

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
Gospel of John: So That You May Believe
Chapter 3 ~ Jann Wright
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Good Morning/Evening and welcome to Women's Bible Study. Our study this semester is the gospel of John and this morning/evening we will be working through the third chapter. This chapter contains one of the most familiar and memorized verses in the Bible, John 3:16. Many of us know it by heart, but perhaps we overlook the fact that the beloved verse is nestled in the context of a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

We will take a careful look at Nicodemus and his interaction with Jesus. Also, in this chapter we encounter a bit of a competitive spirit among John the Baptist's disciples. We will study John's response and how it applies to us and the church today.

With that much to cover, we had better get started. Please open your Bibles to the gospel of John. You will recall from Svea's teaching in Chapter 1 we learned the Jesus was the Word and that he was with God from the very beginning. We learned Jesus is the Light of the World. We learned that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

In Chapter 2, we learned more details about Jesus. We learned Jesus loves a party. He is Holy. He uses ordinary people. He blesses obedience. Finally, we learned that Jesus is looking for believers not just followers which is the overarching theme as we pick up our introduction to Nicodemus. Chapter 2, beginning with verse 23:

²³Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.¹

Jesus was in Jerusalem, he is at the Passover Feast (a party) and the people had observed signs and wonders that he performed. While they were impressed, they were not necessarily converted. Jesus sees the condition of their hearts and that is why he did not trust them or rely on their testimony about him. Listen to those verses in the more traditional version, the NKJV as the word repetition is significant.

²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.²

Nicodemus

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²Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Then almost as if on cue, an illustration of this very concept enters and his name is Nicodemus. Chapter 3, beginning with verse 1:

¹Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

In these verses we learn several defining characteristics about Nicodemus. The first is the Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Pharisees tended to come from the middle class, in contrast to their rivals the Sadducees who tended to be wealthy priests or Levites. According to the first century Jewish Historian, Josephus, there were a relatively small number of Pharisees around 6,000 during the time of Herod the Great. Yet, they had great influence with the common people, although strangely the Pharisees sometimes viewed the common people with contempt.³

Their zeal for the law often misguided them as they focused on external obedience rather than the internal condition of the heart. Jesus in Matthew 23 stingingly addressed them,

²³"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."(Matt 23:23)

Nicodemus was a Member of the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus was no ordinary Pharisee, he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, or the Jewish ruling council as noted in the NIV. The Sanhedrin was the highest national governing body in charge of Jewish affairs, although they were ultimately under the authority of the Romans.⁴

They were headquartered in Jerusalem. When Judea became a Roman province in AD 6 the Sanhedrin became even more autonomous in handling internal Jewish affairs. As we move through the gospel of John we will find that the Sanhedrin is the catalyst for the plot against Jesus.⁵

The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one members and was presided over by the reigning high priest. It included men from influential priestly families, elders meaning those who were family and tribal heads, scribes who were experts in the law, and any former high priests who were still alive.⁶

³MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1-11. Chicago: Moody Publishers 2006. Print. Page 100.

⁴Kostenberger, Angreas J. Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: John. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004. Print. Page 118.

⁵ Kostenberger 118.

⁶ MacArthur 101.

During the time of First Century Rome they had a wide range of powers related to civil, criminal, and religious matters. They did not have the power to exercise capital punishment which is why in subsequent chapters they could not put Jesus to death. However, they had authority to make arrests and to conduct trials.⁷ Although the Pharisees were the “minority party” their popularity with the people gave them considerable influence in the Sanhedrin.⁸

Nicodemus was a Rabbi.

We also learn later in the chapter that Nicodemus was a Rabbi, or a teacher. In fact, Jesus notes he is Israel's Teacher (verse 10). He clearly has seniority status and a well known reputation.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

Nicodemus comes at night. Some wonder why he as a member of the Sanhedrin would come to Jesus at all after Jesus so publicly cleared out the money changers in the temple. Would he not have been angry and irritated at Jesus' actions? Actually probably not, since the Pharisees had limited involvement in the temple, it was mainly under the control of the Sadducees. Nicodemus might have even been a bit pleased at their scolding.⁹

He comes at night. Perhaps he wanted to avoid the crowds, perhaps he wanted to conduct a covert mission. He was probably afraid of the publicity his visit would bring given his role on the Sanhedrin. Some commentators have also noted that the darkness is a theological symbol for Nicodemus' spiritual condition.¹⁰ He comes in the dark to the one who is the Light of the World.

