

# **THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH**

*SERIES: ONE TO ONE*

By Danny Hall

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

In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

(John 3:1-21)

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Maybe that's the only time he has free on his Day-Timer®, but it's probably because he's trying to avoid being seen. He doesn't know how he'll be received among his colleagues if they find out he's had a private discussion with Jesus. We don't know all of his motives, but as the story unfolds it seems that he's seeking truth.

He states the problem he's having right off: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." That line is very important. In the story of the man who was born blind (John 9), that same phrase reflects an important issue in the discussions between the Pharisees and the man Jesus heals. "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?"

Jesus has walked onto the scene and has begun to teach and perform miracles and introduce new perspectives. Nicodemus is learned in the Scriptures, steeped in Jewish teaching and background, and he is encountering in Jesus a person who is clearly not the norm. Jesus is different from anyone he's ever encountered in the miracles he performs, in his teaching—in every way. So Nicodemus is wondering, "Who is this man? He challenges norms. He's got a different approach. He's certainly not coming out of our pharisaical training. Yet we have to acknowledge that miraculous things are happening." So he begins, "I don't know what's going on here. You are obviously someone special; otherwise you would not be doing these miracles."

But Jesus doesn't at all address the issue that Nicodemus brings up. His response is very cryptic and unexpected.

## **Born again**

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

I would love to have been a fly on the wall and seen Nicodemus' face when Jesus said that. This rabbi, this Pharisee of Pharisees who knows the Old Testament through and through, who is a leader in the community, must be thinking, "Now, wait a minute—the kingdom of God? I'm part of the kingdom of God. I'm Jewish, and I'm even a leader of the Jews! Of course I already see the kingdom of God. We are the people of God. We are the manifestation of the rule of God in the world." And he's right to a point. So Nicodemus is bewildered. What does Jesus mean, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again?

That phrase "born again" is enigmatic. The word translated "again" can also be translated "from above." John is a master of double entendre and allusions, and he may very well have had both of these ideas in mind—a new and fresh birth, but a birth that comes from a supernatural source.

Nicodemus obviously doesn't get it. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Again, we don't know for sure what Nicodemus' attitude is. It could be that he is genuinely baffled by Jesus' statement, or perhaps he's even critical and cynical and sarcastic, thinking, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Maybe I was wrong about this teacher."

Jesus now expands the concept for Nicodemus. “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” This is a phrase that has baffled commentators. I think the answer lies in the background of Nicodemus and Jesus. This Jewish leader, as I said, is learned in the Old Testament. He would know the stories and teachings and promises and prophecies through and through. I think when Jesus utters the words “water and the Spirit,” he intends for Nicodemus’ mind to jump back to the Old Testament prophecy that was given to the nation in Ezekiel 36:25-27:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I 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. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

When Jesus says, “born of water and the Spirit,” I think he’s saying this prophecy is coming to fruition right now. There’s a promise of cleansing through the sprinkling of clean water, and of spiritual renewal in which the Spirit of God will be placed within a person. Nicodemus thinks that the kingdom of God is all about being part of the Jewish nation, keeping Torah and being circumcised. But Jesus says that in order to see, to enter, to understand, and to be a part of the kingdom of God, a person needs to be washed clean (Paul calls this “the washing of rebirth” in Titus 3:5), and they need the reviving of their spirit through the Holy Spirit placed in them. They must become a new creature. In a single statement Jesus is redefining the nature of the kingdom of God—how we see it, how we enter it, how we are part of God’s rule. We live in the kingdom of God by being transformed by the gracious cleansing and renewing work of God in the Holy Spirit.

“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” There’s human birth and there’s spiritual birth. There’s a renewal from the Holy Spirit that needs to take place in each person’s life. “So don’t be surprised,” Jesus says, “when I say you must be born again.”

Then he adds even more enigma in his metaphor of wind. “You know how the wind just blows wherever it wants, and you don’t know where it’s coming from or where it’s going? The Holy Spirit is like that.” I think what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here is simply that you can’t control the work of God. The kingdom of God is not something you can capture in little rules and regulations and parameters.

