

Reborn . . . The Declaration

Face to Face: Encountering the Messiah – Part II

John 3:1-15

Introduction

There is no doubt that certain books of the Bible are more well known than others. I am sure that, if I took a survey, not many of us would know any event or theme from the book of Habakkuk. If our lives depended on it, I doubt we could quote a verse from the book of Haggai. I would bet that even a Bible student would be hard pressed to quote a verse from Haggai.

For those of us who are not fluent in Haggai, when we come to the Gospel of John, chapter 3, the stories are more familiar. Many have heard the story of Nicodemus and many of us have either memorized, sung, or, at least, heard about the most familiar verse in the entire Bible – John, chapter 3, verse 16.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Now, I have a confession, having arrived at chapter 3 in our study through this Gospel. My first thought was, “Well, I’ll just hit the high points and move on. I’ll preach one sermon on the first twenty one verses. That’ll do it. This is familiar territory!”

Then, I began to study and the Holy Spirit began to convict my mind and heart and remind me that I had, open before me, the most precious truth of all time. How dare I skim through it?!

I had initially planned to hand to you a pair of flippers and a snorkel when, before us, is nothing less than a wonderful ocean of truth. My prayer and hope now, is that to those of you who know these truths, they will simply bathe over you with refreshing newness, and to those of you who are unaware or unbelieving, that you will be reborn!

So, for our study of John, chapter 3, we are not going to snorkel, we are going to go deep sea diving.

Nicodemus

The fable is told of a young Arab who was riding his donkey down the road when he came upon a small

bird, a sparrow, lying upon his back in the road. There he was, a small object with his two thin legs pointed skyward. At first, the Arab thought the sparrow was dead. When he found that the bird was alive, however, the Arab got down from his donkey and went over to speak to him.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes!”

“Then what are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed up at the sky?”

The sparrow replied, “Haven’t you heard the rumor? They say that heaven is going to fall.”

The Arab laughed, “Surely you don’t think you’re going to hold it up with those two scrawny legs do you?”

After a long pause, the bird looked at him with a solemn face, and retorted, “One does the best one can.”

I want to introduce to you a man who, if it were humanly possible to hold up heaven by the legs of human achievement, would have done so. John begins the story by giving us, in résumé fashion, all the impressive qualities of a man who seemed to have it all together. Turn to John, chapter 3, verse 1.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

Let us break this verse down.

His religious passion

1. First, John gives us Nicodemus’ religious passion – he is a Pharisee.

In many ways, the Pharisees were the worst people in the world. They were cold and legalistic. At the same time, the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. They were the holy men who kept the law; they pursued purity with a passion and wanted nothing more than to live lives that pleased God. They were sincere, albeit sincerely misguided.

There were never any more than six thousand Pharisees in the country. They were known as the “chaburah,” or “the brotherhood”. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge, in front of three witnesses, that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law.

That was the problem! The scribes had created the Mishnah, the writings that codified scribal law. Then there was the Talmud, which is the commentary on the Mishnah. I have read of a Rabbi who spent nearly three years studying one chapter from the Mishnah.

A perfect illustration is seen in the simple Sabbath law. The Bible clearly told the Israelite, “Do not work, do not bear burdens, but rest and keep it a holy day.”

Well, work had to be defined; carrying burdens had to be defined. For example, one could,

- get milk enough for one swallow, and
- carry a spoon weighing no more than one fig.

It was the scribes and Pharisees who were embroiled over the discussion as to whether or not, on the Sabbath, a woman could wear a brooch, a mother could pick up her child, or a man could wear his wooden leg. These were burdens.

Now the Bible said we were to rest on the Sabbath – not work! Is that clear enough? No. Work had to be defined. For example, in this agrarian setting, it was decided that tying a knot was work. However, a knot had to be defined. Listen to the definition.

The following are the knots the making of which renders a man guilty; the knot of camel drivers and that of sailors; and as one is guilty by reason of tying them, so also of untying them.

Furthermore,

A woman may tie up the strings of her cap and those of her girdle.

Now, suppose a man wanted to let down a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath day. He could not tie a rope to the bucket, for a knot on a rope was illegal on the Sabbath. But, he could tie the bucket to his wife’s girdle and then, tie a rope to the girdle and let it down into the well, because any knot associated with a girdle was legal. Thank goodness!

