

Overcoming Uncertainty

LESSON TEXT: John 3:1-17. DEVOTIONAL READING: John 3:18-21. BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-21.

TIME: A.D. 27 PLACE: Jerusalem

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." ⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^[e] ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[f] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

LESSON AIMS

- To show that Nicodemus, a religious leader, struggled with doubt and overcame it with trust.
- To show that doubt can be overcome by trusting Jesus.
- To help believers learn to put their trust in Jesus when they have doubts.

INTRODUCTION

The book of John is perhaps the most theological of the Gospels. The author was John the apostle, one of Jesus' closest disciples and one who referred to himself as the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (John 20:2; 21:7,20).

John 2 concludes with a record of Jesus' visit to the temple in Jerusalem at Passover. Upon finding the precincts being used for commercial profit, He drove the businessmen out with a whip and told them to stop making His Father's house a house of merchandise (v. 16). After that, when asked for a sign, Jesus spoke of His death and of His resurrection, which would follow three days later (v. 19). This led to confusion among the Jews. Some believed in Him, and others remained uncertain.

The beginning of John 3 thus provides a contrast with the end of chapter 2, for in chapter 3 we read of a man giving evidence of being ready to believe in Jesus. Furthermore, this was not simply an ordinary man. This was one of the Jewish religious leaders, a Pharisee. Throughout Jesus' ministry most of the religious leaders opposed Him, but here is an example of one who did not.

We all have doubts at some point in our lives. We are tempted to despair, for we are left in indecision and do not know what to do. Then someone comes along and shows us the way out of the dilemma, and our uncertain world is restored to calm.

In our passage this week we read of a religious man who wrestled with his uncertainty and turned to Jesus for answers. It is possible that we can grow up in the church and a religious environment and still have doubts about our faith. It is also possible to overcome those doubts through faith in our Lord Jesus.

BACKGROUND

John writes his Gospel to convince his readers that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). John does this by recording important miracles and teachings.

One of the earliest recorded teachings of Jesus focuses on a private conversation with a certain Nicodemus, a very religious Jew who was a teacher himself. When Nicodemus sought out Jesus to learn more about Him, Jesus confronted that learned man with the most important challenge of his life. This challenge made him step beyond his beliefs to examine his relationship with God in a new and powerful way.

Uncertainty Exposed-John 3:1-8.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin-a group of seventy-one rulers who exercised religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction in Israel. The Pharisees separated themselves from everything non-Jewish and followed both the Old Testament laws and the oral traditions of the Jews that had come down through the centuries.

1: Why was it unlikely that a person like Nicodemus would seek a conversation with Jesus? (John 3:1, 2)

Nicodemus was obviously prompted by miracles which he had seen, and as a guardian of theology, he had an obligation to investigate further. Jesus was always surrounded by people in the daytime, so a late-evening meeting would have been a logical choice. It can not be inferred that Nicodemus was afraid or embarrassed to be with Jesus.

2: What had prompted Nicodemus to come looking for Jesus? (John 3:1)

Jesus knew that what Nicodemus really wanted to know concerned the kingdom of God on earth; so it was that which Jesus addressed. Jesus also knew the emptiness and uncertainty in the heart of Nicodemus that had prompted him to seek Jesus out. Jesus immediately stated, therefore, that unless a person is born again, he can never see, or be a part of, God's kingdom.

3: How did Jesus respond to Nicodemus' opening statement, and why did He respond this way? (John 3:3)

The concept of being born again was new to Nicodemus. Since he was not yet thinking in spiritual terms, he imagined it only in a literal, physical way. While it is clearly understood by us that being born of the Spirit refers to spiritual birth "from above"-which is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who believe, Nicodemus could not imagine what Jesus was speaking of.

The Pharisees-of which Nicodemus belonged-did believe in the supernatural and looked forward to the coming kingdom and the resurrection of the saints. But they thought that physical lineage and the keeping of the Mosaic Law would guarantee them a place in that kingdom.

