

# THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

## Encounter Jesus – The Son of the Living God

### *Conversation in the Night - Part 1*

Life is like a ladder we climb until we die. It would be a shame if we simply stopped and never progressed. But it could be utterly disastrous if we placed our ladder against the wrong wall and after a lifetime of climbing discovered that we had wasted all the years given to us. - *Charles Stanley*

The writer of Hebrews asks this haunting question in **Hebrews 2:3 (ESV)**<sup>3</sup> *how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?...* I will tell you the answer upfront. There is no escape for anyone who ignores and does not accept God's great salvation. While I was still working, a co-worker with tears in her eyes spoke of her young brother who had died several years before. She did not know whether he invited Jesus into his heart before he died. She said, "I know the Bible does not teach it, but I would like to think that God gives people one more chance to believe after they breathe their final breath." I was not able to console her by saying that God does such a thing because I know that God's Word teaches that the choice between heaven or hell, eternal life or eternal damnation must be made in this life. **Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)**<sup>27</sup> *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,* Believers should never forget that accepting Jesus for our salvation and entrance into heaven is God's idea not ours and it is our responsibility to share the good news of Jesus.

#### **Jesus the Discerner of Hearts**

**Read John 2:23-24 (ESV)**<sup>23</sup> *Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.*<sup>24</sup> *But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people*

In our last lesson we saw how Jesus cleansed the temple. Now, we are told that while He was there in Jerusalem many *believed in his name*. We have already seen how Jesus knew the heart of Simon Peter and Nathanael. As our study continues we will see Jesus look into the heart of the Samaritan woman, the Jewish leaders and even one of His own disciples. John writes: *Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people*. Bible.org says, We could rightly translate it, "Many believed in Jesus, but Jesus didn't believe in them."

Jesus' ability to know every heart perfectly leads to the unsettling truth that some belief is not the kind of belief that obtains fellowship with Jesus and eternal life. The multitudes' belief in Him because of seeing His signs was not saving belief. Superficial faith may have a high view of Jesus, but that is not what matters. What matters is this: "Does Jesus believe in me?" What does the Discerner of Hearts see when He looks into my heart or yours?

When we connect these verses at the end of chapter 2 with chapter 3, we realize that the hearts of the people were being contrasted against the heart of Nicodemus, a man whom Jesus recognized as honest in his seeking after truth. Whenever our Lord finds an earnest heart, He will ensure that heart will find the truth. Ironside says, "You ask, Well, what about the heathen who have never heard? Will God condemn them to everlasting

judgment for not believing in a Savior of whom they have never heard? No, of course not. But what He will do is this: He will condemn the heathen for all the sins of which they have not repented, but He will see that every repentant soul gets light enough to be saved. **He will not let a man be lost if he is seeking for the truth.**”

### Jesus the Teacher

**Read John 3:1-2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.* <sup>2</sup> *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.”*

Nicodemus, the teacher of the Jews, was first attracted to Jesus because of the miracles. I like J. Vernon McGee’s comment concerning the miracles. McGee says, “Please notice that no one doubted the miracles of our Lord -- not in that day! You've got to be a professor in a seminary today, removed by two thousand years and several thousand miles from the land where it all took place, and then you can doubt the miracles. But you will not find that either the friends of Jesus or His enemies ever doubted His miracles.”

The cleansing of the temple and the accompanying miracles had made both negative and positive impressions on the people. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin—a ‘religious’ man sought a private conversation in the night with Jesus. When we think of the Pharisees, we tend to lump them all under the title of ‘hypocrite’ but this is not any more true than the notion that all church members are hypocrites today. The evidence indicates that Nicodemus was deeply sincere in his quest for truth.

People take notice of John’s mention that Nicodemus visited Jesus in the nighttime. It is not revealed why he came to Jesus at night. Rabbis often had long discussions with their disciples after dark. On the other hand, he might not have wanted the Sanhedrin to know that he was meeting with Jesus. Or, it is possible that Nicodemus came to visit at night since Jesus was so surrounded by crowds in the daytime. The purpose of John’s gospel is to evaluate the spiritual side of Jesus’ ministry. Possibly John mentioned the darkness of the hour to contrast Nicodemus’ dark spiritual condition when he came to Jesus, the Light of the World. Nicodemus saw the physical signs performed by Jesus; however, he was not looking at them with spiritual eyes.

Notice how Nicodemus used the plural pronoun *we*, when he said *we know that you are a teacher come from God*. This may indicate that Nicodemus was actually representing some of the religious leaders. Or the reference might have been to close friends or family. Nicodemus quickly admits that Jesus is a teacher from God but he did not realize that Jesus was God Himself in the flesh. If Nicodemus’ words to Jesus were meant to stroke Jesus’ ego, it had no effect. Jesus did not respond to Nicodemus’ comment instead He went straight to the ‘heart of the matter’.