It was ridiculous, yet these were men who committed themselves to the incredible inconvenience

of keeping thousands of regulations in order to please God! It was tragic, yet passionate.

The scribes had expounded and developed all of the written law into thousands of regulations. The Pharisees dedicated their lives to keeping them.

Here we are, enjoying grace and freedom – we know the truth! Yet, we have little passion to please God, and an even smaller desire to inconvenience ourselves. We silently sink into our contemporary culture, without causing a ripple of distinction.

So, the first thing to note about Nicodemus is his religious passion.

His financial status

2. Secondly, Nicodemus was wealthy; that is, he had tremendous social prominence.

Travel to the tomb, where Nicodemus brought, for the body of Jesus, a mixture of myrrh and aloes of about an hundred pound weight. Only a rich man could afford that! Rabbinical tradition makes Nicodemus one of the three richest men in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus is actually a Greek name which means, “one who conquers the people”. It is interesting, in the days of Jesus, only the rich were able to hire Greek tutors for their children – thus exposing them to Greek culture. And, we know that families of the upper classes often gave their children two names – a Hebrew name and a Greek name. It seems that Nicodemus belonged to a distinguished Jewish family.

One commentator suggested that Nicodemus’ family was the Rockefeller . . . the Eisenhower of his day!

His position

3. The last part of verse 1 tells us, thirdly, that Nicodemus was,

. . . a ruler of the Jews

The Greek word is “archon,” which lets us know that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin.

In Israel, the Sanhedrin was made up of seventy-one religious leaders. This was Israel’s Supreme Court! These men were the power players and, interestingly enough, one of the Sanhedrin’s responsibilities was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet.

His occupation

Now skip to verse 10 and add one more quality to the résumé.

Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?”

The definite article “the” before “teacher” is translated, “Aren’t you the leading, the famous teacher in Israel?”

4. The fourth quality is that Nicodemus was evidently extremely popular, and had a reputation as a great teacher.

Nicodemus knew the facts of scripture, but he did not know the truth!

John is setting us up for a point.

Nicodemus was the best kind of person in Jesus’ day. He had a terrific reputation; he was socially prominent and yet, had chosen not to live for money but to live a separated life in order to please God. He was a leader among the Sanhedrinists and he had a reputation for being an outstanding teacher. He was the best representative that religion, education, and culture could produce.

If anyone was a candidate for the kingdom, it would be this man. If anyone could have graduated from the human race with the title, “Most Likely to Get Into Heaven,” it would be Nicodemus.

But Nicodemus was lost!

Now notice verse 2.

this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

By now, the debate was already raging as to the source of Jesus’ power. Some said it came from Beelzebub. Nicodemus is kindly informing Jesus, from the beginning, that he does not buy that argument. He is, in effect, saying, “Jesus, I really think you have pure motives and the power of God.”

It was also a polite way of opening the door for Jesus to share, with Nicodemus, His primary message.

“I know you’ve come from God and have the power of God. I saw you clean out the temple this morning and declare authority over the temple. But,

what are you really trying to communicate; what’s your primary message?”

We are given Jesus’ answer in verse 3. Here is His primary message.

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This is a shocking statement! Why? Because Jesus is telling the leading candidate for heaven that he is not going! He has done a lot of things right, but he has not done the right thing!

And Nicodemus, being a faithful Jew, has always assumed that he is already part of the kingdom of God. He is a son of Abraham – he has a right to heaven!

This is not only a shocking statement, but a difficult statement! What does it mean, “born again”? Continue to verse 4.

Nicodemus said to Him, “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?”

Poor Nicodemus . . . cannot figure it out! Neither could we, without a passage like John, chapter 3.

Jesus, the master teacher, will now proceed to provide Nicodemus, and all of us, with three illustrations that explain the transaction, that we call, salvation.

Illustration #1

Of the physical birth

1. Illustration number one is the illustration of the physical birth.

Look at verse 5.

Jesus answered, “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 stop there, or you will get into trouble. Continue to verse 6.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh . . .

Or, “out of water”.

. . . and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

“Of water” refers to . . .

Now, just what does, “of water” refer to?

It is a reference to:

- the cleansing aspect of the New Covenant,
- the cleansing of the Word,
- another reference to the Holy Spirit,
- John the Baptist and his baptism of repentance,
- the necessity of water baptism.

Let me refer briefly to the last view. Jesus was not teaching that the new birth comes through water baptism. In the New Testament, baptism is connected with death, not birth. While baptism is necessary for spiritual obedience, it is not necessary for spiritual birth.

