

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS' WORDS
(John 3:9-13)

9 *Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?*

10 *Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

11 *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.*

12 *If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*

13 *And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.*

Jesus has just engaged Nicodemus in a discussion about the necessity of regeneration. And he told Nicodemus,

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

John 3:3

What We Know About Nicodemus

- I. Nicodemus was one of those who believed but who were not saved.

Now Nicodemus appears to be one of those people in general at the end of chapter two who believed in the name of Jesus when he saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit

himself to Nicodemus because he knew what was in his heart.

It seems that Nicodemus had some kind of belief in Jesus, but it was not a saving belief. Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a miracle worker, but he did not believe Jesus was the Redeemer. Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a “teacher come from God,” but he did not believe that Jesus was God come to teach.” And there is a huge difference.

So, Nicodemus was one of those “unsaved believers.”

II. Nicodemus came to Jesus thinking he had authority.

It appears here that Nicodemus came to Jesus wrapped in the self-righteous robes of the Sandedrin. He was a member of that illustrious ruling group and it seems that he came as their representative. Perhaps he felt he was condescending to some degree to come out and speak to this young man named Jesus. Why, maybe even Jesus should have been somewhat intimidated to speak with Nicodemus, Nicodemus being the high ranking official and Jesus being no one of note. And I suspect Nicodemus thought of himself as superior to Jesus.

And I suspect Nicodemus thought that he might share some of his vast knowledge with Jesus and they might have a good, robust theological discussion and perhaps they might enlighten each other. But Jesus told him,

Verily, verily, I say unto thee.

John 3:3

Jesus basically told Nicodemus - There are two of us standing here, but only one of us has real authority. And that one is me. "I say unto you."

From the very outset of this discussion, Jesus assumes the role of the superior. It is Jesus who speaks with authority. It is Jesus who speaks with insight into spiritual things. It is Jesus who speaks with first-hand knowledge of heavenly things and it is Nicodemus who is in the dark.

It appears here that Nicodemus came to have a discussion about the kingdom. He probably was interested in eschatology. That is, when will the Messiah overthrow the Romans? When will this kingdom be established? When will "we" (Israel) begin to reap the benefits of the kingdom? And Jesus told Nicodemus a very startling thing. He told Nicodemus that he was not qualified to enter into the kingdom.

I am sure Nicodemus thought, "What? A Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a master in Israel is not qualified? Then who is qualified?" And Jesus said,

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

I have thought in the past and I think many people think of Nicodemus as being a man who came to Jesus with an open heart; a man who came honestly searching for the truth. Sure, he had his faults. He was afraid of peer pressure because he came under the cover of night. Nevertheless, he

came respectfully and he came ready and willing to receive instruction from Jesus.

But it seems from this passage that Nicodemus is not so open and receptive after all. He came respectfully at first. He called Jesus Rabbi and admitted that Jesus was a teacher come from God. But that is the last show of respect that we have from Nicodemus. From this point forward in the discussion, Nicodemus questions everything that Jesus says.

Jesus told Nicodemus that a man must be born again to see the kingdom of God and look at the response of Nicodemus.

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

John 3:4

Then, Jesus reiterated the necessity of the new birth using the figure of the wind to describe the operation of the Spirit and Nicodemus responded,

How can these things be?

John 3:9

Nicodemus sounds just like someone who does not have saving faith. Nicodemus is basically saying, "This is impossible." He is saying, "This is not good theology." He questions everything that Jesus says. This concept of the new birth flew in the face of the Jewish religious thought of the day. They trusted in the Law. They trusted in their blood line. They trusted in rituals. And Nicodemus is ready to have a debate on the subject with this young, 29 year-old

named Jesus. But he has no concept that he is standing in front of God himself. And Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be."

The problem here with Nicodemus is that he is unregenerate and he is an unbeliever.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

John 3:11

Now when Jesus says, "Ye, receive not our witness," this is not only a condemnation of Nicodemus, but also a condemnation of his Sanhedrin buddies because the "Ye" is a plural "Ye." And so, his condemnation of Nicodemus serves as a general condemnation of the religious leaders of the day and of the nation as a whole.

Now we are going to take a look at the answer of Jesus starting in verse nine and continuing down through verse twenty-one. And the first thing that Jesus reveals to Nicodemus is,

The Fault of Nicodemus in not knowing these things.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things.

John 3:10

Jesus is rather sharp with Nicodemus here, almost sarcastic. And he says, "You mean you are such a hot shot in Israel and you don't know this fundamental truth of salvation?"

Now how was it that Nicodemus should have known about the new birth? And the simple answer is that Nicodemus should have known by the Old Testament Scriptures.

This tells us that the concept of regeneration was not something new and distinct and different. It is not some new doctrine brought in with the coming of Christ. Rather, it was something quite old. It was clearly something Nicodemus should have known about.

Regeneration was always the gateway into the Kingdom. Regeneration was always the beginning and foundation of salvation. It has always been true that, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Every redeemed man in the Old Testament was saved by a new birth. He was saved by God changing him. He was saved by the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing over his soul and making him a new creature.

