

John Chapter 3: 1-21

Jesus and a Devout Jewish Clergyman

If the two key verses in Chapter 20 demonstrate that John's Gospel is evangelistic in intent, then to find their ingredients reappearing openly in chapter 3 suggests that this chapter too is evangelistic in intent. What kind of evangelism do we find in chapter 3, then? We find the evangelism of the Jew, just as chapter 4 exemplifies the evangelism of the non-Jew. By the Jew, we mean the orthodox traditional Jew: a Pharisee and member of the Council, not today's liberal Jew who may be no different from any other ordinary, decent bloke, with only the vaguest religious ideas and no convictions whatever. Nicodemus is not that. He is a sincere man without condescension, and without undue cowardice; after all it was a fairly risky thing to come out at all to see Jesus. He was a kind of chief rabbi, a serious person and a scholarly one. How do we evangelise people like that?

God-centred, Trinitarian evangelism

Before plunging into part 1 to look at Nicodemus (verse 3-8), it may help to give an overview of the whole, because evangelism too easily becomes man-centred or church-centred. Notice that Nicodemus is introduced first to the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit (3-8), then to the unique word and work of the Son (9-15), and then to the loving purposes of the Father (16-21) – in fact the whole saving activity of the Triune God. What Nicodemus lacked was nothing less than the knowledge of the true God; what he needed was just that introduction to the Father which is ours only through knowledge of Jesus as Lord. All this was to hang on the conversation that began that evening when a distinguished leader of the Jews sought to have an undisturbed meeting with the young rabbi, Jesus.

It will be helpful to look at this section as a whole, and try to analyse what is going on in a kind of logical order. We shall pick out five main points that would help give some kind of shape to expounding this passage.

1. The Kingdom has come

Notice that Jesus immediately introduces the theme of 'the kingdom of God.' Why does he mention the kingdom of God? And what would it mean to Nicodemus? It would mean simply this: 'to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal resurrection life' (Carson).

That would be the hope of Nicodemus, as it is of course of many sincerely religious people in our own day. Jesus is making it clear that this hope is indeed deed a reality, and that it is a reality arrived in His own person. The kingdom has come.

2. Eternal life therefore begins now

Jesus tells Nicodemus that if anyone is to participate in this eternal kingdom they must enter it here and now.

3. But God alone can regenerate

What this exposes – to the shattering of human pride – is that by ourselves we are impotent to enter the kingdom of God. However privileged our birth, however religious or refined our nature, however pure our blood, however esteemed by other, however superior our achievements, entrance to God's kingdom is barred to us. Apart from a thorough-going regeneration, a creation act of God, making us a new kind of person altogether through a new kind of birth, we cannot enter the kingdom, or even see it (3,7).

4. This is the gospel of the Old Testament

This is vital to realise. Jesus clearly indicates that Nicodemus should not be surprised by this (7,10), because he, of all people, had known the gospel all his life. Did not the prophets of old repeatedly speak of a fundamental inner change? Of course they did! All the law ceremonies of the covenant spoke of this inner, spiritual reality right from the beginning (see Deut.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4;cf. Rom.2:29) But above all, Ezekiel 36:25-27 is surely the key to this conversation. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; ... I will give you a new heart...; And I will put my Spirit in you ..." How could "the teacher of Israel", this Pharisee among Pharisees, this member of the elite Sanhedrin-this supposed Scripture expert-not understand what Jesus was saying about the need to be born again "of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3, 5-6)? Let's take a look at some of the sacred texts he must have passed by.

Look up the following passages, and write down how they could have prepared Nicodemus for what Jesus told him.

Psalm 51:10 _____

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 _____

Ezekiel 11:19 _____

Ezekiel 36: 25-26 _____

5. Jesus is the only way

This has already become clear in passing, but is very evident in this Nicodemus dialogue and so important to highlight today. This new birth is not optional. 'You must be born again' insists Jesus to Nicodemus (7), for no-one - no-one can see the kingdom of God otherwise. For Jesus, it was necessary to state the logical consequences of the positive teaching. It was not enough to teach, for example, that he was the way, the truth, and the life, (14:6a) without adding that no-one could come to God except through Him (14:6b): in other words, that there was no other way to God except through Him.

The message from the heart is the message of the cross (14-15)

It is notable that all this is introduced to Nicodemus in Old Testament terms, by the famous story of the brass serpent (Numb.21:8ff). This meaning is clear: the lifting up of a source of life which becomes effectual through the faith of the helpless sufferer. Nicodemus lived to see with his own eyes the fulfilment of this prophecy (19:39).

We must not miss that John's further record suggests Nicodemus did indeed bravely come into the light (7:50; 19:39). Surely we are meant to take special note of this.

It is the responsibility of all to believe in Jesus

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3: 16-18)

God's love for a rebellious, lost world

The vast scope of the divine love is first signalled in verse 15; the son of Man is to be lifted up, in order that—mark the word— everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. And so it continues. God so loved the world, wicked in rebellion and perishing as it is, that whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish (16); whoever believes in him is not condemned (18).

Personal responsibility to believe the gospel

The Lord himself looked for a definite response of faith in his claims: to take Him at His word and trust in His promises. He called on his hearers immediately to accept his testimony and take Him at his word. Moreover, not to believe in Him would have momentous consequences. There is therefore a clear sense in this section that a person's destiny is in their own hands. To refuse God's one and only Son and His sacrifice is to refuse the one and only way of salvation. It is to reject life and settle for darkness and death (cf.36).

STUDY QUESTIONS

John 3: 1-21

LOOKING INTO THE SCRIPTURE

JESUS TEACHES NICODEMUS

Read 3: 1-21 and discuss.

- 1. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus by night?**
 - a. he couldn't wait until morning
 - b. he worked during the day
 - c. he was afraid of being seen
 - d. he wanted time alone with Jesus

- 2. Of the three levels of communication, how did the conversation start out?**
 - a. mouth to mouth—polite talk
 - b. head to head—intellectual talk
 - c. heart to heart—deep sharing

- 3. When Jesus explained, “...unless a man is born again...” what happened?**
 - a. Nicodemus got defensive
 - b. Nicodemus got curious
 - c. Nicodemus got interested
 - d. Nicodemus got confused

- 4. In the conversation that followed, what is the issue?**
 - a. religion versus new life
 - b. what Jesus' kingdom is all about
 - c. why religious people don't understand
 - d. how to get into the kingdom

- 5. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up ...” To what is Jesus referring here?**
 - a. Numbers 21:4-9 in the Old Testament
 - b. the death of Jesus on the cross
 - c. the resurrection of Jesus
 - d. the second coming of Jesus

- 6. What is the condition for obtaining eternal life according to verses 16-18?**
 - a. feeling sorry for yourself
 - b. feeling sorry for your sins
 - c. living a clean life
 - d. going to church every Sunday
 - e. receiving God's free gift by faith

- 7. How do you think Nicodemus came away from this conversation with Jesus?**
 - a. totally confused
 - b. enlightened
 - c. a silent follower of Jesus
 - d. intellectually convinced
 - e. with “food” for thought