

Message #9

Kurt Hedlund

John

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JESUS EXPLAINS SALVATION

JOHN 2:25-3:12

I.

Back in 2009 a frumpy, 47-year-old, single lady with a touch of autism from a rural village in England showed up on the stage of Britain's version of America's Got Talent. Some of you remember the story. Here is how it all went down. Don loaded this up for us. He could not get the sound and the audio to sync exactly, but you should be able to understand it.

... **[video of Susan Boyle]** {Lady is socially awkward in front of panel of 3 judges, which includes Simon Cowell. The audience appears skeptical. She begins singing, and everyone is immediately "wowed."}

Later that year Susan did up her first album. It became the best selling debut album in British history. She made over \$6 million on it. She has turned out 6 more albums since then. Not bad for a middle-aged, single lady from rural England!

To feel the dynamics of this story is to understand something of what was going on when Jesus showed up on the stage in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. He was the hick rabbi from the sticks of Galilee who was showing up before a panel of judges who were seeking to examine His performance and qualifications and aspirations. These judges had all of the degrees and civil, as well as religious, authority. They knew the Bible well, but they had never performed any miracles. This Jesus was showing amazing abilities and power, and He was attracting a popular following like none of them had ever experienced.

One of these judges had enough humility to privately seek out Jesus and find out more about Him. In the interaction that followed Jesus revealed spiritual truths that have just as much relevance to us today as they did to His first century audience 2000 years ago.

We have seen that the Apostle John organized his biography of Jesus around seven sign miracles. The first one, described at the beginning of #2, involved turning water into wine at a wedding feast. Last week we saw that Jesus followed that up by making the first public appearance of His ministry in the

temple for the Passover feast and forcing the money-changers and animal sellers out of the part of the temple compound that was supposed to be set aside for worship by Gentiles.

The Passover feast was the annual event that was commanded by God to remind the Jewish people about how He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The Passover itself was held on one evening. But it was immediately followed by the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Collectively, the combined feasts were often referred to simply as Passover. We shall see now what else happened at this first Passover feast of Jesus' public ministry.

II.

In vv. 23-25 of #2 we find that JESUS ESTABLISHES A MESSIANIC CLAIM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JESUS ESTABLISHES...) According to v. 23, **"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing."**

In the Apostle John's statement of his purpose in writing this book in #20 vv. 30 & 31, he mentions that there were many other signs that Jesus did which are not written in this book. The "signs" that John mentions are miraculous deeds that Jesus did. Now in v. 23 John makes reference to Passover visitors who witness these other signs.

We are not told what these signs were. But in the other Gospel accounts, most of the miracles which Jesus did involved healings. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah spoke in several places about the coming Messiah and his deeds. For example, in #35 vv. 5 & 6 (ISAIAH 35:5-6), the prophet said this about the coming kingdom and its Messiah: **"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy."**

We see elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus did these kinds of miraculous deeds. Probably this is the kind of thing to which John is referring here. Jesus is establishing His Messianic claim. The religious leaders should have recognized this. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus was certainly attracting a crowd. Many were believing in His name. The term "name" in these ancient days referred to the character and reputation of the person represented by that name.

We read in vv. 24 & 25, **"But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."** The original verb translated here as "entrust" is actually the same word translated as "believed" in v. 23. Many people were believing in Jesus, but He was not believing in them. Why is that?

The belief on the part of the crowd was a superficial belief. They saw Jesus perform miracles, probably healing miracles, and they believed that He could do more. Some perhaps brought sick relatives to be healed. But they did not believe, at this point, that Jesus was the Savior who was God in the flesh, who had come to provide eternal deliverance from sin and its consequences. Few people recognized yet that this was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. It is only the Apostle John, writing from his vantage point years later, who sees the real identity of Jesus.

The additional note that Jesus knew what was in man has significance for our understanding of Him. John does not just want us to think that Jesus has a good understanding of people. In #4 we will find that Jesus truly understands what individuals are thinking.

In the Old Testament Book of 1 Kings, King Solomon is giving a prayer at the dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem. He is asking God to respond to His people when they encounter difficulties and turn to Him. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 KINGS 8:39) He says in v. 39 of #8, "**...then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind)...**" John says in our passage that Jesus knew what was in the hearts of these people. That is because John recognizes that Jesus is God. He is the omniscient, divine Messiah.

