

Bewildering Jesus

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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John 3:1–21 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Do you ever find Jesus a bit bewildering? You are not alone. We shouldn't even be surprised at this, for the truth of Christ falls hard on a dark world.

Who is Jesus? This simple question is what sets Christianity apart from all the other religions and worldviews on the planet. Many Christians, particularly those who grew up placing their faith in Jesus, have trouble understanding how anyone can't “get it.” How could they not embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior? Yet, the truth is that the Jesus movement began with a small group of disciples and grew slowly, though inexorably, across the Roman Empire. Rodney Stark, a prominent historian and sociologist, estimates that there were less than 10,000 Christians in the Roman Empire in 100AD.¹

The truth about Jesus is that most of his fellow Jews rejected him, choosing not to embrace the claims made by Jesus or made about him by his followers. This series will be about those whose encounter with Jesus left them confused, angry, or dismissive. The series is entitled *The Jesus They Thought They Knew*.²

We begin with a man named Nicodemus who finds Jesus to be, in a word, bewildering.

¹From Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*. He suggests that a growth rate of 3.4% per year is the most reasonable estimate given what we know about population trends at the time and the sociology of conversion.

² This title is a play on Philip Yancey's book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, in which he describes the process by which deeper and broader study of Jesus and his times led Yancey to meet and embrace the untamed Jesus as he really was.

In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee³ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus' world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry⁴ for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. "Who is he?" the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn't just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night -- so no one would know.⁵

There, Nicodemus sat in front of Jesus looking only ever more confused. Born a second time? Born from above? Blowing wind and the kingdom of God? What is Jesus talking about? Crazy talk. I know the Scriptures inside and out, Nicodemus thought to himself. None of this is making any sense! Jesus had even taken him to task, wondering how Nicodemus could possibly be a teacher of the people if he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Bewilderment and insults – that pretty much summed it up. Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived.

Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, "You must be born from above"? How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? Should he even try?

Born of water and Spirit

The problem is that Jesus tried to lead Nicodemus into a facet of God's truth that has been perplexing to people for these last two thousand years. Few topics will raise as many eyebrows and create as much as confusion as discussions of the Holy Spirit, and his work in each of us and in this world. It is a story that is grounded in the Old Testament; nonetheless, most of us need a guide to help our understanding. Nicodemus ought to be such a guide, for he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. But no, he is as confused as anyone.

So, Jesus pushed hard on the man, for not understanding when he should (v. 10).

Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being "born of water and Spirit"⁶ he is calling on common OT imagery of cleansing repentance and God's life-giving spirit

³The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God's Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God's kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

⁴The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnal house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

⁵Obviously, I'm using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to "night" in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness as he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

⁶ Jesus isn't speaking to Nicodemus about Christian baptism, as is often supposed. How could Nicodemus be expected to understand a practice that didn't even exist yet? Further, entry into the kingdom is not given or denied on the basis of baptism. I better illustrate what I mean. Imagine an adult who has never been baptized and comes to faith in Christ, yet is killed on his way to his own baptism. Or the infant who dies before her baptism. Would we really imagine that Jesus would turn away either of these? Baptism is a gift from God intended for all the people of God, but it is not some sort of magic ticket which must be punched or all is lost.

being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25-27).⁷ He should grasp that God's promises of a day when God would dwell in his people's hearts are happening in and through Jesus.

Jesus wants Nicodemus to grasp that being part of God's people and their entry into God's kingdom, had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision,

"Born from above" or "Born again"

V. 3 in today's passage gave us the phrase "born-again Christian." The Greek word here, *anōthen*, can mean either "from above" or "again." Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean "again" for he asks how someone could revisit Mom's womb and be born a second time. Yet, Jesus insists to Nicodemus that this new beginning, this regeneration is the work of the Spirit, who comes from above.¹

Though John's other uses of *anōthen* in the gospel all clearly mean "from above," here he almost certainly has in mind a double meaning, as John does with some other words when there is a point to be made. Christians are both "born again" and "born from above."

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are "born of God" and have "become children of God" (John 1:12-13). This generation of new life is a complete, total, radical transformation of our whole being. "Born again" is an apt and dramatic analogy.

