

22 October 2006

"Look - and Live!"

Reading John 3:1-18

Have you ever heard the bizarre account of the man who woke up one day convinced that he was, in fact, dead? He shared the startling discovery with his wife, and she at first thought he was joking. Before long it became obvious that he was serious. Try as she may, she could not convince him otherwise, and she could see from the look on his face that something had snapped.

Eventually she persuaded him to accompany her to the family doctor. He carefully examined the patient and, at length, pronounced him not only alive but fit and healthy. But the man would have none of it. He was sure, despite the clean bill of health, that he was stone dead.

So she dragged him off to a psychologist friend after telling him the alarming story on the phone. They engaged in a long conversation as the psychologist probed to find out what had caused the delusion. But nothing could convince the man to change his mind. In desperation the psychologist decided to employ a method he had never learned at the university. He casually asked his friend whether he believed that a dead man could bleed. After some thought the man replied, "No, I'm sure a dead man can't bleed."

The psychologist continued with the conversation for a few minutes, sidled up to his desk, picked up his rather sharp letter opener, grabbed the man's hand and cut his finger. He then squeezed it until a bead of crimson red blood appeared. A look of utter astonishment and disbelief came over the face of the man. "I'm amazed!" he said, I would never have believed it. Dead men **can** bleed!!!"

We would think it strange indeed, and very sad, if a man who was physically alive actually believed he was dead. It is even sadder when people who are *spiritually* dead believe they are spiritually alive.

If you were here last week, you may remember that we examined Jesus' emphatic insistence that every single one of us needs to be born again. This three-fold imperative comes across so strongly in the first part of John 3 that we tend to focus all our intention on it. But there's more to the passage than that. So let's explore some of the riches in the rest of the discussion.

The passage as a whole answers three important questions about the life Jesus brings to us: *WHAT*, *WHY* and *HOW*? We tend to limit our attention to the "what" because it stands out in the passage, but the "why" and the "how" are every bit as important.

The "What" is Crystal Clear

The account before us is undoubtedly a summary. We cannot think that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus lasted less than two minutes. The summary is an accurate one; the salient points in the discussion have been faithfully recorded for us. We are able to understand the relevance of the points made and appreciate the rationale of Jesus' insistence. But let's start by reiterating the "what": To have any part in God's kingdom, it is necessary to be born again.

"No one can *see* the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"No one can *enter* the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

So the "what" is crystal clear. But there is more to the conversation than that.

The "Why" is Highly Enlightening

There are times when we may not understand a particular commandment of God, but we obey it because the sovereign God has spoken. We acknowledge that we are not omniscient and may therefore not, at present, understand the perfectly good reasons he has for issuing an instruction. We bow to his superior wisdom.

But usually it is not that difficult to understand *why* he gives us a particular instruction. As parents we know that our children sooner or later reach the "why" stage. They want an explanation for everything. It can drive you up the wall. At times you may have to say, "Because I said so! Even if you can't understand or accept my reasons, this is my call and I am making it. Your compliance is not dependent upon your ability to grasp my reasons." This, of course, should be the exception and not the rule. Usually you should have good reasons for your instructions and expectations and be prepared to explain.

When it comes to spiritual matters, it is not only helpful to understand the reasons; it may even be obligatory for us to do so. We need to know that Jesus was not simply laying down an arbitrary condition here. He was not saying, "I'm in charge here. If I say it is necessary for you to be born again, who are you to argue? Some people think of God like that. They view his stipulations as restrictive and maybe even irrational. But, of course, God is never, ever unreasonable.¹

We are given a clue in this dialogue: Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand his insistence (3:10, 12):

"You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things? ... I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

We may well ask, "Why did Jesus expect Nicodemus, as a respected teacher in Israel, to grasp the importance of being born again?"

There are at least two reasons:

➤ THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

Nicodemus was intimately acquainted with the Old Testament. By implication, Jesus was saying: "Nicodemus, you know very well that *the picture in (Old Testament) Scripture is an exceptionally dismal one.*" Think of it: God creates us to be his vice-regent and showers every blessing upon us. We disobey and fall. We become so bad that

he has to send a flood upon us. He calls a nation into being, gives them great promises, delivers them from Egypt with a mighty hand, gives them his law, guides them, provides for them, gives them a land for which they did not work, protects them, raises up kings, sends them prophets, shows them mercy time and again. Yet they persist in disobeying him. There are a few bright moments here and there, but they demonstrate, again and again, that they are unable to keep his commandments.