The Conversation

The Opener

That is a brief introduction to Nicodemus. Now let's look at his conversation with Jesus. It begins with flattery. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as a Rabbi, a teacher. This was quite amazing actually, Jesus is very young to be a Rabbi, he is in his early 30's. Besides that, he has no formal training. It is almost like acknowledging someone with the title of Dr. who has no graduate degree.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus as his equal which is quite ironic. On the one hand, how congenial of him to confer that kind of respect to Jesus. On the other hand, how dense because he is speaking to the very Son of God.

Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus must be from God. Ordinary people cannot do miracles like Jesus. In fact, even extraordinary members of the Sanhedrin cannot do those things.

Jesus' Response

⁷ MacArthur 101.

⁸ MacArthur 100.

⁹ Burge, Gary M. The NIV Application Commentary: John. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2000. Print. Page 111.

¹⁰ NIV 113

Now, let's look at Jesus' response. We are likely just getting the conversational highlights. Much like when one of my daughters calls me and we talk for 45 minutes and at the end of the conversation, my husband asks, "What did you talk about?". I sum up the conversation with she finished her graduate school applications and would like us to cover the application fees. I have simply given him the most pertinent highlights, knowing he probably has no interest in what she had for breakfast, the new shoes she purchased, or who she saw in the dining hall. In the same way, we likely have just pertinent highlights, but they are very instructive.

To begin with, Jesus doesn't acknowledge Nicodemus' praise. He does not engage with him in a discussion of miracles or his status as a Rabbi. Jesus moves right to the central point which is Nicodemus and his relationship to God.

³Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God means to participate in the kingdom that would come at the end of the age, to experience eternal resurrection life. The Jews expected a future kingdom that would be ruled by the son of King David. The Baker Commentary notes that the "Jews in Jesus' day generally believed that all Israelites would have a share in the world to come, with the exception of those guilty of apostasy or some other blatant sin."¹¹ However, the kingdom of heaven is both this eternal future state and yet also an internal state of the individual who is forgiven and spiritually transformed.¹²

But here Jesus make the incredible statement that no one will see the kingdom of God unless they have a spiritual rebirth. Basically, he is saying, Nicodemus, you are not in, you are not going to see it. That is earth shattering. Nicodemus holds an esteemed religious position. He is on the Sanhedrin, sort of like being a Congressman, a Senator, a Supreme Court Justice, and leader of the Church all in one. He is Israel's Teacher. He is Jewish. He is among God's chosen people.

Nicodemus' Questions

Nicodemus is stunned. He asks two questions: How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

My colleagues in Student Ministries here at Autumn Ridge, often listen to a regular selection of podcasts and then select a few to discuss. One in particular was an interview by Carey Nieuwhof with Robby Gallaty.¹³ They were discussing Gallaty's new book, The Forgotten Jesus which describes the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived.

¹¹ Baker 122.

¹²Gallaty, Robby. *The Forgotten Jesus: How Western Christians Should Follow an Eastern Rabbi*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2017. Print. Page 134.

¹³Nieuwhof, Carey. *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast: Episode 172 Robby Gallaty and Rabbi Evan Moffic on How the Jewishness of Jesus can Transform Your Preaching and Bring You Closer to Christ*. December 25, 2017 CareyNieuwhof.com. Podcast.

Interesting concepts, but what really struck me was their discussion about being born again. The author noted, that Nicodemus, did not ask how he could be born again, which is what I have always skimmed over the passage and read, he actually asked, "How can a man be born again when he is old?".

In Jewish culture this concept of born again has some cultural anchor points. In fact, there were six ways that a person could be born again. These ways are detailed from the work of Arnold Fruchtenbaum in the book The Forgotten Jesus.¹⁴ The first is Gentiles were "born again" when they converted to Judaism. Obviously that didn't apply to Nicodemus because he was a Jew. Second, you were "born again" when you were crowned as a King. That also didn't apply to Nicodemus.

However, the four other ways did apply. When a Jewish boy reached the age of 13 and celebrated what we know as a bar mitzvah, he was considered an adult and capable of obeying the commandments of God. He was "born again". Nicodemus would have experienced this.

A man was considered born again after his wedding ceremony. We can assume that Nicodemus was married since he was a member of the Sanhedrin and one of their requirements was to be married.

Also, a man was considered "born again" when he accepted the position of teacher. Since Nicodemus was a religious teacher, he obviously qualified here. Finally, a person was "born again" when they became the head of a rabbinical school in Israel. Also, likely in Nicodemus' case since he was known as the teacher of Israel.

