

“Now There Was A Man”

Two Events Then Two Encounters

The most significant and unique figure in all of history is Jesus Christ. Among the most important questions you can ask yourself are, “Who is Jesus?” and “Do I Know Him?” The only way to answer both questions is to look at God’s word. John’s Gospel is a great starting place. John is an eyewitness and companion to Jesus for three years. He is writing many decades later to introduce us to this man whom he has come to worship as God. John reveals Jesus as the extraordinary revealed in the ordinary; full deity expressed in full humanity. Last week we watched this God-Man in John chapter 2 at two different events. He attends a wedding feast in a rural village. Nothing unusual here. But he transforms water into wine – an extraordinary sign of his divine power. We then follow him to Jerusalem City for the national feast called Passover. There he enters the temple as any other faithful Jewish man would have. But he proceeds to do something completely unexpected. In righteous anger, he chased out those who were using God’s holy place for personal gain. He acts as if he owns the place because, as God, he does.

After these two events, John relates two encounters that Jesus has with two very different people. As a gospel writer, John again sets these side by side for his readers to compare. The first encounter is in chapter 3. A man named Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus in Jerusalem at night. The second encounter is in chapter 4. Jesus goes north to Samaria and meets an unnamed woman by a well in the middle of the day. These two people and Jesus’ response to each were markedly different. As we look more closely at these two individuals over the next several weeks, you might find yourself identifying with one more than the other. Both represent a different kind of spiritual condition. Today we meet Nicodemus and consider his encounter with Jesus from John 3:1-15. Turn back there with me. It begins on p. 887 of the Bible available in the row near you.

What an amazing encounter. I propose to look at it more closely from Nicodemus’ perspective. If we are going to see ourselves in Nicodemus; if we are going to respond to Jesus as he calls Nicodemus to respond, then we must understand first, Nicodemus’ Profile (who is this man? Where is he coming from?). Then we will have to understand Nicodemus’ Problem (what does Jesus identify is missing? What’s wrong in his life?) Finally, we will trace Nicodemus’ Personal Story after his encounter with Jesus. We will look at the first two this week and cover the third next week.

Nicodemus’ Profile (vv. 1-2)

Consider the profile of Nicodemus that John relates to us. This is important because, in significant ways, it is also your profile and mine. First, Nicodemus is a man (v. 1). We are not all men, obviously. But as a man in that world, he represents those who are accepted and respected. He is among the powerful and important. People think well of him.

Second, Nicodemus is a Pharisee (v. 1). He belongs to a group of influential leaders that strictly adhere to Moses’ law. The name “Pharisee” comes from a word meaning “to separate.” They distinguish themselves from others by their rigidly righteous lifestyle. They are legalists. They are certain they will stand tall on judgment day because of their moral strictness. Others recognize a Pharisee as the standard of godliness. In v.

9, Jesus names Nicodemus as a teacher in Israel. He not only lives a holy life, he instructs others to follow his example.

Nicodemus is also a ruler (v. 1). He belongs to a council called the Sanhedrin. The occupying Romans have delegated a lot of authority to this local council. So, Nicodemus has political power. He must be an older man to sit on the council. He's not ashamed to refer to himself as old (v. 4). He presumes to speak for his fellow rulers. In v. 2, he addresses Jesus in the first-person plural. "Rabbi, **we** know that you are a teacher come from God"

This profile reveals Nicodemus as a man who considers himself already part of the kingdom of God or well on his way to getting into it. He speaks for the inner circle of Israel. When he claims in v. 2 that Jesus must be from God, it is with confidence that he knows who is from God. He considers himself a man of God. He has character. He holds a high status.

In our world, Nicodemus represents a moralist. He works hard at living well, doing the right things, and following the rules. He expects God to grade fairly. Moralists can be generous. They give to charity because, after all, other people have problems. They're glad to help. Moralists may have their own problems from time to time. But they solve them, adding to the sense that they have mastered life. Like Nicodemus they say, "We know. We know what's going on." We all have a bit of moralist in us. In many ways, we fit the profile. You may say, "I don't. I'm not one of the powerful who tries to look good by living right." But you think that such people have an inside track to God. You think your problem is that you're not like them, that you should be. Jesus has a surprise for all of us. We all have a serious problem.

