

In Spirit and in Truth: Rooted and Established

Freedom Church of Denton

John 3

Nicodemus, The Father's Gift, and John the Baptist

Volume 1, Lesson 16

- **In Devotion** (feel free to highlight, underline, and scribble notes. Take your time, working through the following material over the course of the next week...it would be better for you to get through one sentence with understanding than the whole lesson with no understanding!)

*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see
the kingdom of God
John 3:3*

In the last chapter, it was noted that many believed in Jesus because of the miracles that he had performed, but that he did not entrust himself to them because he knew what was in their heart. In chapter three, in Nicodemus, we have such a man, and our first case study. Usually, when God deals in spiritual lessons he almost always follows with a test.

With the dust still settling from Jesus' shakeup at the temple, we have an honest broker coming to enquire of Jesus. He is a Pharisee of the Sanhedrin, a religious leader caught between the old and the new order with honest, even if, immature questions. Whether by fear of repercussion or sincere cordiality, he comes to Jesus at night. The miracles of which he was no doubt a witness, had fulfilled their purpose, for they had brought him to the place of honest brokerage with heaven. And now, heaven's grace would need to bring him across salvation's threshold. Christ's miracles are genuine and should be effective. They should convince us of the authority and the power from which he speaks. They did Nicodemus, as he makes certain in his confession to Christ as a teacher sent from God.

Observing the sincerity in the heart of this instructor turned pupil, Christ wastes no time teaching Nicodemus, answering the unasked questions of his heart. Nicodemus' experience was not unlike most of Jesus' disciples who learn of Christ's glory and Lordship in increments, fits, and spurts. And school was now in session as Jesus begins to lay out the truth and nothing but the truth, plainly before him. And this was no universalist message. It was a message that separated the darkness from the light, the corrupt from the holy, and the kingdom of God from the kingdom of this world.

It was a message of regeneration. That his heart must be made new, with the properties and disposition of another kingdom and another spirit. It was here that Nicodemus' conditioning betrayed him as he clearly failed to perceive the spiritual dimension of what Christ was saying. Perhaps a less-learned or humbler child-like seeker would have understood more readily. But it was no accident that the first person to seek and to hear from Christ in this way

was not just a Jew but a teacher of the Jews, being that the spiritual dispensation that Jesus was introducing would go farther than the law ever could. Providence permitted this occasion with the Pharisee to reveal the character and nature of the new dispensation. Nicodemus' spiritual slowness drew the quick rebuke of Jesus when he asked him how a teacher of Israel could fail to understand the simple and clearly articulated truths that he was communicating.

And perhaps that was the root of the problem. Jesus' gospel was too simple, too easy, too gracious, and too free to be true according to the religious sensitivities of Nicodemus. It's hard for many to believe that salvation can be attained by simply believing. But the remedy is perfectly crafted for the diagnosis. There is no hope in the natural man of salvation, because his problem is complete. He is impotent to heal himself, for his entire nature has been corrupted. There is malware on the hard drive of his heart and the renewal must come from an outside agent. It is impossible for him to act outside of his natural constitution. Garbage in, garbage out. And his error unfortunately results in the loss of his life, for the wage of sin is death, and to stumble in even one point of the law is to be guilty of breaking the entire code. Man's nature has been corrupted in the same way a drop of black dye discolors an entire glass of water - totally and irreversibly. Were he able to heal himself, then his problem would be one merely of adjustment. But if adjustment is what is required then he is in for a long and arduous trial that will ultimately end in exasperation and defeat. The standard is simply too high.

God makes it easier for man not because he is merely a big pushover, but because there is essentially no other way. He is without hope and he doesn't need any self-help. He needs someone to do for him what he cannot do for himself, namely the expiation of his sin, the payment of his spiritual and moral debt, the exchange of new life for his death. He doesn't need a renovation, he needs a recreation. And he is in no better position to do that for himself than he was to speak his own natural life into existence prior to his conception. Thus, the necessity of a new birth - but this time spiritually! And this act of regeneration heaven provides, freely as a gift!

The great irony is revealed in the deliberations between Nicodemus and Jesus that demonstrate the folly of the religious nature and the pride of man. The greatest and most elusive difficulty that man faces is his ability to reach the end of himself. Quite often it is his own effort, his own counsel, his own wisdom, his own righteousness, his own sacrifice, and his own religion that keeps him from receiving the only gift that will make him truly free, saved, and born again. It's the Cainian way to work harder, try harder, and sacrifice more. Foolish religionist! Stop! Receive! Believe! Trust! Rest! What you have needed He hath provided! What you could not do, he did! For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life! This is the most valuable lesson for the new believer to learn, for the spiritual life begins in the Spirit and it is maintained by the Spirit. And Jesus makes it clear to Nicodemus that in the end that there are only two ways: the way of the Lord and the way of the world. There are those who believe and those who do not.