III.

Then in the first two verses of #3 we find that JESUS ENCOUNTERS A SERIOUS SEEKER. (III. JESUS ENCOUNTERS A SERIOUS SEEKER.) "**Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.'**"

The first thing to notice about Nicodemus is that he is a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a religious group which dominated the rabbis of the first century. Rabbis were to synagogues what pastors are to churches today. Most of the rabbis identified themselves as Pharisees. The Pharisees had been around for over a century. Their beliefs developed out of the need to apply the Old Testament law to the situation in which they found themselves.

Much of the religious life of the nation had come to be centered upon synagogues. Still there was a temple in Jerusalem. So the Pharisees had developed a complex set of rules that described how good Jews should live in their day. They believed in the writings of the Prophets. They believed in resurrection from the dead. They believed that miracles were possible and that there were angels around. They believed in the sovereignty of God. They believed that there would be eternal rewards for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked.

The biggest problem was that their religion had become based upon rules and rituals. A good Jew was one who followed their complex application of Old Testament standards. In regard to the Old Testament commandment about not working on the Sabbath, the Pharisees had developed hundreds and hundreds of rules, which were put on a par with the original commandment itself. For example, the Pharisees had determined that a woman should not look in a mirror on the Sabbath. That would be sin. For she might see a gray hair on her head, and she would be tempted to pull it out. That would be work and a violation of the Sabbath commandment.

The Sadducees were the other predominant religious group in the time of Jesus. They accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament. They did not believe in resurrection from the dead or even life after death. They did not believe in angels. Many of the priests, especially the family of the high priests, were Sadducees. They had primary control of the temple and what happened there.

So the Sadducees would have been the ones most offended by Jesus' actions in the temple. The Pharisees, who did not get along with the Sadducees, may have been OK with what Jesus did. They may have been happy to see the Sadducees embarrassed. Jesus' actions earlier in #2 were a challenge to the Sadducees. His statements here in #3 were a challenge to the Pharisees.

Nicodemus in v. 1 of our passage is also called "a ruler of the Jews." This was a term that was used to describe members of the Sanhedrin. This was the high council of Judaism. The Sanhedrin exercised not only religious authority but also considerable civil authority. There were 71 members. They included priests, rabbis and leading laymen. There were both Pharisees and Sadducees who were on the Sanhedrin. So Nicodemus was not only connected to a particular religious party, but he was also a big shot in the religious bureaucracy.

Verse 2 says that he came to Jesus by night. Light and darkness have much symbolic significance in John's Gospel. I suspect that John may see that the physical darkness is symbolic of his own spiritual standing before God. Nicodemus may well have approached Jesus at night because he did not want to be seen by other religious leaders, who probably were beginning to form a negative opinion of Jesus.

As Nicodemus begins his discussion with Jesus, we see evidence of a certain humility on his part. He calls Jesus "rabbi." Nicodemus probably had a PhD from Harvard or some other important university. Jesus was from the sticks. He had not studied under any other important rabbi. But Nicodemus was recognizing evidence that Jesus was from God with some kind of divine mission. Nicodemus had seen Jesus perform miracles. So this Galilean deserved respect. Nicodemus was a serious seeker.

As a religious scholar, Nicodemus knew the Hebrew Bible well. He knew that Old Testament prophets had performed miracles. He knew and believed that a Messiah was coming and that he would perform

miracles. He saw Jesus do miracles. So he was one of the people in v. 23 of #2 who believed in Jesus' name. But the content of his faith at this point was limited. He did not know who Jesus was or what His agenda was. Nicodemus seems to have a sincere interest in finding out more about Him. He has no clue that Jesus is not only from God, but He is God.

His use of the pronoun "we" in his statement that "we know that you are a teacher come from God" is unclear. Perhaps there are a few other Pharisees or a few other members of the Sanhedrin who suspect that Jesus is from God. Perhaps he is just including other members of the crowd who witnessed the miracles of Jesus.

As events unfold, we will see that the majority of the members of the religious leadership will reject Jesus. He does not fit their religious categories. He does not follow their rules. He has already offended the priests and Sadducees by cleaning out the temple. Jesus threatens their world view. Then people generally have a resistance to change.