Ultimately he sends them into captivity to cure them of their idolatry. He depicts the nation as an unfaithful and loose-living wife. (Hosea 1-3) But such is his love for them that he brings them back from captivity and gives them a fresh start. But they do it again. In the last book of the Old Testament, God speaks through the prophet Malachi,

'A son honors his father, and a servant his master.
If I am a father, where is the honour due me?
If I am a master, where is the respect due me?'
says the LORD Almighty. (Mal. 1:6)

The writers of the Old Testament virtually exhaust the Hebrew vocabulary in describing the perversity of which fallen human nature is capable. Sin has reduced us to a state of moral putrefaction. That's how Isaiah describes the condition of God's people.

'Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart is afflicted.
From the sole of your foot
to the top of your head
there is no soundness -
Only wounds and welts
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged
or soothed with oil.' (Is. 1:5-6)

"So Nicodemus, it is a dismal picture. It doesn't matter what God does, the people don't seem to have the wherewithal to obey him."

This is no arbitrary decree. Fallen humanity is not shut out by a barrier which God has erected. We are incapacitated by our own moral and spiritual inability. The problem is not with God's decree but with our nature. "Nicodemus, you, of all people, should be aware of this."

➤ **THE DIVINE UNDERTAKING**

"But Nicodemus, as Israel's teacher, you are also aware of the promises associated with the coming of the kingdom."

Through Jeremiah, God had spoken in unmistakable terms about a new covenant:

"It will not be like the covenant I made
with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the LORD.

"This is the covenant I will make
with the house of Israel after that time,"
declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbour,
or a man his brother, saying,
'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."
(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

The Lord repeats the promise in different words through the prophet Ezekiel:

'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; . . .
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 . . ."
(Ezek 36:25-27)

"You know, Nicodemus, that it has never been enough to have the commandments available *to* us. Surely, Nicodemus, if the kingdom of God is the realm where God's will is undisputed and his word is law, there needs to be a life-giving work of God *in* us."

The interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is an interesting one. Two men are seated beside one another having a private conversation. They address each other personally, but both use the plural in a very significant way. I shall not interrupt the flow of the message, but I have included an endnote.² Now, for the third question . . .

The '*what*' is crystal clear, the '*why*' is *highly enlightening* but . . .

The "How" is All-Important

Jesus tells Nicodemus how the new life about which he has been speaking is imparted. He does so by referring to an incident recorded in Numbers 21.

When the Israelites were in the vicinity of the Red Sea, they became impatient and rebellious for the umpteenth time. They spoke against God and against Moses. Venomous snakes came into the camp, bit the people and many died. The people acknowledged their sin and asked Moses to pray that the LORD would take the snakes away. The LORD instructed Moses to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole so that it could be seen. If anyone was bitten by a snake, he had to look at the bronze snake lifted up above the people and he would live. (Num. 21:4-9) It seemed like a strange solution.

Jesus used this picture to explain what would happen to him: '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'.

Here is something absolutely amazing. John uses the word translated "lifted up" four times with reference to Jesus. (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34) It is also used by Matthew, Luke, James, Peter and by Paul. Every time it is used in the NT, it speaks of exaltation. Let me cite just two examples:

"Exalted (Lifted up) to the right hand of the Father, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:33)

(He) became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted (lit. super lifted him up) him to the highest place ...

Now, look at how John uses the word.

- It is used here: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up ..." (3:14-15)
- It is used in chapter 8: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the One I claim to be." (8:28)
- It is used in chapter 12. "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." (12:32-33)

If we look at the crucifixion as an execution, it has to be the nadir, the low point of human history. Crucifixions were never pretty. They were intentionally gruesome and barbaric. But here is something even more scandalous. "The (eternal) Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us; we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." "In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. . . . Here was God among his creation. "He was in the world and the world was made by him and the world did not recognise him. . . ." Amazing! But what is even more amazing is the fact that the creature was crucifying the Creator!

Psalm 2 depicts the outrageous nature of human rebellion:

Why do the nations rage
And the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers gather together
Against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.

As the leaders of the early church prayed, they remembered this passage:

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentles
and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy
servant Jesus, whom you anointed (Acts 4:25-27)

He was lifted up from the earth to a position where passers-by could see him and witness his disgrace! Public humiliation was very much part of crucifixion. This is ugly. There is nothing glorious here. His own people gloat over him and ridicule him. Onlookers remark on his powerlessness. It is a pathetic sight. He dies in agony and degradation. This is repulsive!

