



The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 3:13–17

December 1, 2013

Introduction

Over the last few centuries, advances in medicine, science, technology, and labor have allowed for extended life spans, improved living conditions, and easier and safer work conditions. Devastating plagues have also been minimized or entirely eliminated. But despite these advances, problems still remain. War, poverty, disease, environmental concerns, and new problems created by the technology designed to fix old problems. But despite the advances in sustaining life, mankind still has a very basic, fundamental problem — one which makes all the others pale in comparison, and one which remains forever beyond our ability to solve. This is the problem of sin. Ever since the time that Adam and Eve fell in the garden; this insurmountable problem has affected all people, without exception (Rom 3:10). All human beings are guilty sinners (Rom 5:8) before a holy God, who will justly condemn them to eternal punishment in hell (Rev 20:11–15) for violating His holy law (Gal 3:10). Ever since the time of the Fall, Satan has promoted the lie that people can come to God on their own terms. This is the lie embraced by all who follow the broad way that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13) and it lies at the heart of every false religion. But the Bible is crystal clear that people cannot save themselves. Their condition is utterly hopeless, humanly speaking (Matt 19:25–26). There is no amount of religious ritual, good works, or self-reformation that can solve the problem of spiritual death (Eph 2:8–9). Only the life-giving transformation wrought by God in regeneration can impart spiritual life to the spiritually dead. This was the shocking truth that confronted the Pharisee Nicodemus.

The Interview with Nicodemus (vv. 1–21)

Even though the Lord’s teaching on the new birth was solidly grounded in the New Testament, Nicodemus was incredulous. He struggled to accept that his religious efforts were useless and needed to be abandoned altogether if he hoped to enter God’s kingdom. Last time we saw how Jesus had been working to correct a number of

misunderstandings on Nicodemus's part. We also noted in verse 12 the reason Nicodemus could not understand heavenly things (relating to future events, the coming kingdom, etc.) is because he had not understood the more basic earthly things (the new birth, which occurs on earth). These two concepts correspond precisely to the two parts of Jesus' statement in verse 3:

| | | |
|----------------|---|-----------------|
| born again | = | earthly things |
| kingdom of God | = | heavenly things |

The kingdom of God is a very broad topic that is discussed at length in the Old Testament and the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). Simply put, this is a reference to the future Millennial Kingdom in which Christ will rule as King over the nation of Israel and the rest of the world. Its coming was foretold by the Old Testament prophets and forms somewhat of a continuation or extension of the Old Testament theocratic nation of Israel over which God ruled as its King. This kingdom is heavenly in origin, but will be on earth and last 1,000 years. It will be inaugurated by Christ's Second Coming, which follows a seven year period of tribulation.

Some theologians have suggested that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke in verse 3 is a *spiritual* kingdom that one enters immediately upon being saved. As a proof-text, they will point to Luke 17:21 which some versions poorly translate to say "the kingdom of God is within you" (KJV, NKJV, NIV '84). This gives the impression that God has a spiritual kingdom within the hearts of believers. However, most modern translations do a better job with this by translating "the kingdom of God is among you" or "...in your midst." The kingdom was in their midst because the King was standing among them. Notice also the context in that passage — Jesus is addressing the Pharisees (v. 20). There is no possible way He would be suggesting that these wicked Pharisees were saved, having a spiritual kingdom of God within them. Now it is true that the Spirit of God takes up residence within the heart of a true believer at the moment of conversion (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Tim 1:14). But this is a very different thing than God's kingdom program. Every reference to the kingdom of God in the Old Testament speaks of an earthly, Israel-centered kingdom that will be ushered in by the Messiah. When John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries, they began to announce the impending coming of that kingdom because the King of that kingdom was present. Because no explanation was given, the people

naturally and rightly understood them to be talking about the kingdom foretold by the Old Testament prophets. Unfortunately for them, most of the first century Jews rejected Jesus as their King and ultimately crucified Him. But He will one day return in force to claim the kingdom which is rightfully His (Rev 19:11–21).

There are many things related to the kingdom that Jesus could have discussed with Nicodemus. But he had a much more pressing need. He needed to first understand the new birth. Without the new birth, Nicodemus would never even see or enter the kingdom (cf. vv. 3, 5).

The New Birth is Experienced Through Faith in Christ (vv. 13–21)

At the root of Nicodemus’s problems was a heart of unbelief. He did not commit himself to Jesus or believe in His teachings. This kind of belief or trust is something the Bible calls faith. It is not a mere intellectual agreement with some truths or facts. Instead, it is a willful acknowledgement that you are a sinner and only Jesus can save you. Faith is fully trusting in Jesus to wash away your sins and give you eternal life. This is what Nicodemus needed to believe in order to be “born from above” (vv. 3, 5).

