



THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

Catalog No. 1345

John 3:1-15

Seventh Message

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February 29th, 2004

As we return to our studies in the gospel of John I want to begin with a story that a friend shared with me some time ago.

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant, kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started, so Bill walks down the aisle, looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a place. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit and, when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, this had never happened in this church before.

By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. The minister sees that a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. The deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly, he walks with a cane. Everyone is thinking he can't be blamed for what he's about to do. How can you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid sitting on the floor? It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him.

The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do. And now the congregation sees this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone.

Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control, he says, "What I'm about to preach you will never remember. What you have just seen you will never forget. Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some people will ever read."

Incarnation: "*The Word became flesh.*" This is the story of the gospel of John. In the incarnation, God moved into the neighborhood and sat down beside us so we wouldn't be alone. This gospel tells the story of what happens when God inhabits a human body.

In John 3 we come to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. This story is placed in a section bounded by certain signs of Jesus in Cana of Galilee. The six episodes in the text form a chiasmic structure. In 2:1-11, John records the first of Jesus' signs in Cana. Chapter 4 closes with a second sign of Jesus in that place. Between these comes the temple cleansing, the encounter with Nicodemus, John the Baptist's dialogue with his disciples, and

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman.

In this section Jesus encounters three individuals—a Jewish man, a Samaritan woman, and a Gentile official. These three are not hostile to Jesus (the hostility surfaces in chapter 5). The dialogues between Nicodemus and Jesus and John and his disciples are followed by discourses that are very similar in content. This morning we will look at the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. We begin with the final three verses of chapter 2.

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night, (John 2:23-3:2a NASB)

Verses 23-25 of chapter 2 are a transition between the temple cleansing and the episode with Nicodemus. The mention of Jerusalem and Passover refers back to 2:13. The word "sign" is a link back to verse 18 and forward to 3:2. The phrase "believe in his name" points forward to 3:18. It also links back to the prologue, 1:12. And finally, the word "man" is a link forward to 3:1. So these stories are not just a series of random episodes but a well crafted account that is carefully stitched together.

In Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus had raised quite a ruckus at the temple and had performed signs. Many believed in him, but Jesus knew that their faith was inadequate. While he was there, Nicodemus comes to him at night. This man was a Pharisee, a member of the business class of religious leaders as opposed to holders of political power or members of the aristocracy. He was a "ruler of the Jews," a term that John uses for those in leadership who were in opposition to Jesus. Because of this term, the fourth gospel draws the same criticism as the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Nicodemus is also described as a teacher of Israel (3:10). He knew the Scriptures and could impart truth to others. He was a man of authority and education.

I think we would have been attracted to Nicodemus. We would call him a "great guy." We would love to have him for a neighbor. He would take time to chat, lend you his tools, and collect your newspapers and mail when you were away. You might even play golf together. If Nicodemus were to walk into this church, you would be drawn to him immediately. You would

call the church office and say we need to get him involved here. He would appear to “have it all together.”

Why does Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? Perhaps that was when rabbis sat around and talked. Maybe he was fearful of being identified with Jesus and was taking precautions. But I think night is a metaphor for darkness. Nicodemus is still in the dark. Everything is not as it appears.

What drove this man to come to Jesus? Perhaps he is an example of those to whom Jesus did not entrust himself. He may believe, but his faith is inadequate. Perhaps he is an example of how one moves from elementary belief to a true faith. When he saw and heard Jesus, however, he may have recognized that there was something missing inside. To his credit he comes to Jesus, even if it is at night. Many have questions about God but never come to Jesus.

There are many people like Nicodemus: church people, religious people, hard workers, capable, ethical, upstanding citizens. They appear to have it together, but inside there is still a question. There is a dark place covered by a façade of respectability.

Three exchanges follow between Nicodemus and Jesus.

this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (3:2-3)

Nicodemus approaches Jesus respectfully, addressing him as rabbi, a man “come from God.” Nicodemus may have been a rabbi himself. He assumes they are in the same line of work. He recognizes that God is with Jesus, like he was with Moses or Jeremiah. Even if Nicodemus doesn’t confess Jesus’ pre-existence, he knows there is something special about him. He addresses him as a fellow theologian and treats him like a respected member of the department of religious studies of a secular university.

