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?”

- † Instead of answering Nicodemus’ implied question about who he is, Jesus will challenge Nicodemus to think through some concepts that will suggest Nicodemus – as high up as he is in the religious hierarchy – is not equipped to assess spiritual matters! It is not fun to verbally spar with Jesus!
- † As we learned a couple of weeks ago, Jesus prefaces some of his most important teachings with “Amen, amen,” which was like saying, “Listen up! This is the truth!” English translations vary in how they translate this, from “truly, truly” to “I tell you the solemn truth.” In any case, we can expect an important lesson here!
- † **[Slide 6: again]** The Greek word *ἀνωθεν* is used in the Bible to mean “again,” “from above,” “from the beginning,” and “for a long time.” Most English translations say here that a person must be “born again,” while the NET controversially says “born from above.”
- The apostle John likes to show how people misunderstood Jesus’ words, providing Jesus with a teaching opportunity, so probably we are seeing deliberate word play here: Jesus says a person has to be born *ἀνωθεν*; Nicodemus takes that to mean being physically born again; Jesus then explains that you have to be born again by being spiritually born by the Holy Spirit from above.

- You know, many people who are Roman Catholic or go to theologically liberal churches are surprised that being born again is actually in the Bible. They think we evangelicals made it up.
- † Jesus said we have to be born again, or born from above, to see the kingdom of God. The Old Testament prophets made clear that at the end of time, the Messiah would become the king on the throne of David, rule for God over the earth, usher in the New Covenant with God, and resurrect the dead to life. Only those born again will participate in this new kingdom.
- Nicodemus understood this reference to the kingdom, but he did not understand that Jesus was the Messiah. We have the testimony of John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit, the early disciples, and the prophetic signs in Cana and at the temple, so we can understand that Jesus will be this king.
 - Nicodemus probably was shocked to hear about any obstacles to his own entrance into God's kingdom. Are you? Think about this: if Nicodemus – one of the highest religious men among God's chosen people, with all his attainments of knowledge, position, and integrity – is not worthy enough to enter the kingdom, then what hope have we? None, right?

[Slide 7: 3.5-8] John 3.5-8: Jesus answered, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must all be born from above.' The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

- † Again Jesus starts with "amen, amen," so again we can expect something profound. This time he says we must be born of water and spirit to enter into the kingdom. This might confuse readers today, just as it probably confused Nicodemus. But Nicodemus should be familiar with the teachings of the prophet Ezekiel.
- **[Slide 8: Ezekiel 36.25-27]** Let's look ourselves at Ezekiel 36.25-27 [NASB]: [Here we have God speaking about the time when he would restore Israel as his people] "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."
 - As part of the New Covenant and characteristic of life in God's kingdom, God would transform individuals to be able to live in his image as they were created to do, instead of in sin, so as to truly be his people. The symbolism God used for this was water for cleansing and spirit for transformation, and the Holy Spirit for ongoing empowerment.
 - **[Slide 9: 3.5-8]** This is what it means to be born again or born from above: God cleanses, transforms, and empowers us to be his people. It is not enough to be born physically, not even if you are born into God's chosen people and rise up to be one of their religious leaders, you must receive a new birth from God above. Jesus said Nicodemus should not be amazed, he should know this.
- † **[Slide 10: wind]** Jesus then uses another play on words. I share this to show you more about who Jesus is as a man, so you can see his wit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word is the same for spirit and wind. So Jesus is being playfully poetic here.

- We cannot tell where the wind is from or going, but we can perceive its effect: movement in the plants around us, clouds going by, pressure on our skin.
- This is true also of the Holy Spirit: we cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can see his effect on those who have been born again. Can the world see the change in you? If you are not experiencing real change in your character and your life, you should be concerned. Have you truly put your faith in Jesus? Are you living by the Spirit, in the light? If you have concerns about this, please come talk with me.
- One reason being “born again” frightens people in more traditional, denominational, churches is that quite often when people say they are born again they get a little zealous! They start doing evangelism, they start insisting Jesus is the only way, they get emphatic about issues like abortion, homosexuality, and divorce, they can be tough to handle, because they seemingly are on fire for Jesus and not afraid to say so. But we think that is a good thing, right? We know from last week that Jesus himself was zealous in honoring God.