The Answer for Unbelief (vv. 13–17)

Verse 13 continues Jesus’ thought about heaven. Only Jesus — the Son of Man has ascended into heaven. This verse should not be taken to mean that Jesus had made a previous ascension into heaven before His resurrection. The word “except” (NIV, ESV, HCSB) is taken from the Greek words *ei mē* (εἰ μὴ) and has the idea of “but” or “but only.” In other words, Jesus is saying that no one has ever gone into heaven so as to be able to speak authoritatively about heavenly things, but only the Son of Man, who came from heaven, is equipped to speak of heavenly things. The author of Hebrews begins his book in this way:

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...” ~Heb 1:1–2a

We are totally dependent upon the Son of Man for this revelation. The KJV and NKJV add the phrase “who is in heaven” to the end of this verse. There is good evidence to suggest that this is part of the original text, and as such forms a powerful argument for the omnipresence of the Son of God.

Beginning in verse 14, Jesus appeals to an Old Testament illustration to make His point. This further emphasizes Jesus’ claim (v. 10) that there was no excuse for Nicodemus — an expert in the Scriptures — to be ignorant of the way of salvation. He had already explained the new birth using symbols from Ezekiel — water and spirit. Now He turns to a narrative passage from Numbers 21:4–9, which gives the account of a plague of poisonous snakes which came among the Israelites in the wilderness and caused many deaths. There is a parallel between the lifting up of the bronze snake and Jesus. When the verb for “lift up” (*hupsoō*, ὑψόω) is used in John’s gospel (8:28; 12:32, 34), it combines the ideas of Jesus being physically lifted up and exalted. The Son of God would be lifted up on the cross and returned to heaven exalted. We also shouldn’t miss the other parallels in these texts.

| | <u>“Look”</u> | <u>Observed Object</u> | <u>Result</u> |
|---------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Numbers | with the eyes | bronze serpent | live physically |
| John | in faith/belief | crucified & exalted Jesus | live eternally |

Just as the Israelites who looked at the bronze serpent lived physically, so also those who look to the crucified and exalted Son of God will live spiritually and eternally.

Verse 15 should actually be translated “that whoever believes should not perish but have eternal life in Him.” The phrase “in Him” modifies “eternal life,” not “believes.” Only in Christ can we find eternal life, because He alone is God’s way of salvation. The reason God will lift up His Son to provide eternal life is given in verse 16 — the love of God. This verse is undoubtedly the most familiar and beloved verse in all of Scripture. And yet its very familiarity can cause the profound truth it contains to be overlooked. We looked at the terms “only begotten” back in 1:14, 18. As with those verses, the same meaning applies here. The two English words come from the single Greek word *monogenēs* (μονογενής), meaning “special” or “unique.” God’s motive for giving His unique Son is that He loved the evil, sinful world of fallen humanity. All of humanity was utterly lost, completely sinful, and unable to save itself by any ceremony or effort. Thus there was nothing in mankind that attracted God’s love. Instead, He simply determined to do so out of His sovereign will. God’s plan of salvation was carried out in spite of any worth or merit on our part. The term “world” (*kosmos*, κόσμος) is a general term for all of humanity. But this is not teaching that all of humanity will be saved. Verses 16–18 make it clear that not all people

will be saved, and many will be condemned. Verse 16 is teaching that for all the world there is only one Savior (cf. 1 John 2:2), but only those who are regenerated by His Spirit and believe in His gospel will receive salvation and eternal life through Him. God's purpose in sending Christ into the world to die on a cross was not one of judgment (v. 17). If God wanted to judge all of mankind, He could easily have done so from heaven. But the fact that Christ came while we were still sinners is a demonstration of God's love toward us (Rom 5:8). Paul uses the term *world* in 2 Corinthians in a similar way:

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” ~2 Corinthians 5:19

The world has no other reconciler than Jesus Christ. This does not mean all will be reconciled, as 2 Corinthians 5:20 makes clear. That is why Christians are called as ambassadors — to plead with others that they be reconciled to Christ. There are no words that could fully express the magnitude of God's saving gift to the world. Paul called this gift “indescribable” (2 Cor 9:15).

Conclusion

The result of God's gift is that whoever believes in Him experiences the new birth (vv. 3, 5), has eternal life (vv. 15, 16), and is saved (v. 17). The alternative is to perish (cf. 10:28), lose one's life (12:25), and be doomed to destruction (17:12). There is no third option. To perish is to receive God's final and eternal judgment. Even though God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, nevertheless God will judge those who reject His Son (v. 18). What is your relationship to Christ? Have you believed on Him for eternal life? Have you experienced the new birth? Or will you stand condemned at the final judgment? Trust in Jesus today and He will surely save you!

~AWB