Nicodemus uses two words in the plural, “signs,” and “we.” Thus far only one sign of Jesus has been mentioned, but there were others. The “we” indicates that Nicodemus might well have been there with his disciples or that he represented others who wanted to know about Jesus. They recognized something about him, but they did not understand his message.

Nicodemus makes the interesting observation, “God is with you.” He doesn’t say that Jesus is a great teacher, that he has insight, organizational skills or runs an excellent music program. “God is with you” is a statement of intangible reality; it describes a presence that is not attainable and is not earthly. I wonder if people could say the same thing about us.

Nicodemus doesn’t ask a question, but one is im-

plied: “Jesus, who are you? We know you are a teacher, that God is with you, but are you more than that? Do you have a message from God?” Jesus responds with an astonishing statement. There’s no beating around the bush. He doesn’t let Nicodemus set the agenda, but gets straight to the point. He begins with the emphatic, solemn formula, “Truly, truly”—Amen, amen. This double “amen” is exclusive to John. It occurs 25 times in this gospel but is not used at all in the rest of the New Testament. Jesus utters it three times in this episode. It means, “Listen up. What I am about to say is very important. You can depend on it. Unless one is born again (or born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Other than chapter 18, this is the only place in John where the words “kingdom of God” appear. For Nicodemus, seeing the kingdom of God meant participating in the kingdom at the end of the age, experiencing eternal, resurrection life.

The term “born again” takes us back to the prologue. Its exact meaning is hard to understand. “Born” signifies childbirth; “again” could mean “from above.” Perhaps it means both. It may be a play on words. Nicodemus understands it to mean “again.” Jesus may be pointing to a birth that has to come from above through the work of the Spirit.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, is concerned with how to get into the kingdom of God. This is what motivates many churchgoers. We want to make sure we have the right ticket for the kingdom of God, that we are going to get in. Jesus is concerned about the same thing, but says that in order to get this kingdom we have to be born again, born from above.

Jesus is turning this man’s world upside down. What Nicodemus has done thus far means absolutely nothing. His knowledge is sadly lacking. What he desires lies outside of himself. Experiencing the kingdom of God as a present reality can happen only as the result of an act of God himself. It is a miracle, a gift from above, a new creation, a new begetting, new life from another realm. It is never the result of the reasoning of the theologian or the technique of the evangelist. Experiencing the kingdom of God is not simply a matter of illumination but of regeneration. It is not a matter of rearrangement but a matter of transformation. It is not just new seeing but new being.

Consider a man of Nicodemus’ caliber, credentials, knowledge, gifts and standing. If he needed a complete transformation, then certainly that would apply to everyone else too. Calvin said, “There is nothing in us that is not defective.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (3:4-8)

Nicodemus responds with a complete lack of comprehension. He takes Jesus' words to mean born again physically—reentering his mother's womb. Jesus is being absurd, he surmises. Human birth cannot be repeated. Nicodemus wants to see the kingdom of God just as he is. He doesn't want to change, he wants to progress. He wants an addition, not a new house. He wants to keep the foundation of his life the same. We try to do the same, but God does not give us that option.

Jesus restates his challenge and expands his meaning, telling Nicodemus that he has to be "born of water and the Spirit." Much has been written about what these words mean. Some say he was referring to physical and spiritual birth. Others say that water refers to John's baptism of repentance—that it takes both repentance and Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. But notice the parallelism in verses 3 and 5: "water and Spirit" replace "from above," and "enter" replaces "see."

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (3)

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (5)

Jesus is referring to the same thing, but now he is challenging Nicodemus in his area of expertise. He berates Nicodemus, a teacher of the Scriptures, for not understanding these things in verse 10. Perhaps Jesus is referring to a passage in Ezekiel that links water and Spirit:

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." (Ezek 36:25-27)

If that is the case, water and Spirit refer to the same thing, not different things. The OT prophets promised a new beginning, a new birth that would cleanse and renew and transform. It is all based on the Spirit of God that enables people to see and to enter into the life of God, the kingdom of God.

Jesus explains further. Like begets like. Therefore flesh begets flesh and Spirit begets spirit. Flesh cannot beget spirit. Flesh denotes the whole of our being insofar as it seeks to organize itself and exist in its own power, apart from the continually renewing presence and power of God. Humans bear children that are hu-

mans that belong to the earth. God bears children that are spirit people that belong to the kingdom of God. Nicodemus should not have been surprised by what Jesus said.