Yet Jesus had said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He spoke of the attraction of the cross. As believers look at the spectacle we see beauty. We look past the blood and the gore, the battered body and the involuntary groans and we see the most amazing sight: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5:21) He was "the stone the builders rejected" but "to (us) who believe, this stone is precious." (1 Pet 2:6-7)

That's what Paul meant when he said: "We proclaim Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." (1 Cor 1:23-25)

Something of the paradox of the cross is evident in the last and greatest of the Servant Songs:

See my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up³ and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him -
his appearance was so disfigured
beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness -
so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard,
they will understand.
(Is. 52:13-15)

I love the way Jürgen Moltmann expresses this truth in his book *The Crucified God*.

When the crucified Jesus is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning is that this is God and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity."⁴

I wonder where Nicodemus was when Jesus was crucified. We know for a fact that he was not far away. (John 19:39-40) We do not know whether he was at the meeting of the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus. (Luke 22:66) I doubt it. In rounding up the members for the emergency meeting, they probably conveniently excluded him. He would have known exactly what took place when a man was crucified. And it is not impossible that he was at Calvary. Did he actually see Jesus "lifted up"?

If so, did he recollect that strange statement spoken some three years before? Did it dawn on him that the Son of Man was being lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life"? He was beginning to see the fulfillment of Jesus' subsequent statement, "And I, when I am lifted

up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. Judging by his actions later on that day, when he and Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with spices in strips of linen, he was one of the privileged people who felt the drawing power of the crucified Christ.

I can never read this account without realizing how fortunate we are. As those who live after the death and resurrection of Jesus - we know that his death on the cross was for us. So often we over-complicate the matter. It is as we see Jesus dying on the cross and fasten our gaze upon him that we receive the gift of life. As we look and believe, we are born again.

Conclusion

Why would anyone want a form of Christianity other than the one Jesus advocated? In fact, he did not present it as one option among several. I might not like the term as it is used today, but if we take Jesus seriously, born again Christians are the only Christians there are.

Notes

1. One old ethical chestnut asks: 'Is an action is right because God declares it to be right, or does he declare the action to be right because it is right?' God does not determine the 'rightness' of an action arbitrarily. It is not that there is a law higher than God to which he must conform, but rather that all his decrees and instructions are the result not of a whimsical decision but of loving wisdom.
2. The Question of Authority
You will recall that Nicodemus commenced his conversation with Jesus in a respectful way. Interestingly, he used the plural pronoun and verb form. "Rabbi, *we* know you are a teacher who has come from God." I don't want to read too much into this usage, but it was as though an individual was being interrogated by someone representing a multitude. As an esteemed teacher of Israel and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus may have assumed he was speaking for the entire tradition.

In responding to him, Jesus sometimes uses the singular and sometimes the plural.

"I tell you (singular) the truth, No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"I tell you (singular) the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

"You (sing) should not be surprised at my saying, '**You** (plural) must be born again.'"

"You (singular) hear its sound . . ."

"You (singular) are Israel's teacher . . ."

"I tell you (singular) the truth, **we** speak of what we know and we testify of what **we** have seen, but still **you** (plural) do not accept **our** testimony."

"I have spoken to **you** (plural) of earthly things and **you** (plural) do not believe; how then will **you** (plural) believe if I speak of heavenly things?"

So, Jesus is certainly speaking to Nicodemus personally, but he extends the imperative "You must be born again" to those whom he represents. When he speaks of the inability to grasp his teaching and the failure to accept his testimony, he refers to the Jewish leaders in general or even to the nation as a whole.

Even more significant is Jesus' use of the plural in verse 11. This use of the plural may well have been in response to Nicodemus' use of the plural in verse 2.

Jesus may well have been saying:

'Nicodemus, when you addressed me at the beginning of our conversation, you said, "Rabbi, **we** know that you are a teacher come from God..." (No doubt he was alone. But the "we" lent authority to what he was saying). It was as though an individual were being interrogated by someone representing a multitude.

"What **we** know, **we** speak, and what **we** have seen, **we** witness." (Is there a gentle reprimand here?) "If it's a question of

authority, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man."

Of course, Nicodemus is hearing more than he expected. He came to Jesus and, giving him the benefit of the doubt, he said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God..." By that he meant: "Obviously God has raised you up and is with you." Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, there's more to it than that. You're only half right. I have *come* from heaven. In fact, I am the Son of Man." (cf. Dan 7:13-14)

What lends credence to this explanation of the use of the plural is the fact that Jesus speaks repeatedly about his relationship with the Father. (5:17-45; 8:18, 19, 28, 38; 10:30, 38; 12:49; 14:7, 9, 11; 16:3, 32; 17:20, 21) He claimed, "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." (8:28)

3. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the same word (*hupsoô*) was used to describe the exaltation of the Servant of the LORD as is used to describe the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in these passages in John.
4. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: S.C.M., 1974), 205.