

THE ANSWER

John 3:9-21

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Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (Jn. 3:9-10).

It is sometimes said that there is no such thing as a bad question. The Gospels show that this is not completely true, since Jesus was frequently approached with false questions intended to accuse or entrap him. But when it comes to honest questions, asked with a sincere desire for truth, Jesus always gave an honest answer. An example is the question asked by Nicodemus in John 3:9. Jesus had confronted this Pharisee with his need to be born again. Nicodemus was puzzled and asked, "How can these things be?" His question must have been sincere, because Jesus answered with some of the most beloved and instructive statements ever heard.

MANKIND'S IGNORANCE OF DIVINE TRUTH

Nicodemus came to Jesus talking about what he knew. "We know that you are a teacher come from God," he began (Jn. 3:2). But Jesus cut him off, saying that "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). Nicodemus really did not know, and he immediately displayed his ignorance: "How can a man be born when he is old?" he inquired (Jn. 3:4). Jesus clarified this by explaining that he meant a spiritual and not a physical rebirth.

This led to Nicodemus' second question: "How can these things be?" This shows that he did not grasp Jesus' point, which was that no amount of questions would lead Nicodemus into truth until he was brought to spiritual life. Before he could receive answers, Nicodemus

needed to experience what Jesus was talking about. Jesus therefore said, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (Jn. 3:10-12).

The problem Nicodemus faced is the problem facing all of mankind: our ignorance of divine and heavenly things. This needs to be emphasized today, when man is more arrogantly deceived than ever about our ability to learn and know things. If we are going to progress in spiritual truth, Jesus says, we must first confess that on our own we are ignorant of God and of godly things, that what makes sense to us about spiritual things is normally wrong, and that apart from God’s gracious intervention we can only persist in ignorance and folly.

Jesus presents two reasons why mankind is ignorant of divine truth. The first is that we have no access to the necessary information: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen” (Jn. 3:11). Jesus’ use of “we” is probably a response to Nicodemus’ statement in verse 2, “we know,” and no doubt refers to the his fellow members of the Trinity, a rather more influential group than Nicodemus’. Jesus is saying, “You and your associates know about things you see in your world. What I and my associates know is based on what we have seen in heaven.” He elaborates, “No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (Jn. 3:13). His point is that unless you have been to heaven, as he has, you have no way of knowing heavenly things on your own.

It is not that nothing can be known of God in this world. David wrote in Psalm 8 about looking up at the stars at night and seeing a display of God’s majesty. But there are many vital matters about which man simply cannot know by our own study or investigation – such as What does God require? How can one who has sinned be forgiven? What does the future hold for us? No matter how brilliant someone is or how much effort he applies, man simply cannot find an answer. This is why the whole history of philosophy is one of confusion and despair. Man lacks the information to answer the great questions

about God and eternity. Job asked, “Can you find out the deep things of God?” He answered, No! “It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?” (Job. 11:7-8).

What man therefore needs is a Word from God. We need God to teach us. This is what the Bible provides: revelation from God. Not one of the biblical authors says, “Now here are some interesting things I have been thinking about.” Not one says, “I have some ideas I want to share with you.” They all say, “The Lord said to me...” “This is the Word of the Lord.” The Bible is revelation from God through human authors; Peter explained, “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20). The Bible is just what we need to know about divine things and the way to salvation.

That is the first of Nicodemus’ and mankind’s problems – our lack of information – the solution to which is God’s teaching in the Bible. Nicodemus, of course, had the Bible. This is why Jesus asks how a teacher of Israel can be so ignorant. But there is a second problem, namely, that fallen mankind is not able to receive and therefore to understand God’s teaching. We will find this throughout John’s Gospel as men and women constantly misunderstand what Jesus says. Jesus offered the woman by the well a gift of “living water,” and she thought he was talking about plumbing. Jesus fed the five thousand, then taught, “I am the bread of life.” They asked how people could eat his flesh. They had his teaching but not the ability to grasp it.

The same was true of Nicodemus when it came to Jesus’ teaching on the new birth. “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (Jn. 3:10), Jesus asked. This shows that the Scriptures are not enough without the regenerating work of the Spirit. Even with the Bible, we don’t understand it until the Spirit enables us to. Nicodemus is like so many brilliant and learned scholars today who know vast amount of information about the Bible but cannot grasp its truth. Arthur Pink rightly warns, “The fact that a preacher has graduated with honors from some theological center is no proof that he is a man taught of the Holy Spirit. No dependence can be

placed on human learning.”¹ The reason is that no one can understand the Bible – clear as it is – without the Spirit’s ministry.

