

## John 3:1-21

### Part Two

We are continuing this morning in our study of John's Gospel, turning our attention, once again, to chapter 3, verses 1-21. In our last look at John we *began* working through this section and managed to make it to verse 8 before we had to stop.

In those first 8 verses we saw how Jesus took advantage of the occasion of Nicodemus' visit to show him that entrance into the Kingdom of God was not, ultimately, a function of one's heritage but rather was something that came from God - a working of God himself. To use Jesus' own words - it was not a function of merely being "born" into the right lineage but rather of being "born again" or "born from above" as it can also be translated.

In other words, what Nicodemus and the entire nation of Israel needed was the thing that the prophets, especially Ezekiel, had spoken of - to be born of water and the Spirit, i.e., to be cleansed and washed, renewed and restored, and ultimately indwelt and transformed by the Spirit of God. And that cleansing and renewal and restoration was what Jesus came to accomplish. Through his life, death and resurrection, and through believing and trusting in these things that Jesus had done, the realities of which the prophets had spoken would finally come to pass and the Kingdom of God could be attained by God's people - both within ethnic Israel and beyond.

And that last bit - the truth that God's plan and purpose went beyond the limits of tiny Israel - that truth is one of the central realities that we will be focusing on this morning as we continue our look at this section of John's Gospel.

Now, those of you who have been with us for this series will know that the Apostle John's *overall purpose* in writing this Gospel was to preserve a record of Jesus' life that would be especially helpful in encouraging faith among the *exiled Jews* that were scattered all over the place, including the place from which John wrote his Gospel: the city of Ephesus. John's hope was that through his Gospel people would come to believe that Jesus *was* the Christ of God - the Messiah - the long-awaited and Promised One who was going to come to restore God's broken people, and God's broken world.

In pursuit of this purpose, thus far in this Gospel John has concentrated his energies on clarifying the *identity* of Jesus for his readers. And so, in chapter 1 we have seen how Jesus was and is equal with God the Father, even participating in the creation of the world with him. After making that point, the Gospel of John quickly moves on to John the Baptist and is eager to show the relationship between his ministry and Jesus' ministry, and how John the Baptist clearly saw his ministry as a *precursor and as preparatory* for what Jesus came to do.

From there we saw some of Jesus' early interactions with the men who would later on become his set apart apostles. Following *that* we get an account of Jesus' turning water into wine at a local wedding, and then an account of his angrily clearing out the local temple. In all of these things we are given further as to Jesus' character and identity.

Alongside these various accounts which are showing us who Jesus IS, we see that John is concerned to not only show us *that* but also to help his readers to see what it means to respond *appropriately* to this revelation of who Jesus is. In other words, once we know who he is, what are we to *do* with that knowledge? We saw the first installment of the answer to that question a few weeks ago when we looked at 2:23-25 and saw, among other things, what an *inadequate* response to Jesus would look like.

And then we moved into chapter 3 which is now helping to clarify for us what it means to respond to Jesus in a *legitimate* and *adequate* fashion. Before we continue our look at these things let's pause to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to come and teach us....

*Father in heaven, you said you sent your Spirit into the world to guide us into the truth, we ask that you would make that happen right now by using your word to illuminate your people working in, through, beyond and, if necessary, against the things that are poorly said here, in order to accomplish your purposes. We thank you in advance for your great faithfulness in this. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.....*

(Read passage)

Now, that's quite a mouthful, and because it is, and because it is has been over a month since we last looked at this gospel, the approach I will take this morning is to spend a few minutes on the front end giving you what I hope is a clear overview of the *flow of thought* in this passage. Afterward, I want to come back and pull out just a few things among many that could be pulled out - and think a little bit further about them....With that being said, let's dig in....

At the beginning of this chapter, as we have already seen, Nicodemus - who was a Pharisee and part of the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin) comes to Jesus at night to ask him some questions. According to John's account, in Nick's opening words to Jesus he acknowledges that God is with Jesus and that Jesus is "from God". And so, taking Nick at his word, Jesus decides to take this avowed belief out for a little "test run", so to speak. On the heels of Nick's affirmations, Jesus announces - quite out of the blue in verse 3 - that the kingdom of God is not open to people on the basis of their heritage and lineage but rather on the basis of their being born again. To put it another way - it is not the circumstances of the birth that takes place *down here* - your earthly birth that matter - but rather it is your birth *from above* that counts.

In the wake of this stunning announcement, which was not at all what Nick had come to believe, he is very much confused and so asks, "How can this be", wanting Jesus to explain himself further on these matters.