If this were not so, salvation would not simply be received, it would have to be earned. Oh, no! My friend, I was baptized not so I could go to be with the Lord, but so that I could show publicly that I belonged to the Lord already.

The amazing thing about interpreting the scripture is, so often we overlook the commentary of the passage we are studying. Jesus is talking about being born again. In other words, in order to get into the kingdom, you have to be born twice. Look at verse 6 again.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh . . .

That is the natural, first birth.

. . . and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

That is the supernatural, second birth.

So, in Jesus’ analogy, the fleshly or natural birth corresponds to being born of water. The Greek words are “ex hudatos,” which can be translated “born out of water.” It is interesting that, in the Hebrew, the word for “to give birth” actually refers to the rupture of the membranes.

I do not want to bore you with the details, but when I went through this, for the last time, we were in the labor and delivery room and they came in and broke her water. The baby had been floating in a sack filled with amniotic fluid, which we refer to as “the water”. The doctor, by breaking the sack, basically let the water out of the swimming pool. I am obviously using layman’s terms here. And, just like you, no one wants to swim in a pool without any water. This is the incentive for the baby to make an appearance!

Then things really started to happen fast!

Contractions came quicker and were more painful. I was nervous. I am glad to report that Marsha did not say anything to me or about me that would jeopardize my ministry. I was proud of her for many reasons that day. Our little girl was literally born “ex hudatos,” or “out of water”.

That is what verse 5 is referring to – you must be born (physically) “out of water”.

Now you might think, “That is too obvious. Everyone knows that, in order to go to heaven, you have to be born.

You are thinking like a good Jew. They thought that birth, physically, was all there was – they were simply born into Abraham’s family. That was it! So today!!

Jesus concurs, “Yes, you have to be born physically, but I’m talking about another birth – spiritually. The first birth is not good enough! You have to belong to another family, Nicodemus, if you want to enter heaven.”

Now the problem that Nicodemus is having, at this point, relates to the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus is a pragmatic realist. Everything needs to be black and white. He is thinking, “How can I trust someone, who is invisible, that I really don’t understand!”

Before Nicodemus gets that argument out, Jesus provides His second illustration for him.

Illustration #2

Of the re-birth by the Spirit

2. Illustration number two is of the re-birth by the Spirit.

Look at verse 8.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

F. B. Meyer wrote,

The new life begotten by the Spirit of God is as mysterious as the wind.

What is Jesus saying? Well, to begin with, He is saying that the wind and the Holy Spirit are a lot alike. In fact, the Greek and Hebrew words for spirit and wind are identical.

The re-birth by the Spirit and the movement of the wind are similar. How?

- The spiritual birth and the wind are both invisible.
- They cannot be seen, but they can both be sensed.
- They cannot be fully explained, but they can both be fully evidenced

Effect of the Spirit in human lives

You cannot see the wind blow, but you can see what it does. You may not see the Spirit move, but you can see the effect of the Spirit in human lives.

H. A. Ironside, once the pastor of Moody Church, was preaching in the open air in Chicago. A large crowd had gathered to hear him preach on salvation and the Christian life.

A well known agnostic was in the crowd. He was a man who sowed skepticism and doubt in the scriptures and the reality of a personal God. He stepped forward and handed Ironside a note that read,

I challenge you to a debate in the Hall of Science next Sunday afternoon.

Ironside read the note aloud and then, said to the agnostic,

I will come and debate with you the reality of the Christian life, if you will do one thing . . . you must agree to bring with you one person from your sphere of influence. One person who was discouraged and defeated by life, not knowing where to turn or what to believe, until that person came and heard you lecture your agnostic beliefs. And then that man, after listening to you, said in effect, 'I believe what you are saying and will begin living in light of it. . . .' Bring one person who, after hearing you speak, found peace of mind, victory over temptation, and a purpose for living . . . bring one and, if you will, I will debate you and I will bring with me one hundred.

It was reported that the agnostic turned on his heels and marched away.

Ladies and gentlemen, the unanswerable argument for Christianity is the Christian – the Christian with a life that is under the sway and bent of the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus was still confused and says to Jesus, in effect, “Okay, you’ve told me I need to be reborn and, after being reborn, I’d see the effect of the Spirit’s work, but . . .”, verse 9b,

How can these things be?