[Slide 11: 3.9-15] John 3.9-15: Nicodemus replied, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things? I tell you the solemn truth, we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you people about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven— the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

† Jesus calls Nicodemus “the teacher,” i.e., the greatest teacher of his people. Jesus says Nicodemus, as “the teacher of Israel” should know these essential things from what was revealed by God in the Old Testament. Even Moses clearly stated that the Greater Moses Prophet would come from God to lead a repentant Israel into the New Covenant, which would include receiving a new cleansed heart.

- **[Slide 12: testimony]** Jesus also says that he and the others from God – probably his disciples and John the Baptist, but maybe also the previous prophets – speak what they know from God, but the religious leaders will not accept their words. The “you” in v.11 is plural in Greek: “all you religious leaders.” Nicodemus represents the views of the religious leaders in Israel at this time, and if Nicodemus and the others are incredulous at his teachings, Jesus is incredulous at how spiritually obtuse they are despite having extensive knowledge of the Old Testament.
- **[Slide 13: heaven]** In v.12, Jesus says, if they cannot understand the teachings about what happens on Earth, how will they understand any teachings about what happens in Heaven? If the religious leaders are failing to understand the basics of the faith, of what God has taught must happen among them, how can Jesus teach them deeper truths about God and Heaven?

† Again we get “amen, amen,” so again we know we are getting something important. Actually, Jesus will reveal here three things that are important.

- **[Slide 14: son of man]** First, Jesus refers to himself as the prophetic Son of Man and thus the only one who has been to Heaven and knows heavenly things. We talked about the Son of Man from the book of Daniel a few weeks ago. Jesus is declaring himself to be God the Father’s chosen representative and king for the whole world, who will rule eternally.

† Second, Jesus refers to something that happened during the exodus many centuries earlier. Numbers 21 tells us how during their wanderings in the wilderness, the people complained against

God and Moses, so God sent poisonous snakes among them. When the people repented, God instructed Moses to lift up a bronze snake on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at the bronze snake with faith in God's deliverance, and he or she would not die.

- Jesus says he, the Son of Man, must be lifted up too. In the gospel of John, Jesus uses this phrase to talk about his crucifixion and exaltation together. Isaiah [52-53] prophesied that the Messiah would be lifted up and greatly exalted as in his death he carried the burden for our sins.
- Just as God gave the Israelites new physical life when they trusted in his deliverance through the lifted up snake, so too God will grant people new spiritual life and eventually resurrected physical life if they will trust in his deliverance through the crucified Christ.

† The third thing Jesus says is that because he will be crucified and then exalted through the resurrection and ascension to Heaven, anyone who is believing in him may have eternal life. This is the answer to Nicodemus' question, "how can these things be?" A person enters the kingdom of God, receives eternal life, and experiences new birth through the saving work of Jesus on the cross. What do we have to do for salvation? Believe. We'll talk more about that in a moment...

[Slide 15: 3.16-18] John 3.16-18: For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

† Back when the Greek text was written, there were no quotation marks, so it is impossible to know for sure where the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus ends and the narration by the apostle John begins. It doesn't matter, because all of it is God's revelation.

† We learn several things. First, even though people have been corrupted by sin and God cursed the world, God still loves the world and people.

- Remember we believe in a triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each a distinct individual, but so in unity in essence and will that they constitute one God. Out of love, God the Father sent the Son of God to be born as the human Jesus and die for us.
- We see again that Jesus is the one and only Son of God, there are no others. And as we have discussed before, we now know that the Greek term *μονογενής* means one and only, so there is no need to wonder here about the terminology of being begotten.
- We also see the extent and means of God's love: he loved the world and its people so much that he showed it by sending the Son.

† We see again that everyone who is believing in the Son of God will not perish but have eternal life.

- What does it mean to believe in the Son or to believe in his name? Before we started studying the gospel of John, we looked at passages from the book to see what constitutes saving faith in John's mind: essentially the gospel comes down believing in who Jesus said he was and in what he said he would do.
- We believe Jesus is the divine Son of God who came to earth to be born as a man, that he is the Christ/Messiah and Son of Man promised by the prophets, who would come to be God's greatest prophet, God's eternal high priest, and God's chosen king in the line of David.