Now it is Jesus' turn to be stunned and amazed. And what Jesus is stunned and amazed about is the fact that Nicodemus, who judging from the way Jesus refers to him must have been a prominent teacher in Israel - but Nicodemus doesn't understand things that Jesus clearly believes he *should* have understood, given his knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures.

And so Jesus' amazement finds verbal expression when, after saying some things in verses 5-8 which should have jogged Nick's OT memory a little bit he responds to Nick's question with a return question, "Are you the teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?"

And then from there, and continuing to respond to Nick's "How can this be?" question - Jesus uses an analogy to show why he *cannot* and *is not* going to answer Nick's question. And he does so by reminding Nick, firstly in vs 11, that the things he (Jesus) has said and revealed thus far are trustworthy and verifiable truths. In other words, this Jesus - who Nick himself has acknowledged is "from God" - has said some things which he knows to be true. But these things he has revealed - this testimony - has not been received by Nicodemus - or by those he represents, as indicated by the fact that the "you" of verse 11 is plural - "you all".

After this, the analogy comes into play when - likening what he has already said to earthly things - he says, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" And so, in response to Nick's "how can this be?" question Jesus says, in essence, "Look, you don't even understand the things I have told you already - which are, by comparison to what you are asking now, simple things, earthly, rudimentary things. And if you don't get *those* things, if you don't understand WHAT I have said so far, how could you understand higher things, heavenly things? How could you understand the WHY behind what I have said?"

It's like a person who doesn't understand basic addition and subtraction, asking for an explanation of calculus. What would be the point of giving such an explanation to that person?

There would be no point. And so Jesus doesn't go into anything deeper with Nicodemus but, instead, comes back at what he has already said, from a different angle. Once again, he affirms the uniquely authoritative and trustworthy perspective from which he speaks in vs 13 - as if to say, "Let me assure you, I *know* what I am talking about here" and then makes a third attempt at explaining to Nicodemus what he has been driving at with all this talk of being "born again" and being "born of water and Spirit".

This third time he appeals again to the Old Testament - but this time to a portion that, hopefully, would be easier for Nicodemus to pick up on. He refers to an account in what we know as Numbers 21 where the people of God were again complaining and rebelling against God and the Lord disciplined them by sending serpents among them. In that story, the plague of serpents remained and was only abated when a serpent was fashioned and set on a pole so that people could be healed and spared from certain death by coming and looking upon this pole that was raised up - all of which was an act of humbling and repentance, and an acknowledgment of their sin against God.

And so, appealing to that account, Jesus says to Nicodemus that just as that serpent was placed on a pole and raised up in Moses' day, so too was he - the Son of Man - which was how Jesus referred to himself - going to be lifted up, so to speak, so that he too would be a source of deliverance and more than that, of salvation and eternal life itself - for all who believed in him.

That is why God gave us His Son - verse 16 tells us so emphatically. He gave his Son so that people all over this world that he loves so much might have life through believing *in* His Son - i.e., through understanding who Jesus is and why he came - and embracing and taking hold of that - and all of the implications that flow *from* that.

This truth is so important that it gets repeated and highlighted by contrast in verse 17 where we are told that God *didn't* send his Son into the world to condemn it but the very opposite - so that the world might be saved through him.

This too would have been quite a stunning reality for Nicodemus to grasp. Because he, and his colleagues with him, would have been of the opinion that when God's deliverer came, he would liberate God's people and endorse them in all their religiousness and, at the same time, he would show the nations a thing or two, and visit them with his wrath and judgment.

But so far in this conversation, what Nicodemus was seeing was the opposite. He and those whom he represented were being told that rather than being "in" with God already, they in fact needed to be born *again* to see God's kingdom. Their first birth was not good enough. Even further, they are now being told that rather than coming to beat down and decimate the pagan nations that God's deliverer was coming to make *salvation* available to them!

*However.....*

There is a caution, a qualification, a caveat that needs to be made here. And the qualification comes in verses 18 and following. And it is a very necessary qualification. Because if the passage had just stopped at verse 17, you might have walked away with a very different understanding than the one you are meant to have. If the account had just stopped at verse 17, you might well have walked away thinking, "Well, that settles it. It's all over and done. There is no more condemnation, period. God has sent his Son to save the world. That what he did. The world is now saved, and we can all breathe a lot easier now."