And then he retreated with his disciples to the Judean countryside and they began to baptize many other people. Not far away, John the Baptist would continue to prove himself a true disciple of Christ that understood better than the rest the truths that Christ was teaching. He wasn't the least bit threatened by the manifestation of Christ and his growing ministry that began to draw more of a following than his own. Nor was he tempted by the jealousy of his own disciples. It is no accident that we find him ministering in a place called Aenon near Salim, that is nowhere else mentioned in the entirety of the Word of God. It was a place of obscurity for a man who always liked to be moving toward obscurity. What a different model than the way of many modern churchmen, that often look for the bigger and better. John understood his ministerial post was a temporary one and so he eschewed the praise of men. He had no business cards or monument signs. Martyrdom was the seal of his office. True promotion in the kingdom of God is often measured more by the metric of suffering and persecution than it is by wealth, ministerial success, numbers, or the accumulation of break and of mortar. Those who seek to be leaders in the church seek a noble thing, but they ought to fully understand the nature of that which they are seeking before they venture in. True apostles, like Paul, live as unknown, yet well-known; as dying; and as punished and yet not killed. Their lives are often measured as tragedy by the world's standards. We must be careful not to measure spiritual success by worldly measures. In the end the prize is worth the cost. Whatever affliction comes in this world is momentary and light in the face of eternity!

John the Baptist knew the spiritual life was the way of decrease and he was contented to humble himself before the prominence of Jesus in the same way the moon gives way to the rising sun. He understood it was his place to point everyone to the most sacred and blessed truth that the obedience that God requires from every child of God is an obedience of faith and not of works! Hallelujah! This is good news for spiritual beggars that have no spiritual currency with which to trade.

- **In Meditation**

Study Skill: Read **John 3** at least three times slowly and all the way through. **Try reading the passage in a different translation of the Bible each time (e.g., ESV, NASB, NIV, NKJ, or Amplified)** It is good to read your selected passage all the way through without interruption before getting into the details. Before you can truly comprehend the individual trees, you need to understand them in the context of the forest!

Identify the **who, what, when, where, why,** and **how** in this passage _____

What do you see as the major divisions of thought in this passage? Try to divide **Chapter 3** into at least three sections:

Section One (fill in the verses here): _____
Section Two (fill in the verses here): _____

Section Three (fill in the verses here): _____

Section One – You must be born again! (verses 1-15)

Who is Nicodemus and how does his appearance relate to the last three verses of chapter two? _____

Why do you think that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night? _____

What was the condition of Nicodemus' faith at the outset of their conversation? _____

Why does Jesus answer Nicodemus so quickly when apparently he didn't even ask a question? _____

What do Nicodemus' questions of Jesus reveal about his heart and the condition of his faith at the moment? _____

How do you see yourself in this interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus? _____

Why is new birth necessary to see the kingdom of God? _____

What is meant by being born of water and the Spirit? _____

Even though Nicodemus portrays the frailty of man's faith at times, what encouragement can we draw from Jesus' response and example? _____

Can you explain why faith is all that is required to be born again? _____

What is the relationship with the new birth and the serpent that Moses lifted in the wilderness? Compare to Numbers 21. _____

Section Two – For God so loved the world! (verses 16-21)

How is the love of God revealed in the gift of his son? _____

How is this gift received? _____

How can salvation seem so exclusive? In other words, why is salvation limited to only those who believe? _____

Why is one who does not believe already condemned in his heart? _____

Is the method that God used to save mankind purely arbitrary or was it essentially the only way man could be saved? How is God's gift of salvation tied to the nature of God, man, and morality? _____

Section Three – John the Baptist exalts the Christ! (verses 22-36)

Why do you think Jesus withdrew to the countryside? _____

How is he relating with his disciples and what can we learn about being a disciple and making a disciple? _____

What and where was John doing at the same time? _____

What was the at the heart of John's disciples' complaints? _____

What is the character and nature of John's response to his disciples? _____

Jesus said about John that no greater man has been born of a woman. It is fair to say that his ministry is one of the greatest examples of what Christian ministry should look like. What separates his ministry from others and what can we learn of his methods and motivation, and message? _____

Our Goals (should be S.M.A.R.T. meaning specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely)

Grow – how can I specifically and measurably apply this lesson to my own personal spiritual life?

Go – how will I apply this lesson to the lost people that God has placed in my path?

Gather – how will I apply this lesson specifically in training other believers that may not be as far along as I am? Name someone that you will teach the things that God has taught you in this lesson.
