

- ***READ John 1:43-51*** As we discussed two weeks ago, John's Gospel was written for the purpose of instilling within the reader belief and faith in Jesus as the Son of God. (**John 20:30,31**) We can see this focus right from the start as John begins his Gospel account with Jesus being described as the Word, Light, and the One who would give men the right to become children of God. (**John 1:1,4,12**)
- From John's perspective, Jesus of Nazareth was a man of the highest influence. Those who would come to know Jesus...those who would come face to face with Jesus...well...they would leave changed. John the baptist when simply seeing Jesus coming to him from still a long way off was awestruck as he proclaimed, *"Behold the Lamb of God who take away the sins of the world!"* (**John 1:29**)
- Then we come to the end of chapter one, and we are introduced to the man Philip who is so impressed with Jesus that he goes to find Nathanael so that he can come and meet *"Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* (**John 1:45**) As impressed as Philip was, Nathanael was equally unimpressed. *"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"* is the response offered by Nathanael. (**John 1:46**) So as they are walking towards Jesus, the Word cries out concerning Nathanael, *"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit."* (**John 1:47**) Nathanael questions how Jesus could possibly know who he was, and Jesus responds with miraculous ability speaking of where Nathanael had been previously. This alone stuns Nathanael to the degree that he exclaims, *"Rabbi, You are the Son of God: You are the King of Israel."* (**John 1:49**) Jesus downplays what has taken place and basically says that if Nathanael was impressed with that then he would be blown away when he sees *"the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."* (**John 1:51**)
- We are not even out of chapter 1, yet we have already seen the amazing things that can happen by simply coming face to face with Jesus. These people saw Jesus and were changed, and we are seeking to do the same thing as we read through the Gospels this year. This morning, we are going to begin a series of studies looking at those who had come face to face with Jesus. We want to consider some of those face to face encounters that can be found within the Gospel of John so that we might see what those individuals experienced who came face to face with our Lord and what we might be able to learn as we come face to face with Jesus in the Scriptures. We're going to begin these studies by looking at the face to face encounter that Jesus had with the Pharisee Nicodemus from **John 3:1-21**. Thought Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, the Light quickly illumined him to some critical truths concerning the Son of God.

I. Only those born again will see the kingdom of God. (John 3:1-8)

A. This Man, who must be from God, was very focused on the kingdom of God.

1. The first thing that Nicodemus says to Jesus when he comes to Him is that Jesus must be from God because of the signs that He had supposedly performed. To Nicodemus, this man who could do these amazing things must be someone worth listening to. Whatever He has to say must be something of great value, right?
2. Right from the start, Jesus gets to the point of what He came to earth to do. He came to tell every person who would listen that the kingdom of God was at hand, and now was the time to get ready and prepare oneself to be in it. This is the first mentioning of the kingdom in John's Gospel, but we know from the other Gospels that this message of the kingdom coming was the foundation of what Jesus taught. Just after His baptism and His temptations in the wilderness, we see *"from that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"* (**Matthew 4:17**)

3. So what was Jesus's message to Nicodemus concerning the kingdom? He said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."* (John 3:3) To Nicodemus, this seemed like a very strange thing to say which is why he responded in a confused manner. *"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* (John 3:4)
 4. Of course, this type of rebirth was impossible, but Jesus seeks to clarify what Nicodemus is confused about by telling him, *"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God....Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"* (John 3:5,7) This whole conversation could still be very confusing at the moment to Nicodemus, but to us with a fuller picture of what Jesus was teaching, it can make much more sense.
- B. Jesus is simply stating that there was an important turning point that needed to take place in order for one to become a part of the kingdom of God.
1. While so many would seek to read baptism out of this text because it does not fit their theology, we must recognize that Jesus is speaking exactly of that very thing. He is saying that one who was to become a part of the kingdom of God must be baptized...they must be born again of water. This becomes obvious when we consider Paul's words to the Corinthians when he says that they *"were washed."* (I Corinthians 6:11) It makes complete sense when we consider that Peter says that, *"baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience"* (I Peter 3:21) There truly is nothing mysterious about what Jesus is telling Nicodemus. He's simply saying that one must be baptized if they want to see the kingdom of God.
 2. So this means that as long as someone is immersed then they're good, right? Well not exactly because we cannot forget that being born of water was only half of the equation. They also had to be born of the Spirit, but what does that mean? Consider, again, that Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel that repentance was necessary for the kingdom of God was at hand. Those who wanted to be a part must have hearts of repentance.
 3. This is where the Spirit comes into play. One must allow for themselves to be born again according to the Spirit of God. The one who is just born of the flesh will live a fleshly life, but consider that one who is born of the Spirit will allow for the Spirit to become their guide in how they live in this life. Is this not exactly what Paul speaks of in **Galatians 5:16-25**? Those who walk by the Spirit will not carry out the desires and the deeds of the flesh. They will live for God by being people who are producing Godly fruits in their lives. This decision of repentance is seen in the change from living according to the flesh to now living according to the Spirit. Jesus, this man who must have been from God demanded that one be born of the water and the Spirit if he wanted to see the kingdom of God.