That is likewise the initial response that we often get in our presentation of the gospel. People may see some sign of the presence of God in us. They may recognize some truth in our message. But there is often a certain fear of its implications and an innate resistance to change.

Nicodemus is at least willing to listen. He is an inquirer, a seeker. He seems to come without any agenda other than to hear out this Jesus. We might have been tempted in this situation to be especially kind and gentle and nice to Nicodemus. It would have been a real coup to get him to sign up as a supporter of our Jerusalem Evangelistic Crusade. But Jesus gets pretty tough with him. He immediately challenges his entire belief system.

IV.

Thus in vv. 3-12 of #3 we find that JESUS EXPLAINS THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE KINGDOM. (IV. JESUS EXPLAINS THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE KINGDOM.) Verse 3: "**Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'**" There is no specific question that has been asked by Nicodemus, at least in the account that we have. But it is clear that Nicodemus is trying to figure out Jesus.

Jesus cuts to the chase and addresses the key issue that is at stake in his confrontation with the Pharisaic approach to religion. The words "truly, truly" precede very important statements that Jesus makes. The big issue is how can one be part of the kingdom of God.

This is the first time that the term "kingdom of God" has appeared in John's Gospel. After our passage, it does not appear again. But it is a frequent term that appears in the other Gospels. The other Gospels record that John the Baptist, and even Jesus in the initial part of His ministry, were proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand and that people should repent.

The term "kingdom of God" can be defined in this way (KINGDOM OF GOD): **"The kingdom is the sphere or realm of God's authority and blessing which is now invisible but will be manifested on earth."** (Ed Blum, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*) Jesus is the King of this kingdom. He has just shown up on the scene. He is offering the Chosen People the opportunity to accept Him and inaugurate this kingdom upon the earth. But they will reject Him and have Him killed. So the establishment of His kingdom upon the earth will be delayed. We are still waiting for it today.

In the brief words of v. 3 Jesus shatters the worldview of Nicodemus. The Pharisaic conviction was that by virtue of their descent from Abraham and their identification with God's covenant through circumcision, the Jews were in. They were automatically part of God's kingdom. The Talmud, which contains the writings of the Pharisees ("ALL ISRAEL [EVEN...], says, **"All Israel [even those who were executed by the court for the transgressions] have a portion in the World to Come, for it is written: 'Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever...(Isa. 60:21)'"**

It was difficult for a Jew to be excluded from this kingdom. ("BUT THE FOLLOWING...") The reasons for exclusion were pretty limited. **"But the following have no portion in the World to Come: He who says that resurrection is not a Torah doctrine, the Torah is not from heaven, and an apikoros [one who denigrates Torah and Torah scholars]."**

Nicodemus had risen to the highest ranks in this religious structure. It was obvious to other Jews that he was a part of this heavenly kingdom. Nicodemus assumed that he was "in." Like too many religious people today who call themselves Christians, Nicodemus thought that he had done significant religious deeds and had such a good religious pedigree that he had to be accepted as part of God's kingdom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus directly challenged these assumptions with the declaration: "You must be born again." The Greek word *anōthen* can mean either "again" or "from above." John is fond of using words in his Gospel that can have double meanings. But in the other four times when the word is used in John, it has the meaning "from above," or "from heaven."

In v. 4 we read, **"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'"** Nicodemus seems to understand that Jesus is speaking about a second birth. He doesn't understand what Jesus is saying. So he takes Jesus in a literal

way and goes to an extreme. "This sounds pretty crazy. So you are saying that somehow I am supposed to have another physical birth?"

Verse 5: "**Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'**" Here we find that "truly, truly" again. Another key pronouncement from Jesus is coming. It appears to be a further explanation of His statement in v. 3.

Jesus seems to be equating "seeing" the kingdom of God with "entering" the kingdom of God. The challenge here is figuring out what Jesus means by being born of water and the Spirit. Good students of the Bible come to different conclusions. I used to think that Jesus was referring to physical birth and spiritual birth. The suggestion was that there was a reference here to a mother's water breaking, leading to birth.

There are two difficulties with this. One is that there don't seem to be any references to this among ancient writers as an expression for physical birth. The other difficulty is a grammatical problem. There is only one preposition that is used to refer to being born of water and the Spirit. Using one preposition for both terms normally suggests that the author is referring to the same thing.