Nicodemus' Problem (vv. 3-15)

1. We are Helpless and Need Divine Intervention (v. 3-8)

But Jesus interrupts Nicodemus and says, "What you don't know is your greatest threat. You are not what you think you are. You have a problem. And you don't realize you have a problem. And you can't solve your problem for yourself. Jesus defines Nicodemus' problem (and our problem) in four ways. First, we are helpless and need divine intervention. In vv. 3 & 5 Jesus confronts Nicodemus in the second-person singular. "Truly, truly, I say to you (singular)." **You**, Nicodemus. **You** have a problem. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (v. 3). And again in v. 5, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Don't miss Jesus' skill and wisdom in cutting right to the heart with this one man. In speaking to an individual, he speaks to all humanity, to every person. "Unless **one** is born again...." Every "one" has the same problem.

John summarizes the problem in v. 7. "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" Nicodemus is surprised. We see this in the tone of his questions in vv. 4 and 9. And, in v. 7, Jesus exposes his unbelief. The fact that Jesus commands him not to be astonished shows that he doesn't get it. He doesn't understand his problem. He thinks he's just fine with God. But he's not. He must be born again. The second "you" in v. 7 is plural. "You (pl.) must be born again. Jesus is saying to this representative of Israel, "All Jews, including all of you in leadership must be born again. You may think that your prestige and authority or your diligent efforts at godliness or your ethnic identity will secure your position in the coming kingdom. They will not. And you cannot do anything to change that reality." It's not just the social outcasts that need a new birth. The moralists also do.

Note that “you must be born again” is not a command. It is a statement of fact. A child does not cause himself to be born. A mother goes through difficult labor and effort. This new birth is not a human invention or achievement. It is a divine intervention. When Nicodemus hears about a new birth, he absurdly thinks that Jesus expects an old man to re-enter his mother’s womb (v. 4). But Jesus is talking about a whole different kind of birth, a birth from above. There’s nothing that Nicodemus can do to effect it. A man, used to power and control, has no power to control his destiny in God’s kingdom. Jesus is clear that, whatever this new birth is, it is the work of the Holy Spirit (v. 8). We are all like Nicodemus. We are helpless. God must intervene for us. We cannot work our way into his kingdom.

2. We Are Polluted and Need Cleansing (v. 5)

In v. 5 Jesus says that to be born again is to be born of water and spirit. Bible students have puzzled long and hard over the meaning of these words. There are three major approaches to their interpretation. The first concludes that there are two different births in v. 5. A water birth is physical birth, “water” referring to the fluid coming from a mother’s body in the birth process. Jesus is affirming that it is not enough to have only a physical birth. To see God’s kingdom, one must be born again. This second birth is a spiritual birth. This view is appealing and I have taught it in the past. It fits well with v. 6 which seems to compare physical birth with spiritual birth. John 3:6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The difficulty with this interpretation is that there is only one birth in v. 5. It is one birth both of water and spirit. Besides, nowhere in the Bible is physical birth called being born of water.

Keeping water and spirit together, others interpret this phrase as pointing to water baptism and Spirit baptism. The main problem with this is that the context (especially, v. 8) emphasizes the mystery of God’s work in this new birth. Water baptism is a ritual performed humans and happens at human initiative. As we have noted in recent messages, water baptism is related to Spirit baptism, but they are not joined in the way water and spirit are here.

So, a third and preferable interpretation sees “water and spirit” as drawing on God’s saving promises through Ezekiel, the OT prophet. Nicodemus knew the OT prophecies about a new covenant that God would establish.

Ezekiel 36:25–26 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. ²⁶And 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.

Sin pollutes. We stand unclean before God because of our sin. We have given our hearts to idols. We have trusted “in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security” (to quote the catechism). The new birth begins with cleansing. God says, “I will cleanse you.” In Ezekiel’s day, all Israel had a hard heart toward God. Each had a polluted spirit. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he is in the same condition, unclean before God. Pharisees pride themselves in ritual purity. But they, like all of us, need cleansing. And the new birth also involves a new spirit that only God can put in us. We do not need our old heart softened. We need a new heart. We need a birth of water and spirit.

3. We are Dead and Need Reviving (vv. 6-8)

Jesus defines our problem in a third way. We are dead and need reviving. That’s the emphasis of vv. 6-8

John 3:6–8 ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

Jesus continues to draw on the language of Ezekiel. In the very next section after the prophet announces the promise of cleansing and a new heart, the Lord brings Ezekiel into a valley full of lifeless bones. He commands the prophet to speak over the bones. He tells him what to say.