It seems as if one of the great attractions of religion for people is that it gives them a sense of control over areas of life that they don’t know how to control. A system of beliefs and tenets to live by gives them some measure of order for their chaotic lives, and offers some answers to the questions and longings of their hearts. So the Jews of Jesus’ day had amassed many burdensome applications of Torah. Pharisees like Nicodemus were charged with the responsibility of interpreting and applying those to the people. In their little country of Palestine on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, this was a way to have control—in some ways, even control of God.

But Jesus says you can’t do that. The work of the kingdom of God is not something that is ordered or controlled by man. It is as elusive as the wind. It is the powerful work of the Holy

Spirit that opens hearts and minds, establishes God's rule, and proclaims the glory of who God is in this world.

Well, Nicodemus is still befuddled. "How can this be?"

Jesus chides him: "You're Israel's teacher, and you do not understand these things?" Referring to himself and his disciples who are now beginning to proclaim this message of the kingdom, he says, "We speak of what we know, and if you can't even understand these earthly things I'm telling you, how will I ever be able to take you deeper into heavenly things?"

What are the earthly things and what are the heavenly things? Again, there's been quite a bit of debate about this. Perhaps earthly things are the earthly metaphors that Jesus is using to describe spiritual truth, like birth, wind, cleansing, and water. "If you can't even understand these earthly pictures of things that are the foundational issues of the spiritual life, how am I going to take you deeper into the great and wondrous things of God?"

## **Belief in the Son of God**

He says no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from Heaven, the Son of Man. In other words no one really knows the inside story of who God is and what his kingdom is about except the one who is from him, Jesus himself. He is beginning to say things that will eventually be considered blasphemous by the Jewish leaders, claiming for himself titles like Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) and authoritative knowledge of what the kingdom of God is about.

Finally he takes Nicodemus back to the Old Testament again, to Numbers 21. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." In that story the nation had been grumbling and complaining again, and God sent a plague of venomous snakes. Many Israelites died, and the people asked Moses to pray for their deliverance. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole, and anyone who looked up at that snake would be healed.

Put yourself back in that day, with poisonous snakes biting you, and you're dying. In desperation you look up to that snake that Moses has lifted up on the pole, and you're healed! Wouldn't it feel very much like a new birth, a new lease on life? Here Jesus foreshadows what God is going to do through him when he is lifted up on the cross.

The term "lift up" is used not only of physically lifting up, but also of praise and adoration of the one in focus. Jesus says the Son of Man will be lifted up in that way, and everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

We don't know fully what happens to Nicodemus. Very little is said of him before or after this account, although he does appear in the Gospel of John two more times. In chapter 7 he defends Jesus, and then in chapter 19 he assists in the preparation of Jesus' body for burial. Whatever his final disposition is in response to the truth that Jesus has given him, he has at least some understanding of what is going on here. Perhaps at some point Nicodemus comes to believe.

Verse 16, of course, is perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible. Now, I believe verses 16-21 are John's commentary on this story. It has been debated how long the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus goes. Some people think it goes all the way to verse 21. Without getting into a lot of technicalities, I think the nature of the language indicates that the conversation ends in verse 15. Beginning in verse 16, John, writing this gospel down many years later, now gives us his glorious explanation of what has just happened. Grasping the amazing beauty of what Jesus said to Nicodemus, he writes the wonderful words that have resounded throughout the history of Christendom: "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."

The word "so" refers to the manner in which something happens. While it has the idea of intensity—"God loved us so much"—its primary meaning is, "God loved us in this way—by sending his only Son." And this wonderful, incredible gift of God was to the whole human race, every man, woman, and child, the whole creative order, to set things right, in an amazing act of sacrifice and love.

Then John goes on to explain that God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world. Most religions, even Christians, often take their stand in judgment of others who don't hold to what they believe or don't behave the way they think people ought to behave. But John says this was not Jesus' mission. His mission was not to condemn, but to draw people into new life, to save them from the sin in which they were bound.

