

Up and out

John 3: 1-18

Joh 3:3 Jesus answered and said unto him, **Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**

Joh 3:7 **Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.**

A man living in a penthouse on Fifth Avenue can be as lost from God as can a man living under a bridge in downtown Houston. Yet you're not going to find any rescue missions on Fifth Avenue. We are so wedded to material things we sometimes forget that a person's economic or social status does not count with God. In Nicodemus we have a case of one who is *up and out*. He was up in the world, but he was out of the kingdom of God. Let's look at:

The Man, Nicodemus

Joh 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

Joh 3:2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

"Nicodemus" means "a conqueror of the people." Whether he conquered anyone else, Nicodemus won a victory within himself, but only after a struggle.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which means that he was a conservative in his theology. He accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God. He believed in angels, miracles, and the resurrection from the dead. He was the opposite of the Sadducees who accepted only the five books of Moses as Scripture and denied all the rest of the things mentioned above. We assume that as a good Pharisee, Nicodemus also lived by the meticulous and countless rules devised by the rabbis for governing the conduct of one's life. Someone has called Nicodemus "the fairest flower of Judaism."

Also, Nicodemus was a man of prominence. He was "a ruler of the Jews." He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. Among all the Jews in Palestine, he was one of seventy men, plus the high priest, who comprised this body. Under the Romans, these men had the final say in civic and religious matters. Jesus also called him a "master," or teacher. To the Jews this was the supreme title.

Nicodemus is the only member of the Sanhedrin who dared speak a word of defense for Jesus during His public ministry, an act which required great courage. And judging by the amount of myrrh and aloes he supplied for Jesus' burial, he must have been a man of wealth.

Yet, in spite of all these things, Nicodemus was outside the kingdom of God. He was a lost man. He was *up* in this life. But he was *out* insofar as eternal life was concerned.

Our text says that Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night". Why "by night"? Was it because he did not want it known that he visited Jesus? Or that he knew where to find Him at that time? More likely, he came at night in order to have an uninterrupted visit with Jesus. At the Passover

season, Jerusalem and its vicinity was crowded with pilgrims. Such a visit would be impossible during the day. Next I want you to see:

The Dialogue

Note that Nicodemus opened the dialogue with a compliment for Jesus.

Joh 3:2 ... Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

"Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God". Otherwise, no man could do the miracles that He did. Nicodemus probably had witnessed some or all of these miracles.

Joh 2:23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast *day*, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.

Looking back at verse 2 of our text. For Nicodemus to call Jesus a rabbi was the supreme compliment among the Jews. Especially, since Jesus was not an accredited teacher among them, even though the same word for teacher that Jesus used in addressing Nicodemus is used here as well.

Is "we" editorial? Or did Nicodemus come as a representative of other members of the Sanhedrin? Either is possible. It is possible that John did not record the entire conversation, but, at least, he gave the heart of it.

"Know" means to have perceptive knowledge. Nicodemus, after witnessing the miracles, had thought the matter through and had concluded that Jesus was from God.

In any case, Jesus took no note of Nicodemus's compliment. Instead, He used shock treatment on him.

Joh 3:3 Jesus answered and said unto him, *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

In John's Gospel, "verily, verily" always introduces a solemn statement by Jesus. Had Jesus said that Gentiles must be born again, Nicodemus would have said, "Amen." Jews regarded Gentiles as being outside the mercy of God. One rabbi said they were but fuel for the fires of hell.

But as a Jew, Nicodemus thought that he was already in the kingdom of God. Imagine, therefore, his shock to hear that he must be born again even to see—let alone be in—the kingdom of God.

Even today some people have strange ideas about what it means to be a Christian. Back in the 70's, the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission made a series of television programs called "Christ Is the Answer." Paul Stevens, who was president of the commission at the time, insisted that in every film the characters having part in the message were to be Christians.

One day he and the director were selecting people to play these roles. When they had finished, Paul asked, "Are all these people Christians?" The director replied, "Certainly! Every one of them is an American citizen!"

He held the same mistaken notion as Nicodemus. Being an American citizen no more makes a person a Christian than being *a Jew* makes one a part of God's kingdom.

In light of Jesus' words, Nicodemus expressed his surprise. "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"

Obviously, Jesus was thinking of a spiritual birth, while Nicodemus thought of a second physical birth. In fact, the Greek word for "again" (*anōthen*) may mean that, or it can mean "from above." Apparently, Jesus chose this word for that very reason. He had to lead Nicodemus away from the idea that his natural birth meant he was already in the kingdom. He wanted him to understand that a spiritual birth from above was necessary. Being born to Christian parents does not make a child a Christian.

Again, Jesus introduced His answer with the words "verily, verily". Look at verses 5-7:

Joh 3:5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Joh 3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Joh 3:7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

What did Jesus mean by "born of water"? Some see it as baptismal regeneration. Others see it, along with "Spirit," as spiritual cleansing. But we have to interpret it in context. The problem here is the difference between natural and spiritual births.

