

Nicodemus' Testimony about Christ

John 3:1-21 (ESV)

The Gospel of John Sermon Series

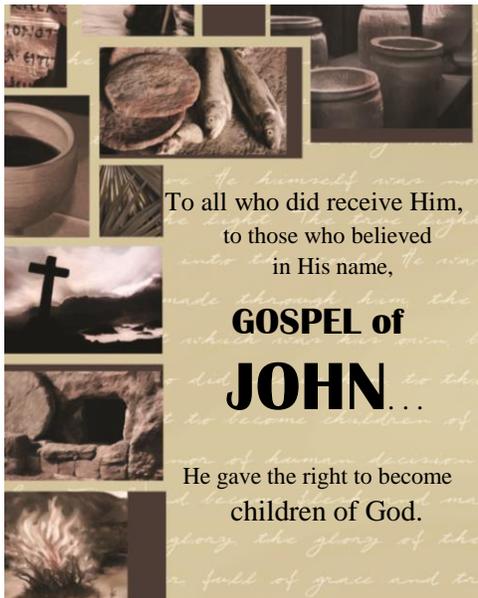
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

March 2, 2014

TEXT: John 3:1-21 (ESV)

We continue this morning in our series on the Gospel of John. We are journeying through a set of testimonies about the Person of Christ. I hope for two great things in this series, and I want you to keep praying for these. The first is, I hope there are people who will come to see Christ



for the very first time through this series; that these testimonies move us to believe. That is why John's Gospel was written. Secondly, they are written that in believing we might have life, new life, in Christ. If you already know Christ and have placed your trust in Him, then my prayer for you, for myself, is that we would have new life. One aspect of that new life that I'm hoping for is that we, as a congregation, might grow with greater confidence in Christ and a more ready ability to speak of Him in any situation that we find ourselves. There are too many Christians who are quiet about their faith.

We had an opportunity yesterday to spend several hours with Santa Ono, the President of U.C. It was just a small group of us, and he spoke of himself. He said, "I am not a stealth Christian." He is probably the most-known Christian president of a major state university. I don't want any stealth Christians here, and the Gospel of John will not leave you to be a stealth, hidden Christian. This morning, we look at the testimony of Nicodemus in John 3, and I want to move through three things together this morning. I want us to see the man; to follow the conversation; and to savor the conclusion.

As we begin, we want to **see the man**. Nicodemus' testimony about Christ comes in the form of a personal visit. It's an extended conversation, one of eleven extended conversations with people in the Gospel of John. This is the first time that we hear Jesus speaking at length about Himself to someone else, and oh, what a gift it is that we are able to listen in and follow this

conversation. In a sense, we see how Jesus evangelizes. We come to John 3:1, and we see the man:

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

We learn four things about this man in this verse:

- *The first thing we learn is that he is a man.*

You might think that's not earth-shattering news, but he is not a child, he's not a woman, he comes as an adult man.

- *The second thing we learn is that he is of the Pharisees.*

This should fire a set of associations in our mind. We know a tremendous amount about the Pharisees. It should come to our mind that this man is a devout man; he is knowledgeable in the Scriptures; he's a layman, not of a priestly class; he is probably respected in his community; and he is concerned for purity.

- *The third thing we learn is his name.*

John, who so deliberately hides his own name, places this man's name forward. His name is Nicodemus. That's a Greek name. Actually, you know this name and its parts. If you have ever worn a set of Nike shoes, that is the first part, and it means *victory*. If you ever participated in a democracy, you know the second part. Nicodemus is a Greek name that means the *victor* or *conqueror of the people*. It's a heroic name. There are thousands of names of first century Israelites preserved in inscriptions on tombstones, and we know the most common names. Of those thousands and thousands of names, would you believe that there are only four people named Nicodemus? And this is one of them. The other Nicodemuses are probably part of the same family. Nicodemus is an unusual name, a Greek name.

- *Lastly, the fourth thing we learn is that he is a ruler of the Jews.*

He is a wealthy man, a leader, an upper-class person from a known family, and this is all important information. I want to apply this to us before we go much further. When you have an opportunity to speak with someone, you'd better see the person that you're talking with. Too often, we just start rolling on ahead as though we have only one way of talking about Christ no matter who is standing in front of us. This is not the case. The Gospel of John will not allow that because this man comes deliberately and is introduced to us with each of these pregnant phrases: He is a man; he is a Pharisee; his name is Nicodemus, probably from a very well-known family at this time; he is an upper-class man, a ruler in the community, a leading figure. The most important thing we find out about this man is what happens in John 3:2. We find out that he is seeking to know Jesus better.