II. What was taking place should have been recognized and understood. (John 3:9-12)

- A. What Jesus is saying seems so plain and simple, right? Then why was it that Nicodemus was so confused?
1. Notice that all throughout the first part of this discussion, Nicodemus just doesn't seem to grasp what is going on. *"How can a man be born when he is old?"* (John 3:4) *"How can these things be?"* (John 3:9) Nicodemus twice comes back with questions as if he is not truly understanding what Jesus is saying.
 2. You'd think that this would be understandable, but Jesus doesn't cut Nicodemus any sort of slack. *"Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"* is Jesus's jab at this Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin. (John 3:10) These people should've understood what was taking place, but we know that those of Nicodemus's kind were not excited about the idea of things changing so drastically. Yet, they still should've recognized the signs of the times.

- B. What was taking place with Jesus and the kingdom being established was the fulfillment of God's promises to His people of restoration from Ezekiel 36.
1. Ezekiel begins this chapter by making the point that Israel's enemies have had great success against them for a long time and with good reason. **(Ezekiel 36:2,3)** The unfaithfulness of Israel had led them to this place where they were in possession of other nations and had become a disgrace before the eyes of God and they were punished. **(Ezekiel 36:15-21)**
 2. However, Ezekiel is to prophesy that make it known that this time period of Israel being run over was going to come to an end because God's restoration was going to come upon them and He was going to build them up to greatness once again. **(Ezekiel 36:22-38)**
 3. Specifically, notice what Ezekiel says in **vv.25-27**.
 - a) *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean."* **(v.25)**
 - b) *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you."* **(v.26)**
 - c) *"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."* **(v.27)**
 4. All of these statements from God towards His people is exactly what we see Jesus telling Nicodemus he should be aware of if taking place at that very moment. As a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus and the other Pharisees should've been well aware of what was to be coming, but we know their struggle was with the fact that this coming upon Israel would bring about massive change. That didn't matter to Jesus. He knew that they should've recognized the signs that were taking place, and coming away from this conversation, Nicodemus truly had no excuse.

III. The death of the Son of Man would be the key to man's belief. (John 3:13-18)

- A. Jesus again uses an Old Testament illustration to help a learned Jewish teacher to understand.
1. Jesus alludes to the time recorded in **Numbers 21:1-9** when God was punishing the children of Israel for their unbelief which was exemplified in their complaining against God. *"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 miserable food."* **(Numbers 21:5)**
 2. This complaining caused for God to send fiery poisonous serpents among the people so that anyone who was bit died from the bite. The people cried out to God acknowledging their sin, and they asked Moses to intercede for them. God answered by telling Moses to create a fiery serpent out of bronze and to set it upon a tall standard so that any person who was bitten could look upon the bronze serpent and be saved. **(Numbers 21:6-9)**
 3. The details might be different but the basic circumstances were presently true for what was happening as Jesus met with Nicodemus. The people of Israel were awaiting for that source of redemption and salvation that would be offered so that they might be saved, and God had sent that in the form of the Son of Man who would be lifted up on his own standard (cross). **(John 3:13)**
 4. Just as those Israelites had to look upon the bronze serpent, so would people now have to look upon the Son of Man in belief so that they might be saved. It was God's love for man that moved Him to be willing to do such a thing for men who hated, disrespected, and under-appreciated His goodness towards them. **(John 3:15,16)** God sent Jesus so that people might not be saved

B. This belief in the Son of Man is shown through a willingness to give everything to Him in obedience to His commands so that we might not be judged. (John 3:17,18)