Jesus then goes on to make an analogy between wind and Spirit. The Greek word is the same for both. The nature of the wind and the Spirit are analogous because they have the same effect. Neither can be controlled or understood, but the effects of both can be detected. When the wind blows, the trees sway, and the sound can be heard. We can see the effects of God at work, but we cannot understand or control them. While we can understand and accept the mystery of the wind, we reject the mystery of the Spirit of God because we cannot measure, quantify or control it. It's hard for us to yield to something we cannot control. We want life on our terms. But entering God's life can only happen through the Spirit. Until we yield we cannot go beyond the sign.

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life." (3:9-15)

Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?" He is groping for the truth. Either he is bewildered or he is asking a serious question. The problem is that he is placing his trust in obedience to commands, to devotion to God and submission to his will. He does not recognize his need for a new heart.

Jesus marvels at the fact that Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, does not know these things. At this point Jesus becomes the teacher and the dialogue becomes a monologue. Like Nicodemus, he uses the plural, "we" and "you," possibly referring to his disciples. Later he returns to "I."

Nicodemus cannot grasp what Jesus is talking about because he does not receive the testimony of the Scriptures, the prophets, or Jesus. He doesn't receive because he doesn't believe. His problem is not with intellect, but with believing.

By speaking of earthly things like birth and wind rather than heavenly things, Jesus is trying to make it easy for Nicodemus. He tells him that if he has a hard time with earthly things, then he won't have a chance to understand things from above, heavenly things.

In verse 13 it seems as though the Son of Man has already ascended and come back again to speak about it. What it means is that no one has been there and dwelt there. Only the one who comes from heaven has author-

ity to speak about heavenly things. Only the Son of Man, a term that Jesus uses repeatedly in John, can open up the windows of heaven. He is the only link between heaven and earth. We recall the conversation Jesus had with Nathanael in chapter 1 about the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Being theoretical is all very fine, but the only one who can speak with any authority about heaven is the one who is from there.

Jesus then makes another allusion to the OT, involving the serpent in the wilderness in Numbers 21:4-9. Israel was subjected to a plague of snakes because of the people's persistent murmuring, i.e. unbelief. But God provided a way of salvation. If anyone was bitten by the snakes, he could look at the serpent on the standard and live. Looking at the serpent yielded salvation and healing.

This story foreshadows Jesus' death. Three times in John's gospel our Lord talks about being lifted up: He had to be raised up like the serpent. The serpent expressed in symbol the character of what was destroying Israel. On the cross, when Jesus was lifted up, he became our sin and death, the very things that destroy us. Nicodemus was being challenged to turn to Jesus for new birth in much the same way the ancient Israelites were commanded to turn to the bronze snake for life and healing. This lifting up is not what Nicodemus or the theologians expected. However, the one who believed would have eternal life.

Last November, a student at Los Gatos High School died from severe injuries in an apparent drunken-driving accident. He was part of a creative, college-bound group of students who called themselves "The Elite." The student body president, himself a member of

this group, commented, "We thought we knew everything. We really did. But someone died. And now we do not know anything."

Nicodemus knew that Jesus had come from God. Jesus told him that he did not know anything. Israel thought they knew the truth about the Messiah, but they didn't know and they could not see. Many of us think we know about God but maybe we don't know as much as we think.

Are you trying to figure out God? You want life, but you're in the dark. If you truly want life, you must be born from above. God spoke a great word through Jeremiah, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jer 13:23). We cannot change our hearts any more than we can change our skin. But what is impossible for us is possible with God. I would invite you right now to be born from above. Life begins at the cross. It is that simple and yet that profound.

Most of us would say we have been born again. We have entered into life through the cross, and this new life cannot be taken away. But our life in God must continue from above. It doesn't come from religion, obedience or devotion, as good as those things are. As it was with Nicodemus, nothing we do will give us life. Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit. Life comes from the Spirit and the Spirit comes through the cross.

As we continue each day to gaze on the Son of Man who was lifted up, the Spirit of God allows us to enter into a new realm of being. We too can live a life of incarnation. We become Jesus to this world. Then, when someone who seems quite out of place comes to us, we too can sit down beside him so that he will not be alone.

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