

JOHN 3

JESUS, THE DIVINE TEACHER

There is an unflinching charm in the story of Nicodemus (verses 1-21), but there is also a deep undertone of sorrow and sadness. His character is sketched in three different scenes throughout the Gospel of John. In this first scene, he appears as a cautious inquirer; in the second, as a timid defender of the Savior; and in the third, as a secret disciple of Christ. He was a Pharisee, but apparently he was one of the few who were not a hypocrite. The Pharisees, in spite of their formalism, composed the most popular and most patriotic party in Jerusalem; and yet even among their ranks, there were men of true earnestness and piety. Nicodemus was also “a ruler” – that is, a member of the Jewish council called the Sanhedrin. So he must have been a man of high reputation – well-educated, influential, and powerful.

Let us watch Nicodemus as he muffles his face in his cloak and creeps along in the shadows cast by the full Passover-moon. He is startled by his own footfall; and he is fearful that the watchman, on his rounds, might recognize the man who is quietly asking for entrance at the door of the humble lodgings of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, Nicodemus came to visit Jesus “by night.” Nevertheless, he came; and that is the important point. The late hour that he chose for this interview may indicate timidity, but other details in the narrative do reveal a heart of sincerity. The well-respected “teacher of Israel” came to the despised Prophet from Galilee, seeking for light; and Jesus revealed to him the marvelous truths concerning His Person and His saving work of redemption.

There may have been a hint of presumption or self-sufficiency in the words with which Nicodemus opened the dialogue. “Rabbi,” says he, “we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him.” But there was something even more serious which needed correction in the mind and heart of the inquirer, as was shown by the startling reply of our Lord: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Now Nicodemus sincerely longed for the coming of that Kingdom. But he expected that it was to be established by a political revolution and by acts of power, which the miracles of Christ seemed to be hinting at; and he believed that every Jew, by right of birth alone, would have a place in that Kingdom.

It was surprising, then, for Nicodemus to be told that even he must experience a new birth, in order to enter and enjoy the blessings of that Kingdom. His reply expresses his astonishment: “How can a man be born when he is old?” Of course, he was interpreting the words with an absurd literalism, referring to a

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *Christ's nighttime conversation with Nicodemus – verses 1-21*
- ❖ *John the Baptizer's discourse with his disciples about Jesus, in which he faithfully resigns all his honor to Him – verses 22-36*

physical birth. Whatever the false impression of Nicodemus may have been, his ideas were moving entirely in the sphere of the physical and the natural; and Christ proceeds, therefore, to emphasize the truth of the spiritual and the Divine, as He explains to him fully what He means by the “new birth.” How difficult it is for people to take a spiritual view of life! It seems hard for them to comprehend the fact that “the kingdom of God” can never be brought in by merely introducing political expedients, social reforms, and natural processes. Rather, the first great need is a renewal of the heart, and a Divine transformation of each individual person. “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” By “water,” Jesus referred to the baptism of John, and to similar ceremonies with which Nicodemus was familiar. As John taught, there must be repentance, confession, pardon, and purification from sin before a person can be prepared to enter the Kingdom; but there must also be something more, for there must be the renewing and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Human nature alone – no matter how beautiful, cultured, or sincere it may become – can never rise above itself, or produce anything better than itself. However, it does possess the capacity for a higher life, which can only be awakened and called into operation by the Holy Spirit. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” Jesus explained; “and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This truth is so obvious that it should cause us no surprise. “Marvel not,” the Savior continued, “that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”

It is worthy of observation here that when Christ says *must*, it is time for us to wake up! He is so gentle, mild, and tender – always persuading, inviting, and entreating us. He so seldom uses an imperative mood, such as He does here: “Ye *must* be born again!” Therefore, when He speaks thus, it is fitting for us to stop and inquire into the matter upon which He insists so earnestly.

But returning to our thoughts upon the nature of the new birth itself, there is a mystery about it – just as there is about every act of God. One who is born of the Holy Spirit is like the wind; we cannot tell its direction or source, yet we can see its effects. It is the manifestation of an unseen power. So also, the life of the regenerated and redeemed soul will always be a puzzle and an enigma to the people of this world; yet even they are able to test whether or not it is genuine by its acts of humility, purity, and love.