4: What caused Nicodemus to be confused about Jesus' statement about needing to be born again? (John 3:4)

Jesus chose to illustrate His teaching with the movement of the wind. There is a play on words here, because the Greek word "pneuma" can refer to either wind or spirit. In fact, it is translated both "wind" and "Spirit" in verse 8. While we can see and hear the effects of wind, we cannot tell where it is coming from or where it is going. Its work is invisible, and so it is with the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Some things cannot be fully explained or understood but need to be accepted anyway.

5: How did Jesus illustrate the truth of a spiritual birth? (John 3:7,8)

Uncertainty Answered-John 3:9-16

Jesus gently chided Nicodemus-and others who thought as he did-by expressing amazement that a teacher in Israel had such a lack of understanding of spiritual truth. Jesus was only preparing him for more teaching. It is a sad fact that many people have a great deal of religious training without possessing true spiritual understanding.

6: How did Jesus chide Nicodemus when he could not understand? (John 3: 9, 10)

Unbelief was the main problem in missing the truth. Nicodemus did not have a problem with being intellectually capable, but in his heart he did not yet believe what he heard. He was not alone, however, for Jesus used the plural pronoun in verse 11.

Some were teaching the truth, and many were not believing it. In fact, the "you" was probably indicative of the nation of Israel in general. Here was the Son of God Himself, on earth, teaching people how to get to heaven, and they were rejecting what He said!

7: What was lacking in Nicodemus that kept him from grasping the truth Jesus was presenting? (John 3:11,12)

Jesus often referred to Himself as the Son of man (see John 1:51). This name appears over 80 times in the Gospels and is used only by Jesus. He seems to have purposely adopted the title from Daniel 7:13; where Daniel saw a vision of the Ancient of Days sitting on a fiery throne, judging the evil empires of the world (vv. 9-12). As he watched he saw "one like the Son of man" approach the throne, and He was given an eternal dominion over everything in the universe in a kingdom that will never end (vv. 13-14).

8: What did Jesus call Himself? (John 3:13,14)

Jesus referred back to the days of Moses when an infestation of serpents was killing the Israelites (see Numbers 21). After the people confessed their sin of murmuring, God told Moses to build a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. Those who were bitten by the serpents would survive if they looked up at the bronze serpent.

In a very similar fashion, Jesus would be lifted up on a cross. The only way to be saved and to be certain of eternal life would be to believe in Him and His finished work there. That truth is the same today as it was for Nicodemus.

9: What Old Testament incident did Jesus use to explain salvation? (John 3:14, 15)

Eternal life is a spiritual life of fellowship with God. Jesus clearly stated that if anyone believes in Him, that person will not perish but will have eternal life. The concept of believing is mentioned several times in verses 12 through 18 alone, thus stressing the importance of belief in Christ.

Nicodemus eventually overcame his uncertainty. He later questioned the other rulers who were condemning Jesus (see John 7:50,51), and he helped bury Him after His crucifixion (19:39).

10: What truth would enable Nicodemus to overcome his uncertainty? (John 3:15,16)

CONCLUSION

We overcome our doubts by turning to Jesus. He died for us so that we can experience eternal life when we trust in Him. We are not told in the Gospel accounts about any specific decision that Nicodemus made that day, but the indications are that he eventually became a believer (see John 7:50,51; 19:39-42).

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Biblical knowledge alone is not evidence of true salvation (John 3:1,2).
2. Being born again is the only thing that can assure a person of eternal life (v. 3).
3. The kingdom of God is entered only through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4-8).
4. Teachers of God's Word must not miss its essentials and thus condemn themselves (vv. 9-10).
5. Knowledge of the truth is a progressive thing; the basics must be learned and obeyed first (vv. 11-12).
6. As the only bridge to the Father, Jesus alone can give eternal life (vv. 13-16).

PRAYER

Father, thank You for Your great love that sent Jesus to die for our sins. Thank You that we can experience a new birth so that no matter how bad our sins have been we can find forgiveness and new life through the power

of Your Holy Spirit. But, Father, our thankfulness is not enough. Help us to take the message of transformed hearts to others! In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER