

Sunday October 20, 2019
Lesson 8: Bridging the Chasm
Scripture: John 3: 1-8

Context:

The next focus on God jumps ahead to the Gospel of John. In this lesson, we return to looking at Jesus, the Son of the Triune God. The passage used for today's lesson is the text preceding the verse John 3:16, which has become a beloved verse of millions of Christians around the globe.

Early in the Gospel of John, the reader discovers that Jesus is the Son of God. In the beginning chapters, there are accounts of Jesus's divinity through signs and the words of Jesus himself. Yet to give credibility to this good news, it is important to have an account where not all believe in the Son of God and how Jesus responds to those individuals.¹ Thus, we meet Nicodemus, the first "skeptic" or "seeker" of the Christian religion.

Not much is known about Nicodemus. The text reveals that he is a Pharisee and is one of the leaders within this group. Some speculate he is from Jerusalem, but the text does not clarify his origins or any other pieces of his background.² All that is known is that Nicodemus comes to seek Jesus at night without any records of anyone else being present.

In their time together, Jesus and Nicodemus engage in a theological conversation. Being a Pharisee and someone who is faithful to the teachings of scripture, Nicodemus has questions about God and what it means to have new life. It was common for these conversations to occur for people to wrestle with interpretations of scripture, much like we do today.

The topic at hand is the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that no one can see it without being born from above. Nicodemus then asks how people can be born again and come through the mother's womb a second time. Jesus then responds that humans are born of the water and the Spirit with the flesh being only the flesh. Those born of the Spirit will experience life in different ways and have an opportunity to see the Kingdom of God. There is a new perspective that comes from God and not necessarily by the choice of the human.

The dialogue in the text continues with Jesus going back and forth as Nicodemus tries to understand what Jesus means in his explanation. In this text, we learn about the nature of the Triune God and how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are in tandem in one another. We learn about new birth and how the Kingdom of God is different than the other kingdoms of this world. We learn what it means to be born anew and what that means for our walk with Christ.

¹ Gerald Sloyan, "John," *John: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

Application

This passage can be a difficult one to understand, particularly with all the terms being thrown out including “born of the water and the Spirit,” and different translations with the phrase “born anew.” In some Christian circles, this text is used to support the perspective that we must be “born again,” having some type of religious experience where we claim Christ as our Lord and Savior. The experience leads to a decision that includes baptism as admission into the church. The focus is on the “born anew” aspect as well as Jesus’s words of being born of the “water and the Spirit.” Like Nicodemus, there is redemption offered in a second birth of sorts.

For some people, they may need that validation or wakeup experience and that is a fine perspective to claim and own. Yet I think it is also important in this text to acknowledge that God is God and when we are “born anew,” it is an ongoing process. The Kingdom of God does not necessarily need us to have that experience. As Jesus describes the Spirit, there is movement that may not always include us making the choices or decisions. It is what I always remind people when they ask questions about having a religious experience where they question their baptism or even their confirmation. God started a good work in you even before those moments and will continue to do so in whatever valleys you find yourself.

Another way to consider being “born anew” in the Kingdom of God is to not be afraid to give yourself a spiritual thermometer check up from time to time. Like Nicodemus, we all have questions about our spiritual journey and that is a wonderful thing. Are you going through with the different spiritual disciplines in your life? That involves looking at your worship attendance, your private meditation on the scriptures, your prayer life, and if you have plugged into a Bible study or a small group where you can be held accountable in these different disciplines.

All of us may be like Nicodemus and be overwhelmed with the different questions we have about God. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is scripture sometimes contradictory? What is the purpose of prayer? How do I pray? How do I know if I am growing in my faith? How do I reconcile my faith with the practices and behaviors of the world? And those are just a few!

I think though that these questions are important and remind us of the importance of God meeting us wherever we are on our journey. Whenever we read this passage of Jesus and Nicodemus, we are struck by the fact that Jesus answers Nicodemus’s questions and there is conversation. There is no shame and there is no dismissal of Nicodemus for offering a different perspective. Instead, Jesus engages with him and as he does, Nicodemus is born anew in a different way.

I hope that on your journey with Christ today, you are finding those places and the people with whom you can experience spiritual renewal. As you do so, it might be important to evaluate what is working for you and what are other ways that you can grow in your faith. Join a small group. Start a small group. Research a different way to pray and try it. Figure out your learning style and then find a way to nourish some form of growth. If you’re an auditory learner, listen to a podcast on the scriptures. If you’re a kinesthetic learner, engage in something where you can use your hands. The Spirit can lead us in different ways to be “born anew” and constantly be refreshed by the one who

gives us new life.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009