Some have argued that Jesus is saying that baptism is necessary for genuine Christian conversion. But this is before Jesus has even established the Christian ritual of water baptism. There is no other reference in John's Gospel that baptism is required for entrance into the kingdom of God.

Others have suggested that Jesus is referring to the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist and even the disciples of Jesus have practiced. The idea is that Nicodemus needs to exercise repentance, as John the Baptist has been promoting it, before he can enter the kingdom of God. That is possible.

But I am inclined to think that Jesus is using both terms to refer to a spiritual birth. Nicodemus was a student of the Hebrew Scriptures. So Jesus would expect him to associate water with a cleansing by God's Spirit. Jesus may have been pointing Nicodemus to a passage in Ezekiel. In Chapters 36 and 37 the prophet was describing a future kingdom and a restoration to life of the people of Israel. At the end of #37 he described a kingdom over which David, or a descendant of David, would rule.

Thus in Ezekiel #36 vv. 24-27 (PROJECTOR ON--- EZEKIEL 36:24-25) we read, "**I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. (EZEKIEL 36:26-27) And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I**

will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

The prophet here is describing a spiritual transformation, something that God does. The Pharisees were depending upon a works righteousness and a physical connection with their ancestors. When we get to v. 16, we will see that there is one vital human responsibility: belief. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus says, "You must be born again, or born from above." Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees have a religious system that is totally inadequate. We likewise today must be careful to guard against the thinking that our family history of a church connection or our religious good deeds are adequate to gain entrance to heaven. They are not. We must be born again.

Jesus continues in v. 6 of our text, **"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."** "Flesh" in the New Testament often refers to the sinful nature of human beings. Here I think that Jesus is simply referring to our physical humanity. The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom with spiritual requirements. Entrance to it requires a spiritual transformation. We must be born again, from above.

According to vv. 7 & 8, Jesus adds, **"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."** Here in the original Greek and also in the Hebrew of the Old Testament the words for wind and breath and spirit are the same. From the context we can tell that the first reference to the word in v. 8 is referring to the physical wind. The last reference is to the Holy Spirit.

The point of comparison is that we don't know where the wind comes from or where it is going. We don't know when it will show up. In a similar way we don't know exactly when a baby is going to show up. Sometimes babies come early. Sometimes they come late. Sometimes they decide to show up in a cab on the way to the hospital. We can't completely control such things.

Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees had a rigid religious system that was dominated by rules. How one could be part of their understanding of God's kingdom was laid out in detail. Jesus indicates that this is not the reality of God's kingdom. Spiritual births are controlled by God. They show up in unexpected ways and places.

Muhammed came from a family in Africa with a strong Islamic tradition. By the time that he was 11, he had memorized the entire Koran. He later earned a Ph.D. in Islamic Law and taught at a university. He

says this: **"One day I was coming from an academic discussion about who Jesus was from the Muslim perspective. I thought I had it all figured out, and that I was coming with victory from the discussion. I went back home, and was sitting and praying, and Jesus showed up.**

"I saw a person coming from a very far place. He was wearing a long white cloth and a sash across his chest. He was walking, but his legs were not touching the ground, as if he was disobeying the power of gravity. I was so scared. Then he came into the room, I was freaking out, thinking that he was a demon. I was praying and praying, repeating verses from the Koran, trying to cast him out as a demon. Jesus waited awhile, and then he said, 'Have you finished?' I couldn't respond. He said, 'Stop confusing my people,' then turned and went back the way he had come." In a later appearance to Muhammed Jesus made a reference to the Book of John. He got a Bible and read the stories that we are studying. He became a Christian and is now studying at an American seminary.

Continuing with our story in vv. 9 & 10, **"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?'"** Jesus calls Nicodemus "the teacher of Israel." Apparently Nicodemus has some kind of official, recognized position as a teacher. Perhaps he is the chairman of the theology department at Jerusalem University. Whatever the position is, it implies that he is a great scholar.

As a Pharisee, he believed that miracles were possible. He knew and believed the Hebrew Bible. But he had never personally witnessed anything like what Jesus was doing. Jesus at the same time was shattering his own world view. In the process Jesus was criticizing Nicodemus for not understanding the things that He was talking about.

