

Exposition of John

Message #12

John 3:1-21

I would call this an interview with God about eternal life. What we see is a man named Nicodemus coming to God in the flesh, Jesus Himself. Nicodemus comes to Jesus with questions, and Jesus does not disappoint. Jesus gives crystal clear answers.

What we will learn today in these twenty one verses is this:

IN ORDER FOR ANY MAN OR WOMAN TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE, HE OR SHE MUST BE BORN AGAIN THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS AND HIS NECESSARY DEATH ON THE CROSS.

I think the best way for us to work through this text today is to break it down into question answer format. An interview with God about eternal life. I am going to ask 12 questions. The text will answer the questions for us. Some questions are implied that Nicodemus probably had on his mind, other questions are going to come from me. So let's look at

QUESTION #1 - What is Nicodemus trying to do?

Even though I can't read his mind and John does not tell us what Nicodemus is thinking, I would conclude that Nicodemus is trying to find the truth. **3:1**

John gives us four descriptions of Nicodemus.

(Description #1) First, John brings up that Nicodemus is a man.

He may have been a powerful, high class, religious leader, but John makes clear, he was only a man. He is no better than you or me.

(Description #2) John mentions too that Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were the Jewish elite separatists. The Pharisees thought they were keeping the law to a T, but Jesus, during his earthly ministry, exposed to the Pharisees that they were not holding the law as well as they thought, and therefore, they were guilty of breaking the Law of Moses.

(Description #3) John tells us that this man's name is Nicodemus.

The name Nicodemus means "conqueror." That name fits well with this man. He was a highly respected individual who was a leader and a spiritual guide to many, many people. He had a lot of influence. On the surface, he appeared to have it all, but as we will see, he didn't have what he needed most.

(Description #4) The fourth description is that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews.

Later we are going to see that Nicodemus was Israel's key teacher (3:10). What this tells us is that Nicodemus, even though he was in the position he was in, he was after the truth. Why do I think he was after the truth? Because of what he does.

QUESTION #2 - What does Nicodemus do in order to find the truth?

In order to find the truth, Nicodemus respectfully approaches Jesus to learn from Him. **3:2**

The fact that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night was probably very strategic for him. This would mean that he could have personal, private time with Jesus. Jesus would likely not be busy dealing with the

crowds at night. This would also mean that Nicodemus could go to Jesus without being seen by everyone. As a religious leader, his job was to be the teacher, not to be the student.

(Acknowledgement #1) He first acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher sent from God.

(Acknowledgement #2) Secondly, he acknowledges that the signs Jesus was doing have convinced Nicodemus that God is with Jesus.

Nicodemus is giving respect to Jesus. Nicodemus has recognized that Jesus is worth listening to. He is worth learning from because he believes Jesus has come from God.

QUESTION #3 - What must a person do in order to get into the kingdom of God?

Whether or not Nicodemus was trying to ask this question, Jesus wanted to give him the answer. Jesus says that in order for a person to get into the kingdom of God, he must be born again. 3:3

This would shock and puzzle Nicodemus. Out of all people on earth, the Pharisees of Israel were the most confident people in the world that they were on their way to seeing the kingdom of God. They thought for sure, based off their commitment to keeping the rules, they were set for the kingdom.

Nicodemus is likely thinking to himself at this point “I thought I was well on my way to seeing the kingdom of God. I thought I was doing everything right, but Jesus is telling me right now that I need to be born again to see the kingdom. I don't think I have been born again. What does that even mean?”

QUESTION #4 - How can someone be physically born again?

This is essentially the question that Nicodemus asks Jesus, and the answer is implied in the question. It is impossible for a person to be physically born again. 3:4

Nicodemus is an intelligent man. He is analytical, and he is wise. I don't think he is being rude or sarcastic here. I think he is thinking this through, and he is saying that a second physical birth is impossible, especially for someone of his age.

QUESTION #5 - What does Jesus mean by the phrase ‘born again?’

Jesus' answer to the question, what is meant by the phrase ‘born again’ is this: To be born again does not mean a person is physically born a second time. To be born again means a person is spiritually born. 3:5-6

Biblically speaking, there are two kinds of birth in the world. Physical birth and spiritual birth. Born of the flesh and born of the Spirit. This phrase “water and spirit” is difficult to interpret. I understand there to be five major interpretations as to what is meant by “water and spirit” and I want to walk you through those.

(Interpretation #1) Water refers to water baptism.

That would make baptism by water to be a requirement for entering the kingdom of God. The problem with that interpretation is that water does not always refer to baptism in the Bible, and baptism does not always involve water in the Bible. Also, if water baptism were a requirement for the new birth, that would add a work of man to salvation, which is contrary the rest of Scripture (Eph. 2:8-9).

(Interpretation #2) Water refers to repentance signified by John's baptism.

This interpretation forces a lot to be implied within the text, but the text does not plainly reveal that Jesus is talking about repentance. I think he would have said repentance instead of water if he meant repentance.

(Interpretation #3) Water and spirit refers to the Word of God.

This interpretation comes from Ephesians 5:26 where the Word of God is described as a water like cleansing agent used to sanctify the church.