- We believe Jesus lived a perfectly pure human life as only he could do, then sacrificed himself on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and thus bring us permanent peace [atonement] with God. After this, he was resurrected from the dead, walked here forty more days being seen by hundreds of people, and then ascended to Heaven to sit at God the Father's right hand.
 - **[Slide 16: continual]** Here is another interesting thing about John's Greek. In this gospel, John often refers to those who really believe, who have put their total trust in Jesus and his deliverance, using a present tense participle, to emphasize their continuous and lasting belief. In your text, this is "the one who believes," which I would translate "the one believing" to emphasize.
 - Are you someone with lasting, continuing faith? Then you will not perish. Now, you will still physically die, ok? But you will go straight to Heaven to be with Jesus, and then when he returns you will be resurrected to eternal life with him on a new Earth. To perish here means to die without knowing God and thus remain in eternal spiritual death, to be condemned to what we call Hell.
- † **[Slide 17: κρίνω]** The Greek verb κρίνω can mean to judge or to condemn. There are a lot of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah coming to judge everyone at the end of time. Even Nicodemus could not dispute that. But that was not the purpose for the Son of God's first advent: he came to offer people the gospel, grace, the opportunity to be saved to eternal life, cleansed, forgiven, reconciled with God. But you better believe that the judgment is coming!
- The one with continuous and absolute faith in Christ is not condemned; why? Because Jesus paid the penalty for your sin! He took your judgment, your condemnation, the wrath of God you had coming, and he made peace between you and God forever.
 - The one without faith remains condemned or judged, because we all were condemned by the corruption and guilt of sin even before we started misbehaving as a baby, and it is only the one who puts his or her faith in Jesus who has that condemnation removed.
- [Slide 18: 3.19-21] John 3.19-21: Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. But the one who practices the truth comes to the light, so that it may be plainly evident that his deeds have been done in God.**
- † The apostle here tells us another perspective on these same matters. He reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world, the light that brings spiritual life, and then he says people are judged because they are so evil that they love the darkness rather than the light.
- I think "immoral" deeds would be a better translation, because not all of us think of ourselves as doing evil, but we all admit we have been immoral. Still, all sin is evil so it's the same thing. The word translated as "exposed" can also mean "reproved": Those who love doing sinful things don't want to have their sins exposed, they don't want to have to change.
 - But those of us who seek after truth and a life of truth run to the light! We want to praise God for saving us and transforming us, because we know we used to be people who were sinful and in the darkness. We are not better than those who don't believe, rather we are benefiting more because Jesus died for us and set us free. Any goodness in us is a reason to praise God!

Conclusion

- † **[Slide 19: Jesus]** Once again, we learn so much about who Jesus is. John presents some new things and reiterates others from a fresh perspective to ensure we understand. Today we see...
- Jesus is empowered by God the Father to do miracles.
 - Jesus is the wisest teacher who understands God in ways others cannot.
 - Jesus is the Son of Man, the only one who has been to Heaven and can explain heavenly things, and the one God has chosen as his representative and eternal king.
 - Jesus is the Savior who was crucified and then exalted, who brings new and eternal life.
 - Jesus is the Son of God sent by God the Father to offer salvation.
 - Jesus is the light that gives spiritual life.
- † You will notice that at the end of last week's passage and now with chapter three, we are talking more and more about having faith. John is still feeding us a lot of information about Jesus, but he also is moving toward the need for us to respond.
- It is not enough to say "Jesus is cool, I like him."
 - It is not enough to have Jesus as your life insurance, your get out of jail free card.
 - It is not enough to believe some of what the Bible says about Jesus but not other things.
 - It is not enough to believe Jesus is real, but worry whether you are good enough to be saved.
 - It is not enough to believe in Jesus but worry whether you will lose your salvation.
 - It is not enough to believe in Jesus but hedge your bets in some way.
 - You must put your total trust, your exclusive trust, your ongoing present faith in Jesus as revealed in scripture. This is not a lot for God to ask: all he wants is our trust in his promise. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will do the heavy lifting involved in our salvation.
- † One other thought: if you do have true saving faith, John makes clear in his letters that you will experience the effects of the Holy Spirit in your character and lifestyle. So if there is little evidence of true faith, it might be worthwhile to reflect on whether you have true faith. I tell you this out of love, just as John wrote in love to his friends: I would rather shock you into reflection than have you go to Hell because you never realized you were not really trusting in Christ.
- † Let's pray...