Everyone familiar with the natural birth knows that it is accompanied by water. One of the most exciting and at the same time chilling statements a man can hear at 2am is, "Honey, I think my water just broke."

Obviously, the spiritual birth is accompanied by the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the difference between the two: "born of the flesh is flesh," and "born of the Spirit is spirit." So, actually [verse 5](#) is like a piece of meat between two slices of bread, verses 4 and 6.

By the fleshly birth, a person is born into a natural, family with natural relationships and responsibilities. One born of the Spirit is born into a spiritual family with spiritual relationships and responsibilities.

In [verse 7](#), the word "marvel" is a verb meaning "to wonder without understanding." So, literally, Jesus said, "Stop wondering without understanding that I said, It is morally and spiritually necessary [*dei*] you to be born again [from above]."

Nicodemus's problem was that he was reaching out for *understanding* rather than faith. If we understand something, it is not through faith.

Heb 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Just as our physical eyesight is the sense that gives us evidence of the material world, **faith** is the "sense" that gives us evidence of the invisible, spiritual world. Faith has its reasons. We aren't talking about a "blind leap" of faith. But the reasons can't be measured in a laboratory, they have to be understood spiritually.

Faith extends beyond what we learn from our senses, and the author is saying that it has its

reasons. Its tests are not those of the senses, which yield uncertainty. Physical eyesight produces a conviction or evidence of visible things; faith is the organ which enables people to see the invisible order.

If you have the substance before you, if you can see it, what use is there for **faith**? Faith is needed for what we *can't* see and *can't* touch. Faith does not contradict reason, though it may go beyond reason. I may objectively prove the Bible is the most unique book ever published, and has impacted society more than any other book. But only faith can *prove* that the Bible is the *Word of God*. Therefore, this is a belief *beyond* reason, but not in *contradiction* to reason. Faith is *not* a bare belief or intellectual understanding. It is a willingness to trust in, to rely on, and to cling to.

Joh 3:8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

Jesus often taught from spur-of-the-moment events. It is possible that at that very moment a breeze began to rustle the leaves of a nearby olive tree. In effect, Jesus said, "Do you hear that, Nicodemus? That movement of the leaves is caused by a breeze. Do you see the breeze? Or do you understand it?" Of course, neither was true. Nicodemus knew the breeze was there only by the effect of its power and presence.

The ancients formed their language out of experience. They experienced an invisible force in nature, either a gentle breeze or a tornado. They called it *pneuma*. They recognized an invisible force (breath) in humans and animals. They also called it *pneuma*. Likewise, they saw a power in human religious experience, and they called it *pneuma*. Thus, depending upon the context, *pneuma* may mean any of these: wind, breath, or spirit.

So Jesus chose this figure to try leading Nicodemus to comprehend the spiritual birth, the birth from above. "The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound thereof, but can't tell from where it originates, and where it goes to; so is every one that is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*]." "The Spirit works as He wills." We do not see the wind. But we accept it because we see its results. In like manner, we do not see the Holy Spirit. But we see the results of His work. We may well think of the Holy Spirit as the attending physician as each soul is born into the kingdom of God.

However, Nicodemus was so wedded to the natural that he still didn't comprehend the spiritual. So he said, "How can these things be?". He did not understand the figure of the wind, so how could he grasp the deeper things of the Spirit?

But Nicodemus was an expert in the Jewish Scriptures. So Jesus resorted to them.

Joh 3:14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

Joh 3:15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

He cited the episode of the fiery serpents found in [Num. 21:6-9](#).

Num 21:6 And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

Num 21:7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

Num 21:8 And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

Num 21:9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

When the people cried out to Moses for help, Jehovah told him to make a serpent of brass, hold it up, and everyone who looked upon it lived. Apparently for the first time, a small light of understanding appeared upon Nicodemus's face. He recognized the passage to which Jesus referred.

Then Jesus related it to Himself. "Even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Now, we understand that, "lifted up" refers to Jesus' crucifixion, but that was something of which Nicodemus knew nothing at this point. At the same time Jesus introduced the element of faith. Why were the Israelites saved from the serpent bites? Because of the element of which the brass serpent was made? Or because of the excellence of the workmanship in making the serpent? Or because of the graceful way in which Moses held the serpent? All these questions call for a negative answer. They were saved simply because the people had faith in God's promise.

Likewise you will be saved from sin only through faith in God's promise to save all who believe in His crucified and risen Son. Moses' act of lifting up the serpent did not heal all the Israelites. Only those were healed who responded to God's promise in faith. Neither are all people saved from the penalty of sin because Jesus was crucified. Only those are saved who exercise faith in the crucified One.