(Interpretation #4) This refers to the washing of regeneration work of the Holy Spirit.

Titus 3:5 is where this interpretation comes from, as well as Ezekiel 36. When a person is given God's Spirit, he is regenerated and cleansed of his sins. The picture is that water washes away sins.

(Interpretation #5) Water refers to physical birth, where a baby is born in conjunction with the release of a mother's amniotic fluid.

Interpretation 3 and 4 both make a compelling argument. They are both held to by great men of God, and they make a good points. However, I hold to interpretation #5 because of verses 4 and 6. The immediate context of the passage is clearly discussing the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth. Nicodemus mentioned the womb in verse 4. And in verse 6, Jesus refers to being born of flesh as compared to being born of spirit.

The most clear way for me to explain verse 6 is this way: Jesus is discussing that there is a difference between natural birth and spiritual birth. There is a difference between being physically alive and spiritually alive. Everyone is born into this world physically alive, but spiritually dead. No one is born with a spiritually alive nature. In order to avoid rotting away and perishing like all flesh does, a person must become spiritually alive so that they can continue to live and not rot away and perish.

QUESTION #6 - Can you see a person be born again like you can see a person be born the first time?

No, you can not see a person be born the second time. 3:7-8

Nicodemus must have had a puzzled look on his face. Jesus had to tell him not to marvel at the fact that a person must be born again. The phrase 'born again' can also be understood as 'born from above.' A person is born the first time down here on earth, but a person is born a second time from above, born of God, into God's family. According to John 1:12-13, the first birth makes a person a child of the world, the second birth makes a person a child of God.

Jesus is making it personal here to Nicodemus, telling him that he literally must be born again. Then, he gives a play on words illustration regarding the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for Spirit is also a word used for wind and breath. Jesus explains that being born of the Spirit is invisible and mysterious, like the wind. A person cannot control the wind. A person cannot see the wind. A person cannot tell where wind starts and stops. A person can only hear wind, feel the wind, and see the effects of the wind.

QUESTION #7 - What?

That is basically the question in 3:9

Nicodemus is clearly out of his element. Jesus has been teaching him that entrance into the kingdom is a matter of God doing something for man, not man doing something for God. Seeing the kingdom is about God regenerating a person, not man reforming his lifestyle. No one can be born again through rigid

legalism, religious practice, and law keeping. People are born again by the Spirit of God. This is a deep, profound, spiritual, and heavenly reality. It is God who makes people fit for the kingdom, not men.

QUESTION #8 - Why does Nicodemus, Israel's teacher, not understand what Jesus is saying?

Nicodemus does not understand Jesus because of unbelief. 3:10-12

This is where we learn that Nicodemus is the key teacher of Israel, and yet, he doesn't understand the rebirth by the Spirit of God. He didn't understand Scriptures like Ezekiel 36:25-27 that speaks of the Spirit of God being put within the hearts of men. He didn't understand Joel 2 and the working of the Spirit of God in saving those who call upon the name of the Lord. The prophets had revealed the reality of a new birth in men, but Nicodemus didn't understand the prophets.

Jesus uses the phrase "truly, truly" a third time. He said that there are those who know what they are talking about, people like Ezekiel, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and His disciples. Isaiah saw in a vision the throne room of God. John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend like a dove on Jesus. Ezekiel caught a glimpse of the kingdom temple. Jesus's disciples had seen His glory. Jesus, being God in flesh, was speaking of what He knew and what He had seen, but Nicodemus, along with the Pharisees, were rejecting the words of Jesus in unbelief. By the rejection of the words of Jesus, they were rejecting the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, and the disciples.

Jesus had been illustrating regeneration with earthly things, such as physical birth and wind. Nicodemus was not understanding because he was refusing to believe Jesus and the Word of God. Jesus makes clear that in order for a person to understand heavenly realities, he must be willing to accept the plain words of Jesus.

QUESTION #9 - How is it that Jesus knows about heavenly things and can even speak about heavenly things he has seen?

When Jesus speaks about the truth of God and the realities of heavenly spiritual things, He knows what is talking about because He is the only man on earth who has come from heaven. 3:13.

Nicodemus is silenced but Jesus continues to teach. Nicodemus may have been thinking "how can Jesus know all this but I don't?" The answer is that Jesus has come from heaven. Nicodemus hadn't been up to heaven, and for that matter, no one had except Jesus.

Now when Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man that has descended from heaven, He is calling himself the one who Daniel spoke of. Daniel had seen in a dream, a vision of God the Father handing over an eternal kingdom to one like a Son of Man. Jesus is claiming to Nicodemus that He is the Son of God, the Messiah, the King of Israel, the one who will have all dominion.

QUESTION #10 - Why did Jesus come to earth from heaven?

There are 6 answers given in verse 14-18.

(Answer #1) Jesus came to earth from heaven to be lifted up on a cross. **3:14**

The entire picture of that bronze serpent was looking forward to the reason why Jesus would come into this world. He came so that He would be lifted up just like that bronze serpent. Jesus came to earth so that He would be lifted up on a cross and die for our sin. This is something that Jesus said must be done. The plan of God for the salvation of men requires it to be absolutely necessary that Jesus would be lifted up on a cross and die.