So while the concept may seem strange to us, it likely was not so foreign to Nicodemus. However, the problem was at his age, what was he supposed to do? He had checked all the boxes except become a king which wasn't happening. Was he supposed to go back and start over? I wonder if he was really saying to Jesus, "I have done everything a good Jew would do, and more. What do you mean I will not see the Kingdom? What more could I do?".

That is the problem. The kingdom of God is not something any of us can earn, not even Nicodemus. We don't work our way into the Kingdom of God by checking a bunch of boxes. We get into the kingdom by believing in Jesus.

Water and Spirit

So Jesus continues his instruction and explains some basic truths to the teacher of Israel and to us. Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born by water and spirit. Commentators have spent a lot of time trying to explain this and the bottom line is even they are not sure. I can recommend some additional reading if you want to delve into this topic. But one of the best insights is from Ezekiel 36:24-27. God is speaking.

¹⁴Gallaty, Robby. *The Forgotten Jesus: How Western Christians Should Follow an Eastern Rabbi*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2017. Print. Page 136-137.

24For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. 25I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

We must be cleansed from our sins and given a new spirit. Only God can do that. Additionally, Jesus points out the wind, which is often a metaphor for the Spirit, cannot be explained, or captured. Yet, its impact and presence is clear and irrefutable. It is the same with the Spirit.

One Last Question

We have one last question by Nicodemus, he asks simply, "How can these things be?". Jesus provides several illustrations. I want to note just a few of them. Jesus points out that if He has told Nicodemus earthly things and he will not believe, how is Nicodemus going to believe heavenly things? The point here is that it is not a lack of knowledge that is holding Nicodemus back, but a will to believe.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of an incident that occurred during the Israelites' wandering in the desert on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land in Numbers 21. An account which Nicodemus would have known. It is about the Serpent in the Wilderness. Numbers 21, beginning with verse 4.

4They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

6Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

8The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

The people had sinned. The snakes were sent as a punishment for their blatant disobedience. Don't forget God had provided manna and water to them, they had provisions, just not exactly what they wanted. Eventually, they acknowledge their sin and ask for forgiveness.

God instructs Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole, the people need only to look to this provision and they will be saved. It is not a matter of works, but looking to the means God has provided and accepting it.

Jesus said, ¹⁴*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,* ¹⁵*that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*" The ultimate fulfillment of that account from Israel's history is standing before Nicodemus. Jesus will be lifted up (on the cross), Nicodemus has to look to him and believe that he may have eternal life".

And then that most precious verse, John 3:16: ¹⁶*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.* (Continuing on to Verse 17) ¹⁷*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

God so loved the world. Commentator Gary Burge makes these insightful comments.

"Many Christians today think about the work of Christ with an unfortunate, ill-informed understanding of God and Christ. I see this again and again both in the classes I teach and in the church. The imaginative picture used by many to express the work of Christ is that Jesus has died in order to placate an angry God, whereas the cross expresses the love of Christ for us and his work appeases God's threatening wrath. This makes God an opponent and adversary while Jesus is our ally."¹⁵

But that is not what the verses says, it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." Burge continues, "God himself is at work on our behalf. He did not send a messenger (Jesus) to do the dirty work. God himself came to the cross and suffered in order to bring his beloved creation back to himself."¹⁶

For God so loved, God so loved the world. He loved not just the Jews although they were tasked with bringing his message to the world. He loved not just those from Israel, or the Middle East, or the United States, or Africa. For God so loved the entire WORLD, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John the Baptist

We will return to Nicodemus shortly, but I don't want to leave untouched the discussion between John the Baptist and his disciples. The narrative begins in verse 22.

²²*After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.* ²³*Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized.* ²⁴*(This was before John was put in prison.)* ²⁵*An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.* ²⁶*They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man*

¹⁵ Burge 132

¹⁶ Burge 132

who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

The Concern

So from this high point of John 3:16, we then encounter a squabble. Perhaps it was about baptism, perhaps a debate about the ceremonial washings as they related to baptism, but the underlying issue is the perceived threat by John's disciples that Jesus was rising in popularity and their leader was about to be eclipsed. They curiously avoid mentioning Jesus by name. It appears from these verses that Jesus is baptizing people, but chapter four, verse two clarifies that it was not Jesus who was baptizing, but his disciples.

While we may be tempted to shake our heads at their concern that Jesus was upstaging John the Baptist's ministry, we have to realize that many times we think in the same way. We wonder if another church, or small group, or youth ministry, or teacher, or preacher is eclipsing our church, or our group, or our favorite preacher. We get concerned if another church is growing faster than our church.