Ezekiel 37:5–6 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

When Ezekiel first preaches, the bones come together with muscle and tissue. But there is no life in the bones. So, God tells Ezekiel to call for breath to come into the assembled bones. When the Spirit’s breath accompanies the prophet’s preaching, the bones come to life. Ezekiel experiences first-hand what Jesus describes in John 3:8. The wind blows and he sees the effects of it. The wind does the work. In both OT Hebrew and NT Greek, the word for “spirit” and “wind” are the same. The Holy Spirit brings new life that a dead sinner needs. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is as spiritually lifeless as the bones in Ezekiel’s valley. He belongs to a spiritually dead people that must be brought back to life. He might look put together but there’s no life in him. The Holy Spirit must breathe new life. It is possible to come to church and live a moral life and look squared away and yet be spiritually dead. Only the Holy Spirit gives life.

4. We are Poisoned and Need Healing (vv. 9-15)

As Jesus explains the new birth he tells Nicodemus that all human beings, including himself, are helpless in need of God’s supernatural intervention. We are all polluted by sin and need God’s cleansing and a new heart. We are all dead and need God to give us new spiritual life. But Nicodemus still does not understand how it all works. In v. 9 he asks, “How can these things be?” He’s trying to figure out what defies human understanding. So Jesus rebukes him. In v. 10, he asks an accusing question. “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus should grasp what Ezekiel taught over 500 years before. But, in v. 11, Jesus ramps up the criticism.

He begins with the now familiar introduction, “Truly, truly, I say to you.” He speaks with divine authority. But then he continues in the first-person plural. “We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you [plural] do not receive our testimony.” Jesus is now also representing a group. But which group? I conclude that he is declaring that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the triune God, speak in perfect unison. God understands exactly how this new birth happens. It is no mystery to him. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, has come and tried to communicate the new birth in ways that Nicodemus should have understood. Look at v. 12. Jesus says, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” The assumed answer to Jesus’ question is, “You can’t.” So Jesus offers one more earthly explanation.

John 3:13–15 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In v. 13 Jesus reiterates that he has descended from heaven and will ascend back to heaven in a way that no one else ever has or ever will. He will be exalted to heaven even though he will be lifted up in death on earth. He takes Nicodemus back to the experience of Israel in the wilderness 1500 years earlier. Under God’s hand,

Moses is leading the people from Egypt to the promised land. The specific incident Jesus references is in Numbers 21.

Numbers 21:5–9 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

God sends poisonous snakes as a sign of the people’s spiritual condition. Sin’s poison has infected their whole being. So God instructs Moses to make an image of the poison carrier and lift it up above the people. By looking at the bronze snake on the pole, an Israelite admits his polluted condition. He acknowledges that he can do nothing to rid himself of the poison. He must trust God to heal. He must humbly accept God’s remedy.

Jesus’ final words in vv. 14-15 must leave Nicodemus wondering. Jesus says to him, “Nicodemus, you need God’s healing now. Your life is poisoned by sin. Everyone has the same problem. But I will be God’s new poison bearing snake. I will be lifted up to suffer and die. I will go through the difficult labor so that you anyone who looks to me has this new birth. But you must look to me in faith. You must turn from trusting yourself and look only to me. And you will have something better than temporary healing. You will have eternal life.

One of my great burdens is that people can put on a Christian costume but not be born again. Jesus says, you must be born again or you will not see God’s kingdom, you will not enjoy eternal life. It troubles me that many believe that this new birth is the result of our praying a certain prayer, or being baptized, or being faithful at church. But it is not a human achievement. It is a divine intervention. Parents hear their children talk about spiritual things and assume that they are Christians. I’ve often heard people say, I’ve always been a Christian. I hope you see from today’s text that this is impossible. Sometimes we look at people and assume that they are fine with God because they look good and they seem nice. Our assumption is based on faulty theology. We are all helpless, polluted, dead and poisoned by sin. We enter the world in that condition. And only God through his Holy Spirit and life-giving power can solve our problem. When we believe this, it will change the way we pray for our family, friends, and neighbors. “Holy Spirit, breathe. Break through. Bring new life. Next week we’ll see how Nicodemus responds to the word Christ leaves with him. But today, I ask you, personally, have you been born again? Don’t assume. And if you have been born again, then live a new life.