

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 14

Why are you untying the colt?

Luke 19:29-44

April 9, 2017

PALM SUNDAY

Communion: Marilyn Currier

Care Calling: The Webb's

Host: Betty Aytes

Saturday 4/8 Clean Up: Robert Domingos

- 1 ♪ **How Majestic [DH 2238]**
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Luke 19:29-44 (NASB-U)

When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, [30] saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. [31] "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.' " [32] So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. [33] As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" [34] They said, "The Lord has need of it." [35] They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. [36] As He was

going, they were spreading their coats on the road. [37] As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, [38] shouting: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" [39] Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." [40] But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" [41] When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, [42] saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. [43] "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, [44] and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

Do you remember yesterday?

Just yesterday, Jesus was in Bethany with His friends.

Today He is on the road again with a date with destiny.

On this Palm Sunday morning, I want us to go along with Jesus on his date with destiny.

I would like for us to see today something beneath the surface about Luke's marvelous presentation of the Palm Sunday events.

And, you can see something differently, can you not?

What I hope today is that we have the spiritual insight to see deeper into the relevance of Palm Sunday.

But Luke does give us clues, does he not?

We recall that Luke is a doctor of medicine, and thus trained in scientific observation.

He is skilled in collecting data, and making sense of tiny pieces of information.

And being a doctor, he is interested in how people respond to various stimuli.

What does Luke tell us about...

What Jesus did?

What Jesus said?

What Jesus saw?

What Jesus felt?

I. What did Jesus do?

Luke in his chapter 19 tells us something of what took place, and something of what Jesus does.

He records the marvelous story of a man who is short in stature, that had to climb a Sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of the great Rabbi.

Luke 19:3 (NASB)

³ Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature.

What was Zaccheus' height?

The Federal Centers for Disease Control said that average height for Americans has stabilized to about 5 feet 9 inches for men and 5 feet 4 inches for women.

Excavations of 17th century English cemeteries show that the average height of an English man was 5' 6" and women were 5' 1".

The average height of Egyptian mummies are about 5' 5 1/2".

In the smallest pygmy tribe known today, the average height of the men is 4'9" and the women 4'6".

Dwarfism is a condition of short stature.

It is defined by the advocacy group Little People of America (LPA) as an adult height of 4 feet 10 inches or under.

The Oaxacan people that live here in Santa Maria are called "the little people."

But, there can be a problem with being very tall.

Wilt Chamberlain may have won fame and adoration for his height and skill on the court, but he had to have special fixtures put in his house to accommodate his size, and was known to say:

"Nobody roots for Goliath."

As a chief tax-collector at Jericho, Zacchaeus was an example of Jesus' personal, earthly mission to bring salvation to the lost. Tax collectors were despised as traitors (working for the Roman Empire, not for their Jewish community), and as being corrupt. Because the lucrative production and export of balsam was centered in Jericho, his position would have carried both importance and wealth.

And what does Jesus do about this pygmy sized man?

Luke 19:5 (NASB-U)

When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house."

And what does Jesus do?

He stays at the house of man considered a sinner.

I bet he stays at your house also.

Why?

Luke 19:9-10 (NASB-U)

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. [10] "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

And, while apparently still at the house of Zaccheus, he preaches a strange sermon about a nobleman who has to leave on a business trip, and he gives his foremen money to invest in his name.

The foreman who was chewed out was the one who did nothing but wrap the money in a cloth because he was afraid.

And Jesus concludes the parable with a cryptic statement that leaves us scratching our heads:

Luke 19:26-27 (NASB-U)

"I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. [27] "But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence."

And Jesus demonstrates His ability to have supernatural knowledge when circumstances required it.

Here we are told there are two towns, **Bethphage**, 'the House of Figs' and **Bethany**, 'the House of Affliction'.

He sent two of his disciples on to the "**House of Figs**," from the "**House of Affliction**," and that this meaning relates to the use of the village as a center for caring for the sick and aiding the destitute and pilgrims to Jerusalem.

Luke 19:30-31 (NASB-U)

"Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. [31] "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.' "

And Jesus demonstrates His divine sovereignty over the young colt by having it offer no resistance to the first man who had ridden it.

And Luke tells us that Jesus tossed out of the temple those who were selling things, and exchanging money.

Jesus says:

Luke 19:46 (NASB-U)

"It is written, 'And My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a robbers' den."

So Jesus does demonstrates His supernatural abilities.

What did Jesus say?

What did Jesus see?

What did Jesus feel?

II. What Did Jesus see?

Doctor Luke is interested in Jesus' observations of the Great City, and Doctor Luke is interested in the impact on Jesus.