When we studied Galatians, we saw that many of the Jews thought they were saved pursuant to the Mosaic Law and they placed all their hope in the Law. But it was never the Law that saved anyone. The Law only works a curse on sinners. But which Covenant brought salvation? It was the Abrahamic Covenant that saved. And so, were all the children of the Mosaic Covenant saved? No. Were all the children of the Abrahamic Covenant saved? Yes.

And now we find another universal principle of salvation and that is, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Now, let me just show you that this concept of regeneration is referred to in the New Testament as a circumcision but it is a circumcision of the heart.

But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Romans 2:29

Was this concept of inward circumcision addressed in the Old Testament? Yes.

And the Lord thy God shall circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

Deuteronomy 30:6

And let me just say that human nature has always been the same. A man is born in sin. A man has a sinful nature. And in all ages, in order to see heaven, a man must be born again.

But if they ever knew it, the Jews had long forgotten that salvation was a matter of the heart. To them salvation was a matter of blood line. It was a matter of the first birth. To them it was being a Jew that saved. To them it was sacrificing animals and waving incense and Sabbath keeping. And by and large it was not a matter of the heart at all.

Now there was always a remnant of saved people in Israel. And these saved people had changed hearts. They really had faith. They were really broken over sin. They really loved God. They really set their hope on things above.

But the masses in the Old Testament were unregenerate. They had stony hearts. They were unbelieving and unrepentant. And their hearts remained in their natural condition.

Now you must remember that it was never God's intention to save every person in the physical nation of Israel. Was a man a saved man just because he was an Israelite? It is very clear that of those who came out of Egypt, most of them died in unbelief in the wilderness. They died with unregenerate hearts. In the time of Elijah, Elijah sat down under the tree and wept, thinking that he was the only one remaining in Israel who was true to God. And God told him there were yet 6,000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal. But this was a mere pittance of the total number of people in Israel.

In Jesus' day, most of the Jews were unbelieving. They rejected Him. They handed him over for crucifixion, preferring to set Barrabbas free.

God never regenerated all of Israel. He only regenerated his elect within Israel and that according to the Abrahamic Covenant and not the Mosaic. And the masses were yet stubborn and stiff-necked and their hearts were unchanged.

But God made a great promise in the Old Testament. And he promised that He was going to make a New Covenant. It was going to be a different covenant than the one that was made with the nation of Israel through Moses. That Old Covenant was called the Mosaic Covenant. It was called the Law. And we learned in Hebrews that this Old Covenant

was not effective to save. It was not a saving Covenant. It was not a regenerative Covenant. It was a condemning Covenant. It was a cursing Covenant. And not one Jew was ever saved pursuant to this Old Covenant, because every Jew was a sinner. And every Jew fell under the curse of the Mosaic Covenant.

But God said, I'm going to make a New Covenant and it's not going to be like the old one.

Now Jeremiah prophesied during the time of the Babylonian captivity. It was some 600 years before Jesus was born. And listen to his prophesy.

Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

And then, there is a similar prophesy in Ezekiel.

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Ezekiel 36:25-27

Now even though these words were spoken to Israel while they were in captivity, the ultimate fulfillment of these words (according to the book of Hebrews) is found in the New Testament when God calls his true Israel. Whereas he only saved a few of that typical Israel in the Old Testament, when it comes to his real people, he will save every one of them.

And the essential difference in the two covenants is the new birth. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

When we come to the New Testament, we find a great mystery revealed. And that mystery is that God has a new people. It is a people made up of Jews and Gentiles. The middle wall of partition is broken down and they are reconciled to God by the cross. And there is no more Jew or Gentile, but one body in Christ. And the distinctive of every one of these is that they are born again.

It is not like that Old typical Covenant, when they were not all saved. But under the terms of the New Covenant, they shall all know Him. It shall not be necessary to teach every man his neighbor and every

man his brother. Why not? Because they shall all be born again in the New Covenant.

In the new Israel, composed of people from all nations, every one shall have a new birth. God will put his laws in their inward parts by an act of regeneration. God will make all his people new.

And Jesus tells Nicodemus,

Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

John 3:10

Let me point out here that the original text says, "Art thou the master of Israel." Apparently, Nicodemus was not just a teacher, but the teacher. Perhaps he was the leading teacher. He was the most eminent of all the teachers. And so, you can understand a little better than the sarcasm when Jesus says, "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and knowest not these things?"

The Authority of Jesus in Telling Nicodemus These Things

- I. Jesus claims co-equality with the Father and Holy Spirit.

Notice in verse 11 that Jesus says, "We speak." Who did he mean to include when he said, "We.?" Some say that he meant to include his disciples. Remember that he has at least five disciples at this point: Andrew and John, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael.

But it seems that the disciples are not yet vested with authority to speak. They have only known Jesus for a few days at this point and they certainly are no experts on heavenly theology. And so when Jesus says, “We speak,” I doubt that he is talking about He and his disciples.