**Read John 3:3 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> *Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

In this interview Jesus uses the phrase, *Truly, truly* (or *verily, verily* in the King James). Information on Gotquestions.org help me to understand the phrase. These expressions all use the Greek word *amēn*, taken directly from the Hebrew word *ā' mēn*. In modern use, the word *amen* is typically used at the end of a prayer. It

may also be spoken to show agreement with some statement or idea. The original use of the word in the Old Testament literally means 'so be it'. Jesus, however, was fond of saying, 'Amen,' before making a statement or giving a message. When used in this way, the word amen has slightly different implications. Leading off with amen not only implies that what follows is true but also that the person making the statement has **firsthand knowledge** and authority about it. when we read Jesus' words and see statements beginning with "verily," "truly," or some variation, we should recall the deeper meaning. Those claims are not only Jesus' opinion on the truth. Those are ideas about which He has intimate, personal, firsthand knowledge. *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*

*Born again!* What do these words really mean? The Greek word translated *again*" can also mean '*from above*'. Probably both ideas are intended. Although all human beings have experienced natural birth on earth, if we expect to go to heaven, we must experience a supernatural spiritual birth from above. Such a birth requires the power of God. Nicodemus, as a Jew and a Pharisee, would have been proud of the fact that he was not a Gentile, but had been born as a Jew. But Jesus shows him that being a Jew, even a religious Jew, is not enough. He needed a new birth as a spiritual child of God.

Jesus proclaims that a person must be born from above to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke Aramaic; the Gospel writers translated Jesus' sermons and parables into Greek. Mark, Luke, and John translated Jesus' words as "kingdom of God." Matthew sometimes used this phrase too, but often he preferred to translate Jesus' Aramaic words as "kingdom of heaven." According to the Holman Bible Dictionary The two phrases mean exactly the same thing, because they are translations of the same Aramaic words of Jesus.

So, what exactly is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God rules in the hearts of His children who accept God's great salvation in this world in preparation for the next. The kingdom work in us that begins on earth will finally be completed in heaven.

**Read John 3:4-5 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus was confused because he was taking Jesus' words from a literal point of view. How could he climb back into his mother's womb for a second birth? Jesus' answer begins with another *truly, truly* statement - indicating once again something significant will follow and Jesus is providing His firsthand knowledge - *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God!*

In every age, there has been but one way of salvation—faith in God's promise. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand that his natural birth as a Jew and as a Pharisee did not count!

There are differences of opinion regarding what Jesus meant when He spoke of being *born of water*. Being born of water is sometimes interpreted as a requirement for physical baptism with water to enter the kingdom of heaven. If the truth of the matter was that water baptism was necessary to be saved, He could have simply stated, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is baptized and born of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom

of God. You can study for yourself Bible passages that make it clear that salvation is by faith alone. (*John 3:16; John 3:36; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5*)

Another interpretation of being born of water is that Jesus was referring to natural birth (with water referring to the amniotic fluid that surrounds the baby in the womb) and that being born of the "Spirit" indicates spiritual birth. While this could be an interpretation, it is not the best one.

I believe the best interpretation is that *born of water and the Spirit* describe different aspects of the same spiritual birth. So, when Jesus told Nicodemus that he must "*be born of water and the Spirit*," He was not referring to literal water (i.e. baptism or the amniotic fluid in the womb), but was referring to the need for spiritual cleansing or renewal.

Throughout the Old Testament, water is used figuratively for spiritual cleansing. (*Ezekiel 36:25 (ESV)*) Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, would have been familiar with the concept of physical water representing spiritual purification.

So, what exactly is the water by which we are born from above? Run the references on *water* throughout scripture and you will discover that water is the recognized symbol for the Word of God. For example, *Psalms 119:9 (ESV)* <sup>9</sup> *How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. We will study this more extensively as we progress through the gospel of John.*

I am told that the Greek construction points to one birth, not two when Jesus says Nicodemus must be *born of water and the Spirit*. And connecting the water and the Spirit is how to best understand Jesus' answer.

We are born again or born from above by the **Holy Spirit** using the Scripture. No one could be born from above without the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God. One is born from above by the use of water, which is the Word of God, and the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, making it real to the heart.

You may question why the Lord told Nicodemus that you must be born of the Spirit when the Holy Spirit was not yet given. Although the Holy Spirit was sent on the Day of Pentecost to indwell each believer in the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit always was and always will be active on the earth. The Holy Spirit is like Jesus. He was with God in the beginning. He was present in the age before the Flood. We read in *Genesis 6:3* *Then the Lord said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever..."* Old Testament believers were saved in the only way anyone is saved: "by grace." To those who believed the promise of a coming Redeemer, God the Spirit imparted life just as those today receive life by looking back to the coming of our Redeemer.

I love to read novels and often find myself speed reading to the end skipping sentences and skimming paragraphs. That is what has happened with this lesson. I found myself rushing to the end of Jesus and Nicodemus' conversation in the night wanting to get to the end. But, then I realized we need to slow down and enjoy every word of their discussion. Next week, we will finish Conversation in the Night and look into the one verse that is called the 'Bible in a nutshell.'