

## SESSION FOUR

### The Son of Man: *Finding Peace in a Troubled World (John 3:1-21)*

“The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.” ~ C. S. Lewis

#### I. Jesus Dialogues about God’s Love with Nicodemus (3:1-15)

3:1 . . . *a man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus* . . . The reference to “man” appears to link this scene with 2:25. Nicodemus will illustrate the fact that Jesus knows what was in the heart of men; and thus, Jesus does not openly reveal his identity even to Nicodemus (see 3:12).

Mentioned only in the Gospel of John (also 7:50; 19:39), Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin.

3:2 . . . *came to Jesus at night* . . . Scholars have proposed a variety of reasons why Nicodemus came at night. These views include: (1) to avoid the crowds, allowing for one-on-one interaction with Jesus; (2) to avoid being seen since he was a member of the Jewish ruling council (see 7:51-52; 12:42-42; 19:38); and (3) to keep with normal study habits. Jewish teachers often studied at night. Ultimately, the timing is significant in light of the light/darkness motif in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19:39; and 21:3). Nicodemus moves from the realm of unbelief, the darkness, to the domain of light.

Nicodemus’ recognition in the importance of the signs Jesus has performed echoes the crowd’s response in 2:23. Unfortunately, similar to the crowd, Nicodemus has missed the theological significance of these miracles.

3:3-4 . . . *born from above* . . . The Greek term, *ἀνωθεν*, is used five times in John (3:3, 7, 31; 19:11, 23). The term can either be translated “again” or “from above.” It would seem that the best rendering would be “from above.” Nicodemus seems to understand the term as “again.” Jesus’ response speaks of the spiritual rebirth through Jesus.

3:5 . . . *born of water and spirit* . . . Far from referring to two births, “born of water and of the spirit” refers to one. This interpretation complies with the grammatical construction and with the parallel statements (vv. 3, 5, 6b, 7). This dual role is seen in Ezekiel 36:25-27—both of cleansing with water and a new spirit (also, see Isaiah 44:3-5). Thus, Jesus is referring to the work of the Spirit—the one who simultaneously purifies and imparts God’s nature to men and women.

3:8 . . . *wind blows* . . . *so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*. Once again the physical illustrates the spiritual.

3:10 . . . *are you the teacher of Israel?* Note the irony in this statement. As a teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures, Nicodemus should have understood Jesus’ words. This great

teacher of Israel should have also comprehended a connection with Proverbs 30:4-5 (also, see Isaiah 44 and Ezekiel 37):

*Who has ascended into heaven, and descended (John 3:13)? Who has gathered the wind (John 3:5, 8) in his fists? Who has wrapped the waters (John 3:5) in his garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, or his Son's name (John 3:15-16)? Surely you know! Every word of God is tested, he is a shield to those who put their trust in him (John 3:15-16).*

3:13 Jesus seems to imply that no one from earth has ever gone up to heaven and come down again. The Son, who has come down from heaven, is the only one who has been in heaven (see Philippians 2:5-11).

3:14 Jesus refers to Moses lifting up a bronze snake on a pole in Numbers 21:8-9. One commentator aptly writes: "This passage clarifies the prerequisite for birth from above, not mere faith in Christ in an abstract sense, nor faith *despite* the crucifixion, but faith in the crucified Jesus. Not only is Jesus greater than Moses because Jesus parallels the Torah or Wisdom which Moses merely mediated . . . he is greater than Moses because he parallels the instrument of salvation which Moses merely lifted up (3:14)." (Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:563).

## II. Jesus Tells of God's Love for the World (3:16-21)

3:16 . . . *world* . . . The context of this verse limits the meaning of this word to the entire world (also, see 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; and 1 John 2:2). John expresses God's love as qualitative rather than quantitative: "This is *how* God loved the world."

. . . *gave his only begotten son* . . . Typical Johannine style, the giving up carries a double meaning. Ultimately, the Father gave His Son up on the cross.—the ultimate expression of the Father's love for the world.

3:17-21 On one level human choice is emphasized in John's Gospel—a choice each person must make. However, on another level, divine sovereignty is still stressed ("no one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him" ~ 6:33). Condemnation is not future but present. While judgment does carry a present reality (9:39), it rests primarily in the future—an act Jesus himself will perform (12:48).

### III. Intersect

God's love for us (The following material was adapted from D. A. Carson's *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, pages 82-84):

- A. God's sovereign love protects us and cares for us when mere justice could rightly destroy us (see Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 36:5-7; Psalm 63:1-4; Lamentations 3:22-24; Romans 8:35-39; and 1 John 4:9-10).
  
- B. God's love toward us enables us to see the sheer glory and power of Christ's death on our behalf. God has effectively secured the salvation of His people. We love, because He first loved us.
  
- C. God continues to love us—not only with the incredible love that ensures we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us (Romans 8), but with the love of a father for his children.
  
- D. God's yearning, inviting, commanding love, supremely displayed at the cross, "compels us, because we are convinced that Christ died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). We are indebted to God; we owe others the Gospel.

#### The Love of God

By Frederick M. Lehman

The love of God is greater far, Than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
 It goes beyond the highest star, And reaches to the lowest hell;  
 The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;  
 His erring child He reconciled, And pardoned from his sin.

#### *Refrain*

O love of God, how rich and pure!  
 How measureless and strong!  
 It shall forevermore endure—  
 The saints' and angels' song!