Now, as we **follow the conversation**, we read in John 3:2 :

"This man came to Jesus by night."

Of all that background, of all the things to notice, to be able to pronounce his name correctly, the most important of all is that he is interested in Jesus. Would you take the time to find out about the people around you who are trying to make their way to Jesus? Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Dale Bruner, in his commentary, says:

"From this verse we validate the earnest search after Jesus, the serious coming in quiet and often private ways for conversation and study."

People all around us are seeking conversation about Jesus, and we need to make ourselves available. I remember one time visiting with Lassaad, our dear brother, pastor from North Africa, who is now with Christ. Lassaad made this verse come alive to me forever when he told me about the dangers of leaders in his country coming to find out about Jesus. Lassaad was known as a Christian, and he said that late one night a man who had an executive, presidential cabinet position in the government, came to his house because he had observed Lassaad's care for the poor. He came that night and knocked on his door. Lassaad opened the door, and the man said: "I want to know why you're doing this. Why do you care about the poor? Why are you ministering to the neediest of the needy in our society? Why are you doing that?" Lassaad said to him: "I'm doing that because I'm a Christian." Then, in the privacy of that dark Tunisian night, the man said: "I want to know a little bit more about Jesus Christ." At that doorway, Lassaad said, "Do you want the three-minute answer or the three-hour answer?" The man said: "I would like the three-hour answer." Lassaad welcomed him into his home. I will never read John 3:2 in the same way after hearing that.

So, Nicodemus is inside, seeking further conversation with Jesus, and now, knowing the man, our task this morning is to follow their conversation. We get to listen in. Isn't it a blessing that Nicodemus must have talked to John the Evangelist and said: "I've got to tell you about my conversation with Jesus"? We get to hear because it's included in this Gospel. The conversation starts in John 3:2. Nicodemus gives Jesus the honorific title, recognition, of Rabbi, teacher, and he says:

"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 is off to a good start. He's standing on second, dusting off after a no-chance-of-getting-out play. He's standing on second base because he sees Jesus. He recognizes that God is at work in Jesus, and he says: "You've come from God, and I can see that God is with You." There's an awful lot that he could see, and he says: "I know this because no one can do what You do unless God is with him." You might be asking yourself, "Is there a question in here? This

looks like just reported information.” Sometimes people, when they're seeking after Christ, don't formulate their questions very well. There's not an obvious question here, but maybe the hidden question: “What am I supposed to make of you? I'm drawn to You, and it scares me.” Well, Jesus looks inside this man and answers his hidden question. Jesus says: “Nicodemus, let me tell you the really important *unless*. You said to Me that no one can do these things *unless* God is with him. That is true, but let Me tell you a very important *unless*.” Jesus says in John 3:3:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus is welcomed by Jesus, and stopped at this point. Jesus does not compliment him. He doesn't say to him: “Nicodemus, I just want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule and coming to see Me. You have a lot of responsibilities as a ruler, an upper-class man. You just need to take one more step forward, and keep doing the right thing.” He doesn't say anything like that. He stops Nicodemus completely and says: “*Unless you are born again from above you cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Nicodemus has said: “I see. I can see that God is at work in and through You.” But Jesus said: “You cannot see at all unless you are born again from above.” This little phrase *from above* in the Greek text is literally *from above*. This word can mean *again*. It is often translated as *born again*, but it literally carries the image of *from above*. I'm taking both of these in this translation and using *born again from above*. It's a new birth, but what matters in this new birth for Jesus is that it's a new birth *from above*, so pay attention to the space in this passage. Born again from above; and if you're not, you can't see it. Rudolph Bultmann, the German scholar, mid-20th century, says:

“Right at the beginning of the conversation it is stated uncompromisingly that man, as he is, is excluded from salvation, from the sphere of God; for man, as he is, there is no possibility of it. Yet at the same time it is said in such a way that a hint is given that salvation may be a possibility for him, inasmuch as it is possible for him to become another man, a new man. Rebirth means something more than an improvement in man; it means that man receives a new *origin*, and this is manifestly something which he cannot give himself.”

Jesus says you need a new birth; you need a new origin. Then Nicodemus asked the question in John 3:4, the question that we all should be asking, which is:

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

That's a fair question. Are you familiar with people being born again, having a second birth, a new birth? Push out of your mind for a moment the Christian experience that you are used to describe as “being born again.” This is said here for the very first time, and Jesus says you can't even see the kingdom without it. So, it's a good follow-up question to say: “How do I get that?”

It's an excellent question, and Jesus answers this question of how can this be in John 3:5 by stating:

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

The Kingdom of God is the most frequent topic of Jesus' preaching and teaching in the parables. It's the center of gravity in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and yet in John, the expression "Kingdom of God" occurs only twice. John's way of talking about the Kingdom is to describe it as eternal life. Only in John 3:3 and John 3:5 does he mention the Kingdom, and it is found in this conversation with Nicodemus. He says: "Unless you are born of water and the Spirit you can't enter it." Not only can you not see it, you can't get into it, which is more important. It's one thing to see it from a distance, but it's a matter of the highest urgency to get into it. Now our Lord says: *"You can't get into it unless you are born again, born from water and Spirit."* We are right to ask: "What what does this mean?" John 1:12 gives us a clue:

"But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

There's a clue in John 1:12 that to become a child of God, to be born of God, is related to having received Christ. Many people think that "born of water and the Spirit" is the physical birth and then the spiritual birth, but the construction won't allow that. There is just one preposition for these two words; it is just one event that's being described. You have got to have a water-Spirit new kind of birth. That's the answer to the question. I hope you sympathize with Nicodemus at this point, scratch your head, feeling that you don't really understand what Jesus is saying. It's okay, because the conversation Nicodemus isn't over yet. Nicodemus is marveling. Jesus says in John 3:7:

"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again from above.'"

Notice that the "you" here is in the plural, and there's another little application for us here. Every person that you talk with represents a whole group of people. You may speak with one member of a family, but that whole family is represented in that conversation; you may cross a culture barrier, and everyone in that culture group is represented in that conversation. "You plural," Jesus says, "must be born from above." Jesus continues and says to Nicodemus in John 3:8:

"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."

Jesus invites Nicodemus deeper into His thinking, revealing His identity. Jesus says: "If you're going to be born of the Spirit there is a blowing of the Spirit over a person, or in a person, that causes them to come alive."

Nicodemus knows the Scripture, and I am sure that Scriptures are just popping in Nicodemus' mind right now. Scriptures like:

Genesis 2:7 in which God breathes into the first man of His Spirit and man becomes alive: *"The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."*

Ezekiel 36:26-27 that speaks of the era of salvation in this way: *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean from your uncleannesses, and I will give you a new heart and new spirit, and I will remove the heart of stone, and I will put my Spirit within you and cause you walk in my ways."*

Ezekiel 37:3-4 which is a gripping image of new birth by the Spirit. In this passage, God takes the prophet Ezekiel out in a vision in the Spirit and sets this priestly man in the midst of a valley filled with corpses, the most defiling thing of all for a priest. Ezekiel is standing in the midst of these bones, and God speaks to him in Ezekiel 37:3a and says:

"Son of man, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel gives a great answer and says in Ezekiel 37:3b:

"O Lord GOD, you know."

And God speaks to him and says in Ezekiel 37:4ff.:

"Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: 'Behold, I will cause My Spirit to enter you, and you shall live.' . . . Prophesy to the Spirit; prophesy, son of man, and say to the Spirit, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds and breathe on these slain, that they may live.' Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . And you shall know that I am the LORD, . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live . . . Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.'"

New birth by the Spirit of God is a deep river of Old Testament hope, and Jesus tells Nicodemus that this is how it is going to happen: by the Spirit of the living God. Nicodemus knows the Scripture well, and he knows that a holy God cannot share space with unholy people. So this leads to another question. Nicodemus says in John 3:9:

"How can these things be?"

How can the Spirit of God make us alive again, for we are sin-filled people? Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:10:

"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Aren't you the teacher of Israel? Don't you know the way that sin will be removed so the Spirit can come and make us alive again? Jesus tells us in John 3:13:

"No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

That is why we've got to be born from above. Jesus tells Nicodemus, and us this morning, that you cannot go up into heaven and get the Spirit by yourself; you cannot save yourself, but there is One who has come down. And Jesus says in John 3:14-15:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Jesus gives us an image that just as the serpent in the wilderness is lifted up and God's people are forgiven and healed, He says: "So I must be lifted up on the cross." I wish we had time to walk through Numbers 21 when God's people grumble against Him and judgment breaks out. God tells Moses to make a fiery serpent, set it on: a pole, lifted up, and every snake-bitten, judgment-facing, grumbling sinner who looks in faith is healed and forgiven. Jesus tells Nicodemus, and all of us this morning, that the solution for snake-bitten, judgment-facing, grumbling sinners facing the wrath of Almighty God is the Son of Man put on a stake and lifted up high on a cross. If you want to be born again, it happens through the Spirit. If you want the Spirit to overwhelm you, then you must have a solution for your sin. So our Lord unveils God's solution for sinners, the lifting up of His one and only Son on the cross for our salvation. John 3:16 is the most-known verse of the Bible, yet most people who hear this verse have no idea what comes before or after it. In this verse, Jesus says:

"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."

He is telling us that in this way, God loved the world, meaning in this manner of the lifting up on the cross of His Son, God provided the solution for sinners, the way for us to be born again.

We don't know how long this conversation went, but I have to believe we've got the cliff notes here. I believe this conversation went on for hours. We don't know the ending of this conversation other than the ending of this text, that there is an urgency to respond to Christ. Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:18:

"Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

He ends in John 3:21 and says:

"But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Whoever does what is true comes into the light of faith.

Finally, we want to **savor the conclusion**. The curtain comes down on this conversation that transpires in the dark, and we don't know if Nicodemus believed. We are left wondering what happened.

Praise God, Nicodemus shows up two more times in the Gospel of John. In John 7, there is a storm of controversy raging in the public square about who in the world is Jesus. Some people are saying this; some are saying that. Some people are saying that He's the Messiah; others are saying He's possessed by demons. Some people are ready to arrest Him; some are ready to kill Him; yet some people are ready to believe in Him. It's a wild world in John 7, and we will be there in a few weeks. In the midst of this unstable scene, Nicodemus steps forward a little closer to the light and says in John 7:51:

"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

Nicodemus, the leader of his society, takes a step forward and says, "Just give Him a hearing." Can you imagine the looks his way and the temptation just to fade back in the crowd? But he steps forward and says, "Just give Him a hearing," and then Nicodemus fades into the background for 12 more chapters.

The next time we see Nicodemus, we see him at the cross, and this leader of the society, this man with everything to lose, watches Jesus crucified, and he hears His words from the cross, "It is finished." Upon hearing those words, John tells us, Nicodemus, who had earlier come to Jesus by night, came forward, requested the body of Christ, and brought 75 pounds of spices to bury the body of our Lord – a vast sum, very costly. The man who came at night has now stepped forward into broad daylight and identified himself with Christ. Jesus was crucified on the Sabbath before the sun went down, and in the midst of those mocking cries, Nicodemus steps forward to request the body and pay for a king's burial. Richard Bauckham says:

"There cannot be any doubt that Nicodemus makes his allegiance to Jesus highly public. He treats with immense honor the body of the man condemned and repudiated by the rulers as a criminal. He does so in broad daylight, before the Sabbath which began at sunset. If his coming to Jesus by night had been for the sake of secrecy, his action now is in stark contrast. His vast provision of spices is the culturally recognized way of honoring a very eminent person."

Nicodemus steps forward into the light and takes his place with Jesus.

This passage is so rich we could have ten more messages on it. Jesus says: "You must be born from above; you have got to receive Me or you cannot see, you cannot enter the Kingdom." God's love for this world is so vast that He did not spare His one and only Son, but gave Him so that snake-bitten, judgment-facing, grumbling sinners like us can be forgiven. If we are forgiven, then the Spirit of God is welcome to rush in and make us alive. If He's made us alive, then we have a sacred obligation to speak and share of what He has done with people, and you probably will not get it all out in one conversation. But I pray that you'll have many conversations and stay with people, and keep pointing them to Christ, that they might be born anew and have new life. If you begin to live more and more in Christ, you will find this new life just taking over, and it will be your highest joy.

Communion:

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we do praise You together, Son of God, holy Lamb of God, who takes away our sin. Lord Jesus, we worship You and thank You that on the night You were betrayed, You took bread and You broke it in the presence of Your disciples and said: "*This is My body, broken for you.*" Lord, that's us, here. Lord, later in that meal, You took the cup and said: "*This cup is the cup of the New Covenant in My blood poured out for you.*" Lord, help prepare our hearts to come to Your table in full assurance of forgiveness. Lord, we want to set our sins here and leave them here. Lord, we come snake-bitten, judgment-facing, and grumbling, and yet You have come to save. Come to our hearts right now, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.