As Nicodemus expresses his surprise or bewilderment, our Lord states that these are truths which he should have already known. They are merely “earthly things” which the Old Testament taught, and which John had recently proclaimed; but there are “heavenly things” concerning Jesus’ own Person and work which He alone can reveal. These “heavenly things” are not referring to the need and nature of the new birth, which Nicodemus should have been familiar with already; but they do declare the method of that new birth – namely, faith in a Divine and crucified Savior! These “heavenly things” form the answer

to the eager question of Nicodemus: “How can these things be?” His words must have been expressing something more than blind incredulity or astonishment. Nicodemus must have been willing to believe; for Christ now proceeds to reveal to him, in startling fullness, the Divine plan of salvation. He assures Nicodemus that He Himself is worthy of trust as He brings this revelation, for He is more than a mere human Messenger that has been “sent from God.” He is also a Divine Being, Who is united with God. He came down from heaven; but even as He walked the earth in the body of a human being, He still enjoyed the most full, free, and perfect fellowship with His Father.



The essence of the revelation that Jesus made to Nicodemus is this: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him may have eternal life.” What a striking use Christ here makes of an account from Old Testament history! And how accurate is His Divine prevision, as He foresees and foretells His own death upon the cross!

Let us note several particulars in which the Divine plan of salvation corresponds with the symbolism of the brass serpent that was lifted up in the midst of Israel’s camp in the wilderness. Each and every human being is like the Israelites of old; they have been bitten by the serpent, and they are now filled with the deadly poison of sin. But the Lord has provided a remedy in the Person of His Son! In His crucifixion, we see sin vanquished – just as the uplifted serpent in the wilderness pictured the death of the destroyer. Nevertheless, just as the uplifted serpent was not real, but was made of brass; so also, Christ was not a partaker of sin, but was only made “in the likeness of sinful flesh.” Moreover, remember how it was necessary for the dying Israelite to accept God’s provision, and to look – with submission and faith – upon the brass serpent. Similarly, it is necessary for us to raise our eyes – in repentance and faith – upon the crucified Savior! We must commit ourselves to God, as He is graciously revealed to us in Jesus. If we refuse to accept Him, we “perish”; but faith in Him results in “eternal life” (verse 16). This provision is made by the love of God, and it is freely and mercifully offered to everyone who will believe: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life!”

The record of this midnight conversation has provided us with a clear testimony to the Person of Christ. It portrays Him to us as “a teacher come from God;” and also as “the Son of man” Who descended out of heaven, and Who has also ascended into heaven. He is the Savior of all who believe in Him. Furthermore, we have seen here that faith results in life, by being “born anew”; and also in salvation, by being given “eternal life.” Verse 16 contains a beautiful

summary of the Gospel – further testifying to the Person of Christ as the “only begotten Son” of God.

When Jesus withdrew from Jerusalem (verse 22), He continued His ministry in Judea, outside the capital city. His work, for the present, was that of teaching His disciples; and by their hands, administering baptism to new followers. John the Baptizer was laboring in the same vicinity; and quite naturally, the question was raised as to the relationship between the work of Jesus and of John. An opportunity was hereby given to John to deliver his final and supreme testimony of Christ, which is contained in the latter portion of this chapter (verses 27-36). Once again, he bore witness to the Person and work of our Lord, and he also gave a solemn warning as to the end results of faith and unbelief.

The immediate occasion of the witness of the Baptizer was a remark of his disciples which showed evidence of something like jealousy. “Rabbi,” they say, “he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.” In noble contrast, John replies with deep and characteristic humility. He says that he is perfectly satisfied – and even rejoices – in the part that had been assigned to him in relation to the work and ministry of Christ. He declares his great joy at being privileged to stand as the actual forerunner of Jesus, whose responsibility was to prepare the hearts of the people for the reception of the heavenly Bridegroom. And he speaks that word which ought to be a motto for everyone in relation to the Master: “He must increase, but I must decrease!”

So far, John’s witness has shown his inferiority to Jesus and the relationship of their respective ministries. But the closing words of his testimony show the infinite superiority of Jesus to all men, and His unique relationship with God. John speaks of the Divine origin of Jesus: “He that cometh from above is above all.” This is not a reference to the source of His mission, but to His Being. Because of this origin, and in contrast with men (who are limited by the experiences of earth), Jesus’ teaching is absolutely authoritative; for He has been a witness of the heavenly truths which He proclaims, and yet many people are unwilling to receive His testimony. To believe Christ is to believe God, for Christ speaks the very words of God Himself. To Him, the Father has given His Spirit in all fullness – not in limited measure, as in the case of human teachers. Nor is Christ merely a Teacher; for because of the Father’s love for Him, He has bestowed upon Him – as His Son – universal authority. In light of such teaching and authority, John’s testimony very properly closes with the solemn warning concerning the eternal consequences of faith and unbelief. He makes it very clear that belief in the Son of God assures the present and continued enjoyment of “eternal life,” but the rejection of the Son involves the experiencing of “the wrath of God.”

Thank You, heavenly Father, for Your amazing love for us in giving us Your only-begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in You may enjoy everlasting life! Amen.