Luke tells us

Luke 19:41 (NASB-U)

When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it,

Way back when I used to do counseling, and people would begin crying in a session, I would ask them "What are your tears telling us?"

During WWII, Winston Churchill was in conference with officials in Downing Street when an air raid occurred. They heard a bomb drop and explode nearby. It had clearly fallen in one of the poorer sections of London. At once, Churchill ordered that he be taken to the scene. When they arrived, the sight was heartbreaking...desolation everywhere...homes destroyed, people injured and killed. The people crowded around Churchill's car and began to shout "Churchill's here, Churchill's here." Overcome, Churchill openly wept. Then a voice from the crowd was heard: "He's crying. He really cares about us."

What did Jesus see that cause the tears?

He saw a man named Zaccheus who had a deep need to be in a living relationship with our Father God.

And He looked around and saw the crowds who wanted to be entertained with His miracles.

And He saw disciples who wanted to be more deeply involved in His ministry, and who were willing to loan Him a donkey and it's colt that ancient prophecy might be fulfilled.

Zech. 9:9 (NASB-U)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Are you more like Zaccheus, desperately wanting a deeper relationship with God?

Or, are you more like the crowd who want to be entertained?

Or, perhaps you are more like the disciples who want to be more intimately involved with His ministry.

Here is Doctor Luke, being equipped by the Holy Spirit, that we might be drawn into this Palm Sunday date with destiny.

Luke brings us to that scene with Jesus overlooking the Holy City, and being overcome with tears.

What are Jesus' tears telling us?

What is Luke attempting to have us experience through the Master?

Bro. J.W. McGarvey went to the Holy Land in 1879, and his research was printed in 1881 in "*The Lands of the Bible.*"

He says that from the Mt. of Olives to the Eastern Gate is about a half mile.

Down below the Mt. of Olives is the Kidron Valley, which according to visitors is still a beautiful place to wander around in, and walk among its shaded trees, and smell the fresh gardens. And from the Mt. of Olives to the Eastern Gate was a Bridge built by Herod's work forces, and which allowed pilgrims and visitors to walk above the Kidron, and walk right into the city.

Jesus would be looking at that Eastern Gate, which Christians call the Gate Beautiful, and He could see the place called The Skull, or Golgotha, or Calvary.

Is He weeping for His own destiny?
Or, is He weeping for the human beings He created, and for whom He will be sacrificing His life?

Jesus says

Luke 19:42-44 (NASB-U)

"If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. [43] "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, [44] and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

Just as the Gospel writers arranged their written record of these Palm Sunday events in a way to give us deeper insights, so does the Holy Spirit bend the rules of time so we are looking both backwards and forwards.

Jesus is staying every evening in the house of Simon the leper, and is keeping company with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Just days before Jesus had wept over the death of His friend, Lazarus, and now He is enjoying Lazarus company.

Lazarus, a good man that you couldn't keep down.

But if they had their way, the Chief Priests would do their part, for John tells us

John 12:10 (NASBu)

the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also, [11] because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

And

John 11:35 (NASB-U)

Jesus wept.

Today in what was once known as Bethphage and Bethany, you hear through open windows the recitation of the Koran.

But the Muslim residents are proud of their 2,000 year old tradition.

Their city now bears in Arabic the name of Lazarus.

And their school aged kids dress in blue jeans, and listen to their pop singers.

They sing a song they learn in school that says

*"The sound of the stone
The blood of usurpers
The hearts are bleeding in fury
They carry stones in their small hands
And challenge the aggressors."*

The song, written and sung by Egyptian pop artist Walid Tawfig is about a 12 year old boy who the world witnessed dying in the arms of his father during the one of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

And **Jesus wept.**

Over the centuries, The Holy City has been besieged and destroyed several times.

Over the centuries the Holy City has been the scene of carnage hard for us to understand.

An 11th century Crusader described their attack on the Muslims in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount this way

"Men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God."

And **Jesus wept.**

When Solomon built his temple, he built on the site which the temporary place of worship build by David had stood.

Tradition said that the new had to be built according to the pattern of the old.

When the Babylonians had destroyed the temple in 586 BC, Nehemiah had made partial restoration of the temple. But it still remained a destroyed reminder of Israel's refusal to follow the path of righteousness laid out by a loving God.

But when Jesus sat on the back of that colt, overlooking the Holy City, Jerusalem was in a renaissance.

Herod the Great reigned as "*King of the Jews*," from 37 BC to 4 BC, and one of his most remarkable building events was the rebuilding the temple.

Herod was an extraordinary person.

Married 10 times, a serious drinker, probably alcoholic, a half-Jew who was half-trusted by the citizenry.