But it doesn't stop at verse 17. And neither can our understanding stop at verse 17. Because what verses 18 and following tell us is that, while it is quite true that God did not send his Son - in this first coming of Jesus - to condemn and judge the world but to save it *that does not mean that condemnation does not exist and can no longer happen*. It most certainly can, and it does. Condemnation and judgment are very real possibilities.

A person does not take up the mantle to major in mathematics and education at university, just so that when she is finished, she can get a job at a local high school and fail people in Algebra. Quite the opposite, she learns what she learns, and she does what she does with the goal and intention of seeing people understand Algebra and succeed at mathematics.

However, the fact that this is the reason why she goes into teaching does not mean that people will no longer fail Algebra. Because not everyone will listen to what she is saying. And then there will be some who will listen, but will not "get" or "understand" what she is saying. And there will also be some who do "get" what she is saying, but do not care about what she is

saying and so do not apply themselves. And the result of all these things might very well mean failure - a failure that many of them will have brought upon themselves.

In the same sort of way, Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but that does not mean condemnation does not and cannot happen. As the passage makes clear, those who do not believe in Jesus - who do not accept or receive who he is and what he has done - those are the ones who will bring condemnation upon themselves. They will bring judgment upon themselves. They are like people who are floundering around in the darkness, and have grown to love and even *prefer* the darkness such that even when light comes, they run from it, they hate it because of what it IS and because of what it DOES.

By contrast, verse 21 tells us, whoever does what is true, comes to the light. These are the ones who are not like those who are ashamed and do their deeds in the darkness but are like those who are not ashamed, who do their deeds openly, in the light, FOR God and before God.

And with that, the passage ends.

Now, hopefully, that very quick run through will have given you a feel for the flow of what is going on in this passage. With that in mind, let me now very briefly highlight for you a *few* things from within the passage. There are obviously more than that, and I trust that you will find them....and learn from them too.....

The first thing I want you to notice is *the nature of the new birth* - what it involves - what it is like. Now this is something we *might* have talked about in our first look at this passage but we were not able to at that time. But now we do have time. In vs 8, Jesus uses the analogy of *the wind* to try and communicate some truths about the new birth to Nicodemus. And the two main things that Jesus highlights about the wind in his analogy are that: 1) while you can see the winds *effects*, and the evidence of its obvious presence - 2) you still cannot see the wind *itself*, nor can you control or know where it is coming from or where it is going.

The new birth that Jesus has been speaking of is just like that. You can see its effects. You can see evidence that the new birth is present within a person, but you cannot see the thing itself. Further, you cannot control it, nor can you know or even predict where and when it will show up next. That part of it is, and remains, a mystery and the full understanding of it is something which only God can ever fathom.

In short, there is nothing automatic or mechanical about the salvation that God provides for his people. It is not a matter of pushing certain buttons or following certain formulas. The certainty and confidence that Nicodemus, and so many others among the Jewish people in that day would have had, all of that confidence is shown in these verses to have been foolish, grounded as it was in the mere fact of their heritage.

That same thing would have been important for John's readers to have seen - these scattered and exiled Jews who were counting on their Jewishness to make things alright in the end. And beyond that, these things are important considerations for all those in our own day who have placed their confidence as to their right standing before God upon some sort of formulaic certainty that is not grounded in the working of God's Spirit but in their own contemporary notions of Christian heritage and upbringing.

But the nature of the new birth does not change from age to age. It is still like the wind. If you stand in your front yard and the leaves are motionless and the trees are still and you feel nothing on your face - guess what? *There is no wind.* And you *know* there is no wind because there are no effects. In the same sort of way, if the wind of God's Spirit is blowing through a person's life, then there will be evidence that this is so. And any confidence that a person might have in the sustained absence of such evidence is a false and formulaic confidence.

And what this also means, then, is that the person who is concerned to see the Gospel go forth and is concerned to see people respond in faith and repentance - that person, knowing the nature of the new birth that is required, will necessarily be a person of *prayer*. Show me a person who faithfully places the names of her lost family and friends before the Lord, and I will show you a person who truly understands the nature of the new birth - that it is like the wind, and we can neither control it, nor predict it. And that fact ought to drive us to our knees to address the *only one who can*.

The second thing I want you to notice - and very briefly since we've touched on this before - is the *unique authority that Jesus possesses*. No one else is like him. No one else has come from where he came, or done what he has done, or endured what he has endured. And no one - I mean NO ONE ELSE - has the right or authority to speak with certainty about the things of heaven and earth like Jesus does.