So, after a mild rebuke in verse 10, Jesus provides his third illustration. It is the clearest illustration of all.

The first two illustrations explain the nature of the new birth, this one explains the necessity of the new birth.

Illustration #3

Of the brass serpent

3. The third illustration is the illustration of the brass serpent.

Look at verses 14 and 15.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

These verses refer us back to one of the most unique stories in the Old Testament. In the book of Numbers, we find the Israelites in rebellion against God. God sent a plague of deadly serpents, called fiery serpents, simply because fire, or a fever, that ultimately led to death, was the predominate result of their bite.

The people cried out for mercy and God instructed Moses to make a brass serpent, put it on a pole, and hold it up in the midst of the camp. Those who looked up at the serpent were healed. It was as simple as that.

Why not develop medicine? Why not require them to work for a cure? It would have given them all something to do and would have satisfied every natural instinct of the heart to work on behalf of its own cure.

The fact that they were not told to make a human remedy is indicative of the greater fact that there is no human remedy for sin. Nothing but death awaited them unless God provided the remedy.

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote,

In the religious fashion of our day, there would have been a rush to incorporate the “Society for the Extermination of the Fiery

Serpents,” known as SEFS. And, there would have been badges for the coat lapel, cards for district workers, secretaries for organization branches, pledge cards, and mass rallies. There would have been a publication office and a weekly journal to tell of the progress of the work. There would have been photographs of heaps of serpents that had been killed by the faithful workers. All of them feverishly trying, by human effort to overcome the serpent’s bite of sin!

Let us accompany one of the zealous workers as he might take a pledge card into the tent of a stricken victim. The man had been bitten and the poison had already affected his limbs. He lies in feverish agony, the glaze of death already coming to his eyes. The zealous member of the Society for the Extermination of Fiery Serpents tells him of all that has been done to combat the serpents, and urges the man to join. The dying victim fumbles in his pocketbook for money and then takes a pen in hand. His fingers are held by the worker who helps him form his signature on the pledge and membership card, and the man signs in full and dies!

That incident in Israel’s history became a pre-figuring of Jesus Christ on a cross, lifted up, who became wicked sin for us. Salvation, spiritual healing, re-birth comes from simply looking at Him, and, in that look, believing that hope comes only from trust in Him.

My friend, you can join a society, a church, sign a pledge card, go through Bible lessons and catechisms, give money, get baptized . . . and die without God. We have been bitten by sin, and it is a mortal wound. Is there hope?

Look – on a wooden pole – a cross is the dying Savior. He descended from heaven, so that he could be raised up on a cross.

Go back to verse 14.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up

The original word for “lifted up” is wonderful. It is a word that is used twice of Jesus. Once when He was lifted up upon the cross and again, when He was lifted up from earth in His ascension. There is a

double lifting up in Jesus’ life – the lifting up on the cross and the lifting up into glory.

Jesus Christ is the cure for the death bite of sin.

Now, verse 15 says,

that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

What does it mean to believe?

We will discuss that more fully in a later study of John, chapter 3, verse 16, but for now, and for the sake of Nicodemus, what was Jesus saying?

I want you to imagine stumbling onto an old, run-down farmyard. It is windswept and nothing more than hard, baked ground. There is a well and, over the top of the well, is a wooden platform and an old, rusty pump.

You are dying of thirst. So, you go over, step up onto the platform, and begin to pump on that handle. It squeaks and complains with every push and pull. Nothing happens.

What do you do? Well, I will tell you what mankind has done. It has scraped all the rust off and painted the handle. No, better yet, it has replaced the old handle with a brass handle, shining in the sun with class and dignity. People from all around have come to look at the pump. Songs have been composed about it; a painter has come and painted its portrait. It looks wonderful and many people have worked to make it attractive.

Nothing, however, can be done to that pump to ever change the fact that it will never bring one drop of water to your thirsty lips. Why? Because it is sitting on top of an empty well.

“Nicodemus, you look good. You’re the best that society, religion, and culture can produce – but you’re pumping from an empty well. You need to be re-planted, re-built. You need to come in contact with the well of living water.”

And you come by way of a look – looking at the Son of man, who came to earth so that you could go to heaven.

It has been said, that the foot of the cross touched earth, declaring that God had moved to touch you and I. The top of the cross pointed heavenward, declaring there is now a bridge to cross over. The arms of the cross stretched outward, as if to say, “Whosoever will, may come.”

Even me. Even you.