Herod understood that he had to keep a tight lid on the explosive Jews, or Roman military might would once again destroy the Holy City.

He killed thousands of Jerusalemites to maintain control; but also built palaces, entire cities, and an artificial harbor in Caesarea Maritima that lasted 600 years.

And he wanted to build a temple even grander than that of Solomon.

He leveled 35 acres from a mountain top in Jerusalem, which had included Solomon's temple.

This became known as Temple Mount.

In a water starved region he built picturesque water gardens, a amphitheater and a hippodrome.

But he build according to Greko-Roman construction standards, and not according to the ancient tradition.

He built a temple even grander than Solomon's, but to the anguish of the Jews, he didn't build according to the pattern of God's temple.

When Moses supervised the building of that tabernacle, it was crucial for him to make all things according to the pattern which came from the perfect mind of God.

Exodus 25:9 (NASB)

9 "According to all that I am going to show you, *as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it.*

Even the detailed furnishings had to be made exactly like the pattern the Lord had shown Moses.

Various features of the old Jewish system were designed by God to foreshadow gospel blessings; these institutions served as the copies or shadows of the heavenly things, so Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle.

{Heb. 8:5; Acts 7:44; Ex. 25:9,40; 26:30; Num. 8:4.}

But, Herod deviated from the pattern given by God.

He built Jerusalem so it was the most beautiful city between Alexander in Egypt and Damascus in Syria.

But the temple became the center for one riot after another.
Traditionalist rioted because the temple departed from the ancient pattern.
Political fanatics rioted because their Holy Land was occupied by foreigners.

The situation in Judea was so tense that the Romans sent their most decorated legion, the 10th, to keep control.
The Romans had 3000 legionaries stationed in the northwest part of Temple Mount to quell any uprising.

But Herod's temple, as its predecessors, faced the east.
And, its burnished bronze gates reflected the morning sun, so it was blinding to look towards Jerusalem from the east.

And looking across from Bethany and Bethphage, looking across the Kidron valley, a half mile away was the East Gate.

The pilgrims would cross over the valley on the bridge built by Herod, and enter the East Gate.

And it was across that bridge, riding on a colt, accompanied by thousands of cheering pilgrims, some going in front yelling

Matthew 21:9 (NASB-U)

**"Hosanna to the Son of David;
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest!"**

Mark 11:9-10 (NASB-U)

**"Hosanna!
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;
[10] Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David;
Hosanna in the highest!"**

And Luke says

Luke 19:41-44 (NASB-U)

When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, [42] saying, "If you had known in this day, even you,

the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. [43] "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, [44] and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

And, that is what happened.

When the Romans finally got fed up with the incessant rioting, in 70 AD, General Titus with his Tenth Legion leveled the Temple Mount.

The bridge across the Kidron Valley to the East Gate disappeared. The old East Gate which Jesus observed was destroyed.

But 400 years later, the Muslims build a new East Gate above the old.

And there is an ancient prophecy about that.

Ezekiel says

Ez. 43:1-3 (GW)

Then the man took me to the east gate. 2 I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the sound of rushing water, and the earth was shining because of his glory. 3 This vision was like the one I saw when he came to destroy Jerusalem and like the one I saw by the Chebar River. I immediately bowed down.

Ez. 46:1-3 (NASBu)

`Thus says the Lord GOD, "The gate of the inner court facing east shall be shut the six working days; but it shall be opened on the sabbath day and opened on the day of the new moon. 2 "The prince shall enter by way of the porch of the gate from outside and stand by the post of the gate. Then the priests shall provide his burnt offering and his peace offerings, and he shall worship at the threshold of the gate and then go

out; but the gate shall not be shut until the evening. 3 "The people of the land shall also worship at the doorway of that gate before the LORD on the sabbaths and on the new moons.

The ancient Jews believed the long awaited Messiah would come from the east, and enter the East Gate.

The Ottoman Turks conquered Jerusalem and occupied it in 1516, and **Suleiman the Magnificent**, who ruled the Turkish empire from 1520 to 1566, had the East Gate sealed because the Muslims knew of this prophecy that the coming Messiah would arrive through the East Gate.

Then they built a Muslim cemetery in front of the gate because no Jew would cross the city of the dead.

And Jesus, looking down through the centuries sees the one's He loved and died for attempting to keep Him from The Holy City.

Because we of the church of the Living God are the New Jerusalem, and he looks at us and sees that we are holding Him at arms length.

And Jesus wept.

Palm Sunday!

Palm Sunday is a day unlike any other.

Luke's gift to us has been to invite us to see what Jesus saw from there above the city.

And by God's grace we are drawn to look deeper into this day.