How should Nicodemus know these things? Perhaps because Ezekiel spoke about the need for spiritual cleansing in #36 of his prophecy. In #37 the prophet spoke about Israel being like a valley of dead bones. The Hebrew people needed reviving. What would be the source of revival? In #37 vv. 9 & 10 (PROJECTOR ON--- EZEKIEL 37:9) the prophet used the terminology of breath and wind and spirit: **"Then he [the Lord] said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.'** (EZEKIEL 37:10) **So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army."** Nicodemus and his fellow countrymen were in desperate need of the breath, the wind, the Holy Spirit of God. They needed to be born again, from above.

Verse 11, back in our passage (PROJECTOR OFF): **"Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony."** The "we" could be a reference to Jesus and the other members of the Godhead. It could be a reference to Jesus and the

prophets. I would guess the Jesus is referring to Himself and the witness of His forerunner, John the Baptist.

The "you" is also a plural pronoun. I suspect that Jesus is referring to Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees. In #1 we saw that they were part of a delegation that was sent to check out John the Baptist. They were also skeptical about his ministry.

Verse 12: **"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"** By "earthly things" Jesus seems to be speaking about basic teaching concerning God's kingdom and entrance into it. Jesus has been describing that by using analogies involving birth and wind. This teaching has its roots in the Old Testament. "Heavenly things" may include teaching about the Godhead and death and resurrection and details of the coming heavenly kingdom. Jesus will talk about these things in His Upper Room discourse, reported later in this Gospel. The challenge to Nicodemus is to believe what He is telling him. That is the same challenge that we face.

V.

We come then to THE LESSONS FOR US. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. THE LESSONS FOR US A. ...) The first one is simply that YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN. Nicodemus was a religious man. He was probably a very moral man. He had studied and taught the Hebrew Scriptures. He was committed to Pharisaic traditions which included regular prayers and fasting and religious worship. But he was spiritually lost.

George Whitefield studied at Oxford University in the 1700s. He was a very religious person. He was part of a student group known as the Holy Club. John #3 puzzled him. He sought to obtain entrance to the kingdom of God described in our passage. He fasted and prayed and studied the Bible regularly.

One day the wife of a man George had been visiting came to him and said that her husband had just been pulled from the Thames River after trying to kill himself. George visited the couple the next day in jail and read to them from John #3. **"I believe, I believe!"** cried the woman. **"I shall not perish, because I believe in Him now. I am born again, I'm saved."** Her husband trembled, grasped Whitefield's hand and cried, **"I am on the brink of hell."** Then in the next moment the man's whole face changed, and he declared, **"I see it, too. I'm saved! Oh joy, joy, joy!"** George Whitefield was astonished. He didn't get it. It was only later that he believed. Eventually he became a great evangelist. (Pollack, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, p. 14)

We, too, must be born again, from above. Our responsibility is to believe in Jesus.

B.

The second lesson that I find here is that we Christians should SPREAD THE GOSPEL. (V. A. B. SPREAD THE GOSPEL) Jesus was communicating the truth that salvation is ultimately a spiritual enterprise controlled by God. We don't know how God's Spirit will work. We don't know when and where spiritual births will happen. Our responsibility is simply to share the gospel as we can and as we have opportunity.

Mitch Glaser grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in New York City. That family was hostile toward Christianity. Glaser rebelled against his religious roots and moved to California. He sold drugs to fund his hippie lifestyle. At age 18 he was almost killed in a drug deal that went bad. Soon after that, a friend who had recently become a Christian, invited him to visit a Christian group. He was impressed by what he saw. He asked God to show him the truth. That night in 1970 he stumbled across a New Testament in a phone booth. Somebody accidentally left it there, or placed it there intentionally. Mitch began to read it. Several months later, he put his trust in Jesus.

Mitch Glaser felt sad that he did not know any other Jews who were believers in Jesus. One day he walked along the shore in Sausalito and prayed that God would introduce him to another Jewish believer. Glaser says, **"Just then a gospel tract floated onto the rocky shore, right next to where I was sitting and praying. Since I was such a new believer, I assumed that this was normal and, though surprised, I picked up the waterlogged tract and was able to read it."** He contacted the group that produced it, and became involved with them. Today he is President of Chosen Peoples Ministries.

We Christians are to spread the gospel. The Lord can use conversations, tracts, Bibles, messages on Facebook, Bible studies in prisons. We are involved in a spiritual enterprise in which God is in charge. Enjoy the adventure.