(Answer #2) Jesus came to earth from heaven so that people may believe in Him for eternal life. **3:15**

Just like the bronze serpent, Jesus would be lifted up so that people could live. The difference this time though, was that Jesus came for whoever, not just Israel, but whoever. Also, this time it wouldn't be for a temporary physical life like the bronze serpent, it would be for eternal life. The idea of believing means trusting, putting faith in, relying upon, or placing confidence in. Jesus died on the cross so that whoever, that includes you, it includes me, whoever may place their confidence in Him and have eternal life. What's another reason Jesus came to earth?

(Answer #3) Jesus came to earth from heaven because God loves the world. **3:16a**

What prompted God to send Jesus to earth? Love. Love for the world. Love for the people of the world. Love for people who were dead in sin and rebellion against God. Even though the world was and still is against God, God loves the world. God's love compelled Him to give His only Son to the world.

Jesus is the only unique Son of God from all eternity. Jesus is God, and He is also the Son of God the Father.

(Answer #4) Jesus came to earth from heaven so that people would have eternal life instead of eternal death. **3:16b**

Would you rather perish or have eternal life? The Greek word for perish does not mean to be annihilated or to cease existing. Based off of the Greek text, the Biblical understanding means to be eternally ruined in judgment. You don't just die. You die with a full awareness that you are eternally judged by God, and it's described as torment. Would you rather have that, or would you rather have eternal life?

If you would rather have eternal life, what does your response need to be? Believe in Jesus. Place your confidence in, put your faith in, rely upon, trust in the one who was lifted up on the cross for you. There is no news better than this.

(Answer #5) Jesus came to earth from heaven to save the world instead of judge the world. **3:17**

God gave His Son by sending Him into the world to go to the cross. While God had all the authority, right, power, and ability to condemn the world to eternal judgment, God didn't send Jesus the first time to do that. He did not send Jesus to this world so that He could condemn and destroy. He sent Jesus so that people of this sinful world could be saved through Jesus. Would you rather be condemned by God or saved by God? God offers salvation through Jesus. God does not offer salvation through obedience to laws. He offers salvation through Jesus. Now let's look at the sixth answer

(Answer #6) Jesus came to earth from heaven to remove people of their sentence of condemnation. **3:18**

In the mind of God, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who stand before him condemned and those who stand before Him not condemned. If you believe in Jesus, you are not condemned. You have been removed of the penalty of your sin. You are not condemned.

Jesus didn't come to condemn the world because the world is already condemned. You may say, what? I'm already condemned? Yes Why? Because you are a sinner. You are a sinner by nature, and you are a sinner by choice. Because we are born with a sin nature and because we have chosen to sin, we have a condemnation sentence on us that will manifest itself in the eternal wrath of God. But, for whoever believes in Jesus, that condemnation sentence is permanently removed from that person. If you remain undecided, you still have the penalty of your sin condemning you.

QUESTION #11 - Why doesn't everyone believe in Jesus to have eternal life?

Jesus tells Nicodemus that not all people believe, not everyone will have eternal life. And this is Jesus' conclusion on the matter. Not everyone believes in Jesus because people don't want to acknowledge that their sin condemns them. People do not want to come to terms with the fact that they need a Savior.

3:19-20

This is the judgment. This is what Jesus, the judge, declares. This is His verdict. People love darkness rather than light. Jesus is the light of the world. Sin is the darkness of the world. People would rather choose sin instead of Jesus. Sin is evil, and people love it. People don't want to admit that their sin is wrong. People don't want to admit that they are evil. People don't want to acknowledge that their sin condemns them. Why do people today avoid church? They don't want to think about their sin.

Jesus says that everyone who lives sinful lifestyles hate the light that Jesus is and won't come to Him because they are afraid to see themselves in the light of Jesus' righteousness. Some people flaunt their sin and live wickedly in public. Others try to cover up their sin condition with good works, law keeping, and religious rituals.

QUESTION #12 - Why do people believe in Jesus?

People believe in Jesus because they are after truth, are willing to let their sin be exposed in Jesus' light, and are willing to look to Jesus in faith for eternal life. **3:21**

Are you after truth? If so, you need to stack your life up next to the righteous standards of God and admit that you fall short. You need to come to the light. You need to come to Jesus as the filthy sinner you are, you need to admit that you've blown it, and you need Him to give you a new life. You need Him to bring you to life spiritually. You need Him to give you a new birth. How? Transfer your trust on Him and His finished work on the cross for your sin. He died to pay the penalty that you deserve for your sin, if you make a choice to believe in Him, He will remove the penalty and give you everlasting life.

And finally, what happens to the temporary life of an individual who has eternal life? There is a change. Jesus changes your mind about sin. You'll learn to hate wickedness and love light. You will like different things. You'll love differently. You'll care for others differently. You'll live differently, because God's Spirit will take residence in you. You'll begin to grasp the magnificent reality of God's grace. And people will take notice. They'll see that you've been born again, and the only clear answer is that you've been given new and eternal life by God through faith in Jesus.

Would you believe in Him today?