He makes these absolute statements: Whoever believes in him is not condemned, and whoever does not believe stands condemned. This is the watershed issue now. It's not whether you were born Jewish, or born American, or born into this religion or that. The question is, have you believed in God through Jesus Christ? So faith becomes the marker of the people of God, of those who see and enter the kingdom of God.

John loves the wonderful language of light and darkness. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light...."

## **The light of truth**

Darkness is almost always a metaphor for either evil or for confusion and blindness—perhaps even a mix of both. In our sinfulness there is blindness; we cannot see the truth. And light has broken into that darkness, but so much of the time we hold on to the darkness more tightly than we do the revelation of light. In the next message we're going to visit the question of how much we want to get out of the mess we're in. But here John gives this great summary: people are just lost in the darkness. They hang on to it. They don't even want to receive the light that has come. But if they come to the light, they'll be able to plainly see what God has done.

What is this all about? God's gift is received by believing, and we come out of the darkness into light. I think in his commentary John has explained to us how we get to the presenting issue in Nicodemus' life, and that is, how do we find the truth?

The branch of philosophy that studies how we gain knowledge is called epistemology. In the western world, for the last several hundred years the primary epistemological framework has been rationalism. That simply means that the way we gain knowledge is through our senses and our intellect. We gain insight through using our faculties, our five senses, to experience data and analyze it and learn. Our popular expression for rationalism is “Seeing is believing.” We’ve all heard that expression, and we’ve all acted on it. I have to see something, to analyze it; then I can know and believe in it.

But interestingly, that is not the epistemological framework of the kingdom of God. Let me introduce you to a different way of looking at it: the epistemology of faith. You see, the expression “Seeing is believing” is turned around in the gospel to “Believing is seeing.” That is, when we come in faith to the living God, trust in his work and his revelation in Christ, to be cleansed, to be renewed and refreshed and reborn to the Spirit of God, all of a sudden the incredible complexity and wonder and beauty of the kingdom of God and of the cosmos itself are opened up to us. It doesn’t mean that we shelve the rational faculties God gave us. But we recognize that our ability to discern and understand things that are absolute in this cosmos will never come through human ingenuity. It will come through the revelation of God and our response of faith. Believing opens our eyes. It is the light in the darkness. So it is men and women of faith trusting in the forgiveness that comes from Christ, having experienced the new birth, and having a new spirit that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit, whose eyes are open.

Most of us who know the Lord and have walked with the Lord have had moments in our lives when we’ve found that to be powerfully true. We’ve had moments of confusion, moments of crying out to the Lord and praying and trusting God to take us to the next step, or to get insight into his word, and all of a sudden the understanding was just there, and we began to see the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, I want to contrast the story of Nicodemus and the story of the woman at the well, which we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4992). Here are two people at opposite poles of society. As I mentioned in the last message, in our staff study we’re reading Eugene Peterson’s book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. He contrasts these two stories (1). You have:

A man and a woman.  
City and country.  
An insider and an outsider.  
A professional and a layperson.  
A respectable man and a disreputable woman.  
An orthodox and a heretic.  
One who takes initiative; one who lets it be taken.  
One named, the other anonymous.  
Human reputation at risk; divine reputation at risk.

These two stories of Jesus taken together marvelously unveil the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is offered universally to the most learned Bible scholar and someone who has very little Bible knowledge, to rich and poor, to city-dwellers and country-dwellers, to men and women, to the highest of the high and the lowest of the low. It is in the wonderful message of Christ that a Ph.D. engineer in Silicon Valley and an illiterate peasant in the countryside of Afghanistan can both look to the one who has been lifted up and see the kingdom of God. What an incredible gospel! The power of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit washes us clean and makes us new, no matter who we are or where we come from, and we find the truth as our eyes are opened through faith.

## Notes

1. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, © 2005, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 18.

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