But this new birth is also a birth "from above." This is God's work, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, God's Spirit, dwells in us. Paul writes, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul isn't talking about going to your fitness club or staying on your diet. "Body" (*soma* in the Greek) refers to the total, whole person.

The second birth is a birth from God, "from above." And it is a birth given to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who trust him completely. The phrase "born-again Christian" is redundant. All Christians have been born again and from above.

1. In the cosmology of the ancients, the gods lived "up there," in the heavens. From there, the gods could look down on the lives of the humans. The ancient Jews believed that we could speak of God as being "up there," literally, God the Most High. Thus, when Jesus returns to the Father (Acts 1), he ascends to the "above." Likewise, the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples on Pentecost, coming from "above."

the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are "born of water and the Spirit," when we are cleansed and given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, regeneration, re-creation.

Granted, we often don't act like the born-from-above people of God, a bit like a child who isn't acting his age. But the Spirit works with each of us so that as we mature in Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

Bewildering?

Nicodemus may have left Jesus bewildered but that was not the end of the story. Later, Nicodemus defended Jesus before his fellow Pharisees and even brought a wealth of myrrh and aloes for Jesus' dead body after it is taken down from the cross.

I suppose this is the journey for some believers still. At first, this Jesus just seems so foreign, even bewildering. The vocabulary is strange to us. The challenges too direct and threatening. Yet, we are drawn to the man and slowly discover peace and goodness and truth in this man that are *almost* too good to be true, as if it must be some sort of manipulation to trick us or blind us. But still, Jesus is there. Beckoning us to hear him and to see him as he is. The incarnation of God Almighty. Lord. Savior. The Alpha and the Omega. Nicodemus eventually came to see clearly and to hear well. Will we?

⁷See D.A. Carson's highly regarded commentary on John in the Pillar NT Commentary series.

The Scripture passages we've memorized so far

This week is a good time for some review. Here are the Scripture passages we've memorized so far:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV))

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 NRSV)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NRSV)

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:18b NRSV)

Memory Verse of the Week

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16 NRSV

This is certainly one of the most famous verses in the Bible and one of the most beloved among believers. It is Jesus' one sentence explanation of what God's rescue plan was all about and the extent that God was willing to go to make it happen. It is out of love that God sent us his Son. It is out of love that Jesus went to the cross. It is out of love that God desires eternal life for us all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you find most bewildering about Jesus? About God? About church? About our beliefs? What do you think people new to Jesus find most bewildering? What can we do to help them see Jesus more clearly?
2. What is your reaction to the phrase "born-again Christian?" What do you think it means? How would you react to someone calling you a born-again Christian? Do you understand why I say it is redundant? Why do you think it is so popular if it is redundant? How do you think "born-again Christian" came to mean something different from just a "regular" Christian? You might even talk about other popular redundancies, such as "committed Christian" and "Bible-believing Christian." What are some others? Why do we use them?
3. The focus of this study is not on baptism, but I bet that when you read about being "born of water and the Spirit," you thought of baptism. Though this is probably not what Jesus means, it is an understandable connection. What do you think baptism accomplishes? How would you convey to someone that all Christians are to be baptized, but that it is not a requirement for entry into the kingdom (verse 5)? Do my illustrations in the page two footnote make sense to you? Why or why not?
4. In the closing paragraphs of the study, I try to make the point that being "born from above," as is the case for all Christians, is not about adding something we lack or improving us or fixing us. It isn't even a complete makeover. Maybe a do-over is closer to the idea. As Paul puts it, we are "new creations – everything old has passed away, everything has become new." How might we make this new birth seem more concrete to us, more real? How do we proceed with making our thoughts, words, and actions conform to the born-from-above us? How do we avoid letting this slip into some variant of another self-help scheme? What are some practices we could engage in that would help us become the people into whom God has already made us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, John 2:1-12 Jesus goes to a wedding and changes water into wine.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 2:13-22 Jesus turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple courtyards.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ezekiel 36:25-27 God promises to renew his people by water and the Spirit.</p>	<p>Thursday, John 7:45-52 Nicodemus defends Jesus at a meeting of Pharisees in Jerusalem.</p>
<p>Friday, John 19:38-42 Nicodemus honors Jesus after his crucifixion.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