The problem is not that the Bible is unclear or inherently difficult to understand. The problem is that, Jesus said, “you do not receive our testimony” (Jn. 3:11). This is why unregenerate people cannot understand God’s Word: not because it is unclear but because it is unacceptable to them. Being told that he needed to be born again offended Nicodemus’ pride and cut against everything he had always believed. If that is true of earthly things, Jesus says in verse 12 – and by “earthly things” he seems to refer to things that have earthly analogies, such as the new birth, which can be understood in terms of natural childbirth – how much more is it true of heavenly things, which are not so easily illustrated? Because of sin, people’s hearts are hardened against the message of God’s Word, and that is why they cannot grasp its truth (see Eph. 4:18).

I read an interview with the singer Bono, of the rock band U2, that bore this out. Most interviewers hang on the words of rock stars and heap praise on all their thoughts. This journalist asked Bono if he agreed that religion is the cause of most appalling problems. Bono answered that it depends on the religion. He divided them between “Grace and Karma.” Karma is the idea that what comes around goes around, that we ultimately end up getting what we deserve. In one form or another, this is what every religion apart from Christianity teaches. “I’d be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge,” Bono said. “It doesn’t excuse my mistakes, but I’m holding out for Grace. I’m holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross... It’s not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven.” That was a clear and humble presentation of the Christian gospel, from the lips of one of the most popular people on the planet. So did the journalist praise Bono’s message? Hardly. Even a rock star is rejected when he presents God’s Word. The interviewer replied, “The Son of God who takes away the sins of the world... it’s close to lunacy, in my view.”²

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 124.

² Cited from Gene Edward Veith, “Salty dogma” in *WORLD*, accessed on-line, 8/4/2005.

If people do not like to hear about the cross, they certainly do not like to be told they are ignorant. But this teaching is essential, as Jesus' example shows. Until people realize that the only way to know the truth is through God's Word and until they are humbled so as to realize their need for the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, they can never escape the darkness and find the light of Christ.

THE SOURCE OF THE NEW BIRTH

Nicodemus may not have been born again and therefore may not have been able to understand. But his questions were sincere and, starting in verse 14, Jesus gave him a glorious answer.

How can one be born again? Jesus' first answer was that the new birth is possible because of the *sacrifice of the Son of Man*. "Son of Man" is the title Jesus used most frequently for himself. Most people think "Son of Man" is a reference to Jesus' humanity. But there is more to it than that. The term comes from a vision shown to Daniel, in which he was given the privilege of looking into heaven, much as John would be in writing the Book of Revelation. He saw "the Ancient of Days" – a reference to God the Father – taking his heavenly throne. Then he saw "with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom" (Dan. 7:12-14). What Daniel saw was the ascension of Jesus into heaven. "Son of Man," therefore, is a title for the glorious prince of heaven who humbled himself to come to the earth and take up a human form, and having accomplished the work of our salvation, ascended to heaven in a cloud of glory to receive his kingdom from the Father.

The new birth is made possible, Jesus says, by the sacrifice of the Son of Man. He makes this point with an example from the Scriptures: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (Jn. 3:14). This recalls an event from the time of Moses, recorded in Numbers 21. The Israelites spoke in rebellion against God, so he sent fiery serpents as punishment. The snakes bit the people and caused many to die (Num. 21:4-6). Realizing they had sinned, the people asked Moses to intercede with God. When Moses did, God gave him an instructive remedy. He told him to make a

snake of bronze and set it on a pole. When someone was bitten, they were to look to the bronze snake and they would live (Num. 21:8).

According to Jesus, this symbolized his own mission to remedy our need. Like the Israelites, we have sinned, and the punishment for sin is the curse of death. We too have been bitten by the serpent and received his deadly poison. But Jesus entered the world to be lifted up on the cross and bear the curse our sins deserve. The way of salvation, then, is not self-improvement or human striving. Salvation is by looking to the crucified Christ in faith to be forgiven and live.

This is the *cause* of the new birth: Christ lifted up for our salvation. There are two “musts” in John 3. Jesus says, “You *must* be born again” (Jn. 3:7). But he adds, “The Son of Man *must* be lifted up” (Jn. 3:14). These two “musts” go together. Christ died for our sins so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:15). This is the first answer to Nicodemus’ question: “How can these things be?” Because Jesus died for our sins, we can be born again. Through faith in the Son of Man lifted up, sinners gain eternal life.

Jesus’ next answer to Nicodemus comes in John 3:16. How can the new birth be? Having named *the sacrifice of God the Son* as the *cause* of the new birth, Jesus now gives *the love of God the Father* as the *reason* for the new birth: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

How simple, profound, and wonderful this is. The reason we can be born again, receiving eternal life, is that God loves the world. Ours is not a very good world. The Bible shows that as soon as sin entered the world, people began hating and fighting and killing one another. Everything in this world dies and multitudes suffer all the time. This is why philosophers despair, because there is no hope within this world. Some people blame God for tyranny and injustice and suffering, but the truth is that we are to blame. God himself has condemned the world because of its sin. In Noah’s time, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Mankind has not gotten better since then, and God still looks at the world and sees great and continual evil.