"Whosoever" includes you, me, and all others who respond through faith in the Savior. "Perish" renders the word akin to Apollyon, the destroyer, one name of the devil. It means to "destroy fully", but might well read "be cast into hell." And "eternal life" or is not quantitative, a life received at physical death. It is qualitative, a quality of life received the moment we believe in Jesus and that abides in eternity.

Some preach a message that says you will not know that you are saved until the final judgment. The gospel is that you can be saved here and now and know it. I have heard prayers that are closed with the plea, "And save us in heaven at last." Well, my friend, unless you are saved now by grace through faith in Jesus, you will not be saved "in heaven at last." Next I would like you to see:

The Purpose of the Incarnation

Joh 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Joh 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Some interpreters feel Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus ended with [John 3:15](#). They hold that [John 3:16-21](#) is the apostle's commentary. I see the whole as Jesus' words. It is because of people's lost condition that God became Jesus of Nazareth.

John 3:16 is the best known and most often quoted verse in the Bible. Yet seldom is [John 3:16](#) used as a sermon text, because when we quote it, we have said it all. It is the "little Gospel" or the gospel in superlatives. Now, I have always believe that Scripture interprets, and illuminates Scripture. As a result, I believe that possibly the best commentary on John 3:16 is found in [Philippians 2:6-11](#). Go there with me:

Php 2:6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

Php 2:7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

Php 2:8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Php 2:9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

Php 2:10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth;

Php 2:11 And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

[John 3:16](#) presents the greatest Lover: "God." It expresses the greatest degree of love: "so loved." It includes the greatest object of love: "the world." It shows the greatest expression of love: "he gave." And the greatest gift of love: "his only begotten Son." It depicts the greatest response to love: "whosoever believeth in him." It declares the greatest deliverance of love: "should not perish." And it presents the greatest result of love: "but have everlasting life."

Notice that this verse opens with the word for and so. It shows the kind of love God has for a lost world.

[1Peter 1:18-21](#) says,

1Pe 1:18 Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, *as* silver and gold, from your vain conversation *received* by tradition from your fathers;

1Pe 1:19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

1Pe 1:20 Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you,

1Pe 1:21 Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.

"Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, . . . But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." If you could have been redeemed by silver and gold, God could have given mountains of such and have had mountains of it left over. But He had to give all of something that He had. He has only one Son. And the Father gave Him to provide redemption from your sins.

Looking back to our text we have seen the kind of love that God has for this lost world, but to me the principal word in this verse is "whosoever." Literally it means, "every single one of the whole, the ones believing in him." I am so thankful for "whosoever." For "whosoever means me!" I am a whosoever, and so are you!

The word "have," in this verse literally, reads "may have." This suggests the possibility that one may not come to have eternal life. The fact that Jesus provided this life does not mean that everyone automatically has it. It is available, but only to the ones who believe in Jesus. But "every single one of the whole" means that Christ would have paid the price of redemption—even if you or I had been the only lost sinners in the world. Look at verses 17-18.

Joh 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Joh 3:18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

These two verses stress the individual nature of salvation. Every person on this planet falls into one of two classes. You are either saved or you are not saved. You have either believed or you have not believed. And based on whether you have believed or not, you are in one of two states. You are either condemned or not condemned. Let me explain.

In our text, "Condemn" could read "judge." The purpose of the incarnation was not that the Son should judge or condemn the world. It was that through Him the world might be saved. Now, at His second coming He will judge the world. However, those that have already trusted in Him are not judged. Why?

Rom 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Rom 8:2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

So, if you have trusted Christ you're sins have already been forgiven, they have been removed from you as far as the east is from the west, tossed into the sea of God's forgetfulness, never to be brought up again. You are a child of God, adopted into the family of God, sealed unto the day of redemption and are absolutely, positively free from condemnation. But that isn't the case for those who haven't trusted Christ. Notice in our text, the ones not believing in Him already are condemned (perfect tense, a fixed, completed state). Why? Not because they are such terrible sinners. Rather, they are condemned because they have not believed (perfect tense again, have not and do not believe, a fixed state) in the only begotten Son of God.

So, the one sin that will send your soul to hell is a fixed refusal to believe in Jesus as your Savior. You can believe in Him, if you will to do so. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that we bear faith as an apple tree bears apples. It is our very nature to believe. But it makes all the difference in what or in whom we believe? The only way to be saved is through our personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Joh 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Act 4:12 Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

We hear many sermons on what we must do to be saved. But what about to be lost? Based on John 3:18, my conclusion is that you need not do anything to be lost. Because of your sins you are lost already. So, your problem is not how to be lost but how to be saved. Some here this morning, and some within the sound of my voice have heard the gospel many times. You have heard about where you stand with God, and based on that what your future holds for you. And yet, one question still stands before you. It is an age-old question, but one that must be answered. And it must be answered individually. Sadly, I can't answer for you, I can point you in the right direction, but you must decide for yourself.

Mat 27:22 ...What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?...

That is your all-important question. How will you answer? Upon your answer hangs your eternal destiny.