Some say that Jesus is including the prophets that have preceded him. And so, when he says, “We speak,” he is talking about Himself and those Old Testament prophets who spoke the Word of God. That certainly is a viable possibility.

However, it seems here that Jesus is claiming authority beyond that which has been given to other men. The prophets could only tell the people what God had said. But Jesus says, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee.”

But, not only does Jesus say, “I say unto thee,” he also says in verse 11, “We say unto thee.” And it seems that the best interpretation here is that when Jesus speaks it is the same as though the Father is speaking.

Jesus did not come speaking his own words, but he came speaking the Father’s words.

For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.

John 12:49

And so, we see that Jesus says “We speak,” in order to demonstrate the ultimate authority of his words.

This context is demonstrating that Jesus has ultimate authority to teach Nicodemus and to teach spiritual things. And he has this authority because He has first-hand knowledge of these things.

In many ways the Scriptures are telling us things that we could never know by personal investigation. We could never know about the new birth unless God told us.

The idea here is that Jesus is bringing news from heaven.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

John 3:13

This is a strange sounding verse to us because it talks of ascending into heaven. And on the face of it, you might think that Jesus first went up to heaven and then came down.

This phrase ascending to heaven was a colloquialism of the day. And it meant to gain access to heavenly knowledge. The idea is that heavenly knowledge and the knowledge of God is in heaven where God resides. And when it says no man has ascended there, it is saying no man has access to this knowledge. There is no man on the face of the earth that has personal, first-hand knowledge of heavenly things. That is, no one but Jesus.

Example: Now when you are in court, you are only qualified to tell the Judge what happened if

you personally witnessed it. You can't say, well, Mr. Jones told me so and so, or Aunt Susie said. You must be a first-hand witness.

And this is what Jesus is saying here. The best witness is a first-hand witness.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven.

So, no man has access to heavenly knowledge; no man has access to the knowledge of God except the one who came down from heaven.

Example: Now what if a small town somewhere in Alaska were completely covered up with lava after a volcano. And years later, we began to excavate. And as we dig around we find little clues as to what the town was like. And we say, "It appears that the school was over here, and it seems like they had a town square. And the streets ran such and such a way." But as we were digging around, a man that used to live there came up. And he said, "I can tell you everything about this town. I was born there and lived there all my life."

You see, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And he resided in heaven. It was his home town. And he lived there for all eternity. And he knew everything about it. He is the resident expert about heavenly things. And in the course of time, he came down from heaven.

Do you see how Jesus speaks with ultimate authority? If you want to know about heaven, then He is your man. If you want to know how to get to heaven, He's your man.

And so we see the great authority which Jesus had to tell Nicodemus of the things pertaining to Kingdom of God.

Note: We also see the dual nature of Christ here in verse 11. You will notice that in terms of his human nature, he came down from heaven and he was standing on the earth talking to Nicodemus. But look what Jesus says.

. . . even the Son of man which is in heaven.

Wow! Nicodemus' head must have been spinning by this time. Not only was he trying to comprehend the new birth, but he now was trying to grasp the dual nature of this man Jesus. I doubt they had any discussions of this depth and magnitude in the Sanhedrin.

Now let me comment on the difficult verse which is verse 12.

If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

John 3:12

Now the obvious question here is, "What are earthly things and what are heavenly things?"

Some people say that the earthly things that are discussed in this context are the physical birth (verse 4) and the wind (verse 8). However, the problem with that interpretation is that Nicodemus is said not to believe the earthly things. (verse 12) Now I suppose that Nicodemus clearly believed in the first birth and he believed in the wind. And so, I conclude that these cannot be the earthly things of which Jesus is speaking.

The earthly things that Jesus speaks about here is something that Nicodemus did not believe. Now the “earthly things” is something that Jesus had told Nicodemus about.

If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not . . .

John 3:12

So, the thing which Jesus has told him about is the new birth. And it appears that Nicodemus did not believe these things concerning the new birth, for he said, “How can these things be?”

And Jesus says, “If you don’t believe these earthly things, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things.”

Now in what sense then, would the new birth be an earthly thing? The new birth is an earthly thing in the sense that it takes place on the earth. It is something that happens in the course of time, to real people that you can see and touch, and you can see the effects of it in their lives. And so it can be called an earthly thing. Perhaps by an earthly thing, Jesus meant that it is a basic thing of redemption. It is the

ABC's. It is the fundamentals as opposed to the more profound and inscrutable and heavenly things pertaining to redemption.

Some think that the earthly things are things spoken in the Old Testament. We saw in the book of Hebrews that the old Jewish practices were characterized as earthly and shadowy things as opposed to the real substance of things in Christ.

And so, perhaps Jesus was telling Nicodemus that since he had not believed earthly things (the Old Testament revelation), he could not be expected to believe the more profound heavenly things which were to come.

Regardless of how we interpret these things, the underlying message is that "Ye must be born again." There is no salvation apart from a change of heart. Outward acts will not suffice. Only a change of heart will do. May we search our hearts for evidence of the new birth.