1. What had the Son of Man commanded must be done in order for one to be a part of this kingdom of God? What might be included in this belief that will save a man? Back up to vv.3,5 and we see that answer don't we? One must be born again of the water and spirit! But what is the purpose of such a thing needing to take place?
2. When Paul discusses baptism in **Romans 6**, what event does he tie into the action of baptism? In v.3, Paul says that those who have been baptized have been baptized into the death of Jesus. Their belief and obedience to Jesus leads them to die to their sins so that they might be raised or born again to a new life. (**Romans 6:4**) These act of faith, to die to self and sin and to be raised to a new life, emulates the death that Jesus suffered and the victorious resurrection in which He was brought back to life. (**Romans 6:5-10**)
3. In these verses and the following we see the rebirth of water and of the Spirit which leads us to no longer allow sin to reign in our mortal bodies, but that we now present our bodies as instruments of righteousness to God. (**Romans 6:11-13**) Nicodemus might not have seen the whole picture as we are able to with the rest of the New Testament, but these truths were still evident through the words that Jesus had spoken to him. These truths led him to a final recognition as we see the ending of Jesus's recorded conversation with this Pharisee.

IV. Those who truly wanted to be a part of the kingdom had to come to the Light. (John 3:19-21)

A. Nicodemus had taken the first step towards truly coming to the Light by coming to inquire about Jesus, but this wasn't the last time we see him in John's Gospel.

1. Notice from the very beginning that Nicodemus came to Jesus *"by night."* (**John 3:2**) By coming to Jesus at night, Nicodemus was increasing the odds of him being able to have this meeting without many people knowing what he was doing. A Pharisee meeting with the man that they would come to abhor wouldn't be a great look, but it was where Nicodemus was in his belief in Jesus at the moment.
2. If we skip ahead to **John 7:38-53**, however, we find where the Sanhedrin is ready to lay hands on Jesus. He is able to allude the officers who were sent to arrest Him, but even they are amazed at how Jesus taught. The Pharisees are incensed by this, and seek all the more to harm Jesus. It is at this point that Nicodemus takes a brave stand for this hated Rabbi by reminding the assembly that *"Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?"* (**John 7:51**) These words bring the ire of the other Pharisees, and it shows us that Nicodemus is putting more faith in Jesus to the extend that he would bring some heat upon himself in order to defend Him.
3. But then we see the ultimate example of Nicodemus's faith in Jesus at the end of John's Gospel when we see Nicodemus fully putting himself out there by taking care of the lifeless body of Jesus through sacrificing much of himself. In **John 19:38-42**, we find Nicodemus putting himself fully out there as one who deeply cared for and loved Jesus. He sacrificed much of his reputation as a Pharisee and of himself monetarily (\$150,000+) to take care of the body of Jesus. We don't know for certain, but it is speculated from church history that a martyr named Nicodemus is the same one we read about here in John's Gospel. Nicodemus was willing to fully step out into the light and be a full fledged follower of Jesus.

B. What does Nicodemus's transformation teach us about coming face to face with Jesus?

1. Notice from the text in **John 3:19-21** that anyone who wanted to be come to Jesus must be willing to leave behind their evil deeds so that they might be fully influenced by the light of Jesus. Nicodemus had to make that decision to leave that group of men who hated Jesus and practiced evil in order to be a true disciple.
2. Yes, Nicodemus seemed to have some measure of belief in Jesus even here in **John 3**, but he was not ready to fully leave the darkness in order to come into the light of Jesus. While we should be glad that eventually Nicodemus was able to do such a thing, the sad truth is that there were many who were not willing to do the same thing. In **John 12:42,43**, we find that there were even some of the rulers who believed in Jesus, *"but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God."*
3. There is a stark contrast between these rulers and where we see Nicodemus by the time John's Gospel is finished, and I believe we see this contrast because Nicodemus stood face to face with Jesus, and he realized that he couldn't just be a secret follower of Jesus, but he had to fully come to the light, confess Jesus, and allow Him to lead him from then on in his life.

People are sometimes asked, "if you could go back in time and meet one person, who would it be?" I've heard a great many of those people say Jesus, but I'm not sure they truly grasp what it is that they are saying. Coming face to face with Jesus, as we see from the perspective of Nicodemus, is a truly life changing event, and it is my hope and prayer that each of us will find ourselves changed, that we will find ourselves coming fully to the light of Jesus so that we might all be counted with the faithful. Face to face with Jesus...Nicodemus left changed, will you?

PRAYER *Father, we are so thankful for Your Word and that we can take ourselves back to those conversations and situations where lives were changed because they came face to face with Your Son. As we read and meditate on these conversations, we pray that You would help for us to be changed. Help us to be like Nicodemus and recognize what it takes to be a part of the kingdom of God. Help us to be willing to step out of our dark ways and to only walk in the light. Help us to live lives that show the influence of Jesus within us. Bless us to always serve You and may You alone be glorified. In Jesus our Savior we pray...amen.*