Some people think it is different when it comes to them. But I ask you, would you be willing for a transcript to be made of all your thoughts, from the time you got up this morning until now, and for that transcript to be read before the church? How much worse for our thoughts to be read before God! But they are. Psalm 139 says, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!... You discern my thoughts from afar... and are acquainted with all my ways” (v. 1-3).

So how can we be saved? How can we be born again? The answer is that the Father loves us and sent his Son to die for our sins. Some people think that God accepts us only because Jesus forces him to. But it was a loving Father who sent his Son.

God’s love is glorious. It is not like the love we know in this world. We love when something is lovely or lovable. James Dobson tells a story of his beautiful daughter as a little girl. Everyone loved her and showered her with affection. But then she had an accident and her face was swollen and ugly for several weeks. During that time people treated her with contempt. That is how our world loves! But God loves the unloved and the unlovely. God loves this world. People say, “Why doesn’t God do something about this world?” But he has! He has given the new birth so that we might enter eternal life, and he has done it by sending his own Son to die for us on the cross. “The measure of love is how much it gives,” says J. I. Packer, and “the measure of the love of God is the gift of His only Son to be made man, and to die for sins, and so to become the one mediator who can bring us to God. No wonder Paul speaks of God’s love as ‘great’ and passing knowledge! (Eph. 2:4).³

This means there is hope for this world and hope for you. You can have a new start. Why? Because God so loved. You can have a new life. How? By receiving God’s love through faith in Christ. Is there any message more wonderful or more urgent than this: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus’ first answer was the sacrifice of the Son, and his second was the love of the Father, so we would expect his third answer to deal with the Holy Spirit. That is right. Jesus said, “This is the judgment:

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1974), 114.

the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil... But whoever does what is true comes to the light” (Jn. 3:19-21). The light is shining. When Jesus was in the world, he was the light. Now the Holy Spirit shines the light of Christ through God’s Word.

This is the third answer to Nicodemus’ question, “How can these things be?” How is it that you can be born again? Because the light of Christ is shining today through *the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit*. This is the *means* of the new birth: this is how people are born again today. Peter wrote, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Christ’s light shines through the Word of God – as it is read, preached, and witnessed – and people are born again because the Holy Spirit shines that Word in their hearts. “The Spirit of truth... will guide you into all the truth,” Jesus said. “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16:13-14).

Nicodemus was right that Jesus’ teaching on the new birth was stupendous. How can this be, he asked? It was a very good question. Jesus answered with very good news. There is life through his death, there is love from the heart of God, there is light shining in God’s Word through the Holy Spirit. That is why we can be born again.

IN THE FACE OF CHRIST

We began by considering Nicodemus’ ignorance of divine things. He, like everyone else, needed a word from God.

According to John, the truest Word ever revealed from God is Jesus Christ himself. “In the beginning was the Word,” John began. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:1, 4).

Nicodemus had questions; Jesus not only has answers but is himself the Answer. To be born again is, as Paul said, to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Nicodemus asked, “How can these things be?” – “How can I be born again?” – and that was a most excellent question. Have you asked it? Nothing else in life matters compared to this! The answer is that the Son of Man was lifted up so that sinners who believe can have eternal

life; that the eternal Father has loved the world and so he sent his only Son, “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”; and that through God’s Word, the Holy Spirit shines still today, so we can turn from our evil deeds to walk in the light of Christ.

Those answers are true. But they mean nothing unless you come to Jesus himself. Ultimately, to be born again is to receive Jesus and give yourself to him in return. It is only those who believe on him who are born again into eternal life.

So what happened to Nicodemus? This encounter ends without any definite conclusion. But Nicodemus shows up again in chapter 7, speaking up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin. The Spirit was still working on his heart and he had not forgotten his night-time meeting. The day finally came when what Jesus foretold that night happened: the Son of Man was lifted up. And Nicodemus was there. He must have recalled Jesus’ words as he watched him dying on the cross: “The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14-15). Finally, then, Nicodemus saw the light. He saw not merely a teacher and not just a worker of miracles. He saw upon that cross the Savior of his soul; he saw his own sins washed clean by the precious blood of Christ and he was born again.

How do we know? We know because of what happened next. John says: “Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came” (Jn. 19:38-39). Finally, Nicodemus came out to Jesus in the light of day, publicly identifying himself with Christ, come what may. “So it is,” Jesus had said, “with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

The light is still shining through the preaching of God’s Word. Do not wait, like Nicodemus did, but look now upon the Son of Man lifted up and see the measure of God’s love for you. By seeing him as your Savior, you can know that through God’s Spirit you have been born again and you can start living a new life through faith in Jesus.