John's advice

Remember who you are

We would do well to remember John's advice. First, he tells them remember who you are. John's disciples needed to be reminded that John was not in the starring role in this drama, he merely was a supporting cast member. John was very clear on who he was. He reminds his disciples in several ways. He says, he is a friend of the bridegroom. He supports and attends to the bridegroom, but that is not the focus of the wedding.

John reiterates that he is not the Messiah. He was the messenger sent to announce the coming of Jesus the Messiah. John also reminds them that Jesus must become greater and he (John) must become less. Or in the older translations, such as the KJV, "He must increase, but I must decrease". John's disciples and we have to remember who we are.

Remember who you serve

Second, John admonishes them to remember who you serve. Their allegiance was to Jesus, even though they were working closely with his messenger, John. Christ is the central focal point of the Christian life. No matter what church we attend, or what groups we invest time and energy into, or who we work with, or for, or alongside of, our allegiance is to Jesus. Remember who you serve.

Remember value is in obedience

Finally, we learn from John that we have value in the kingdom. However, the value comes not in numbers or other measures, but in being obedient in the tasks with which we are entrusted. For John, that was to be a messenger announcing the arrival of the Messiah. For us, it is to be a witness of Christ in the world, serving in various roles in our families, workplaces, communities, and churches. I always marvel at John's description of his role in the kingdom and Jesus's description of John in Matthew 11:11, *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

Nicodemus and Us

Now, as we wrap up let's return to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is just the first of many examples of people, both men and women that we are going to meet in the Gospel of John who come face to face with Jesus and engage in a conversation. They will be from many walks of life, but Nicodemus is a good place to begin.

He had everything. He had position, prestige, power, reputation. He was a religious leader. He knew his Bible. He followed the law. He wasn't perfect, but by the world's standards and even by religious standards he was at the top of the list. Surely he was IN?

Perhaps you grew up in church. Your parents took you from the time you were small. You went to Sunday School because that is just what you did like waking up in the morning and brushing your teeth. You read your Bible occasionally, you pray when you have a crisis. Surely you are IN?

Perhaps you didn't grow up in church and you just make an appearance on Christmas and Easter. A friend invited you here and there is free child care and you figure why not I can at least get breakfast and few minutes of peace. You make more effort than most, Surely you are IN?

Maybe you are reading this lecture because someone passed it on to you. You are a good person you give to charitable causes, you are a good parent, you obey the traffic laws, you pay your taxes. That makes you way above average. All paths lead to God, surely you are IN? You don't give it another thought.

But Jesus is not just talking to Nicodemus, he is talking to all of us. *No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.* Jesus did not engage with Nicodemus about his specific miracles or whether Jesus actually qualified as a Rabbi. He cut to the heart. In our day, lots of people acknowledge Jesus as a teacher, even a great moral teacher. They want to debate various aspects of theology and a few side topics.

Yet, the most important issue they need to address is their relationship with God. It is the most important issue that you need to address! Unless you have been born again, unless you have experienced a spiritual transformation that is not based on your good deeds, but instead on the acceptance of what Jesus has done for you on the cross. Unless like the Israelites in the desert you have looked to the one who has been provided as a payment for your sins, You are not IN.

That is not meant to be offensive or hurtful, just truthful. It is a prescription. Let's suppose you go to the doctor and he recognizes that you are sick, perhaps it is minor such as strep throat or major such as an inflamed appendix, or even more serious such as cancer or the need for a transplant of a vital organ.

Is it offensive or hurtful to give you an accurate diagnosis? Would it be kind, loving, and helpful to simply tell you what you want to hear, that you are not sick and everything will be o.k.? That seems to me to be one of the cruelest circumstances, to know the truth and to not say it, especially when you know there are life saving measures that can be

taken. Jesus is simply pointing out the truth. He has diagnosed the disease, one that all of us has, and provided the prescription.

Nicodemus by the way appears twice more in the book of John, at the feast of tabernacles in John 7:45-52 where he defends Jesus, although quietly, before the Sanhedrin. We encounter him for the last time in John 19:39 at Jesus' burial with Joseph of Arimathea.

We don't know if Nicodemus ever finally believed in Jesus. Commentators are a bit mixed on the subject. Yet, Nicodemus does seem to make progress in his faith journey from the beginning of the book to the end. The point however, is not to dive deeply into a discussion of Nicodemus' final point in his faith journey, but instead to ask yourself, Where am I in my faith journey and have I crossed over to believe in Jesus as the Son of God as the means for the forgiveness of my sins? Have I accepted the gift of eternal life?

Nicodemus now had the knowledge. He had received instruction from the Son of God himself. You now also have the knowledge. The question is do you have the will to act on the knowledge you have been given?

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