Jesus has had unique access to heaven, and not because he has merely *visited* there but because *he came from there originally* - which is the point of verse 13. Jesus' understanding of the things of heaven is not that of a passer-by or a momentary tourist but that of an insider, of someone for whom heaven is his home, where he belongs.

And because of the uniqueness of Jesus' person and perspective, that lends a unique authority to what he has said and done and thus sets him apart from any others that might claim to be speaking on heaven's behalf. But please notice the *point* and *purpose* of all this. Jesus emphasizes his uniqueness and authority - not so that he can parade up and down, or boast, or rub people's noses in it, but so that a certain *gravity* might be lent to his words and, as a result, people would then hear and believe. *There was a saving intent behind his assertions of uniqueness and authority.*

The Apostle John, in writing this Gospel, has maintained that same intent as he has also underscored the authority of Jesus all throughout, and all for the purpose of seeing his scattered people respond appropriately to Jesus. And that same purpose must characterize our own determination to protect and assert and defend the uniqueness and authority of Jesus today.

As the world continues to get smaller and smaller, and as religion becomes more and more politicized in this country, the pressure will continue to be on to level out the playing field and to “democratize spirituality” under the dangerous banner that says we are all the same, that no one has a leg up on anyone else, and that all speak with equal authority. And those that say such things only demonstrate their deep ignorance, not only of Christianity, but of other world religions as well.

But we must not be swayed by these things or be tempted to comprise the uniqueness of Christ in any way. And why is that? Is it because we want to feel superior? No. A thousand times No. It has nothing to do with that and everything to do with the fact that if you let go of that, then the message of the Gospel descends into a sea of competing messages that, ultimately, renders us speechless about this life and this world and what it all means. And you are left without a Gospel, and without a Savior, and without hope for the teeming millions that so desperately need it.

We hold on to the uniqueness and authority of Christ in order that people might *believe* in this Christ and *not* perish and have eternal life.

Which leads to the third and final thing I want to draw your attention to - and it is the *tone* or *emphasis* of Christ’s ministry. As we have already seen, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but in order that it might be saved. That is and was Jesus’ emphasis when he was here. That was the *tone* and *emphasis* and *goal* of all that he did and said.

And as those who live after the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of Jesus, and as those who live *before* the second coming of Christ - when he *will* come in judgment - but as those who live in this particular age and who have been entrusted with Christ’s Gospel mission - then we too ought to be characterized by that same sort of tone and emphasis in both our individual ministries, and in our churches as a whole.

We ought not be known as those who stand around handing out judgments and condemnation upon others but as those who hold out the word of life, who offer real hope, and who do not want to see *anyone* miss out on the grace and mercy of God. That ought to be our default mode. That ought to be our tone. That ought to be our emphasis. It doesn’t mean we don’t talk about sin, we do and we can and we *must*. It doesn’t mean we can’t say hard things or take a stand.

But what it *does* mean is that when we talk about sin, it is not with a smile on our face. When we say hard things, it is not with some secret delight. When we confront others with their broken-ness, and AS broken people ourselves - when we do all these things, and when we point people to the truth of Christ, it is with this ultimate goal and hope that people will see what we have graciously been allowed to see, and with the hope that people will respond to the mercy and forgiveness and *true freedom* that Christ offers.

And that sort of movement and emphasis, at the end of the day, is what we see in this passage.

Do you remember the circumstantial detail about this visit of Nicodemus - a detail that was pointed out when we first started looking at this passage? All the way back at the beginning, in verse 2, we are told that Nicodemus came to Jesus *at night*. Why does John preserve that detail for us? He almost never makes those sorts of comments. But he does here. Why?

Look at the closing verses of this section. "...everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it might be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God." Why is there this analogy of light and darkness at the end of this section?

Well, I think it's because this whole event of Nicodemus *physically* coming to Jesus, who is the light, and his doing so *at night* - this whole thing is a metaphor and a picture of what Nicodemus now needs to do *spiritually*. Nicodemus needs to come out of the darkness and to the light that is Jesus. And not just Nicodemus, but the religious leaders and the Jewish peoples that he represents.

In short, what we have here is an invitation. This entire section, in the end, amounts to an invitation to respond to Christ, to receive him and believe in him. At one level, it is an invitation, as we have seen, for Nicodemus to come to Christ - not just physically, but spiritually. At another level it is an invitation for John's Jewish audience to respond to Christ by believing in him and receiving him as the Messiah he is. And at another level it is - and remains - a standing invitation to all those who are in the dark, and who love the darkness, to abandon that darkness and, instead, to embrace the light and, in doing so, to escape condemnation and receive eternal life.