And, as you look again at those tears in the eyes of Jesus, you come to grips with the knowledge that yet again, the Son of God is on the move, marching across the waves of the future, looking for the heads, the hearts, the hands of those who seek Him.

Palm Sunday...

The day which Luke says Jesus wept.

The day which Jesus cleansed the temple.

The day which Jesus speaks about faithful servants.

The day which Jesus speaks to a sinner and says,

Luke 19:9-10 (NASB-U)

"Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. [10] "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Prayer and Invitation

Lesson Development Mark S. Krause (1-4), Walter D. Zorn (5), Jon Weatherly (6-9), Lloyd M. Pelfrey (10-13) Verbal Illustrations Vicki Edwards (1, 2), James B. North (3, 4), Laura McKillip Wood (5, 6), Charles R. Boatman (7-13) Involvement Learning Emily Henry (1, 2), Jonathan Underwood (3, 4), Nicholas A. Tomeo (5), Cheryl Frey (6-9), Ronald G. Davis (10-13) What Do You Think? Jonathan Underwood (1-4), Walter D. Zorn (5), Jon Weatherly (6-9), Gene Andrews (10-13)

April 9 Lesson 6 Saving Love

Devotional Reading: [Titus 3:1-7](#)

Background Scripture: [John 3:1-21](#)

JOHN 3:1-16

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” **3** Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” **4** “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” **5** Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” **9** “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. **10** “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son

of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” **16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

KEY VERSE

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.—[John 3:16](#)

Introduction

A. A Mystery and a Love Story

One popular story type is the mystery. A foul deed is committed, clues are gathered, suspects are interviewed, and finally the perpetrator is revealed. Some readers prefer love stories. Two people meet, discover an unlikely attraction, and eventually overcome differences to form a lasting bond of love.

Today’s lesson reflects on the good news of Jesus in a way that combines the mystery with the love story. The mystery is about how God acted to make his world right—a mystery revealed. The love story is about why God acted in such a self-sacrificial way on behalf of rebellious humans.

B. Lesson Background

Our text comes from one of the most beloved books in the Bible, the Gospel of John. In providing narratives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it is rather different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three (known as *the synoptic Gospels*) are notable for their similarities. John’s Gospel, written later, assumes the reader knows the main points of the storyline found in the other Gospels as it provides different, additional material.

John likes to narrate Jesus’ private, one-on-one conversations, including those he had with religious teachers. Today’s text also belongs in this category: Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people.

The Pharisees were a leading party of Jewish thought and practice in the New Testament period. They advocated careful adherence to the Law of Moses and to the traditions they had developed about

the law. Their aim was to build a fence around the law. That is, they taught that if people followed their traditions (and thereby stayed outside the fence), then they wouldn't even come close to breaking God's law.

Though the Pharisees promoted a difficult form of Jewish observance, they were quite popular in Jesus' time and beyond. Their strictness was a channel for the zeal many felt for the God of Israel.

I. Nicodemus Meets Jesus

([John 3:1-3](#))

A. Encounter at Night ([vv. 1, 2](#))

1. Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

John introduces an individual with whom Jesus will have a most significant conversation. As *a Pharisee*, Nicodemus takes a strict view of the boundaries of God's people (see the Lesson Background). The fact that he is *a member of the Jewish ruling council* means that he is part of the Sanhedrin. This council had come into being in the centuries between the Old and New Testaments. The high priest, who presides over the temple, appoints the 70 members of this council to assist him.

2a He came to Jesus at night

To come *to Jesus at night* is to come in secret. Is Nicodemus afraid to be seen with the controversial Jesus? Later John will contrast light and darkness as symbols of good and evil ([John 3:19-21](#)). Where does Nicodemus stand presently?

NIGHTTIME ADVENTURES

When I was in college, my younger sister decided it was time for me to learn to drive a car with a manual transmission (a "stick shift," if you remember those!). She made this decision at 2:00 a.m. I was home on spring break, so there was no time like the present.

We crept outside and pushed the car down the driveway so the sound of the engine starting would not awaken our mother. We jumped in the car at the proper moment, then spent the next hour driving the back roads nearby. We laughed at my mistakes and had fun together, and I learned how to drive a stick shift that night. Our

sneakiness aside, nighttime provided an ideal opportunity to learn before putting my new skill into practice in the heavier traffic of daylight hours.

How to Say It

Nicodemus *Nick-uh-dee-mus*.

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez*.

rabbi *rab-eye*.

Sanhedrin *San-huh-drun* or *San-heed-run*.

synoptic *suh-nawp-tik*.

Something similar seems to have happened with Nicodemus. Perhaps he came to Jesus at night so fellow council members wouldn't see them together. Whether or not that was the motive, it was an ideal time to learn, with no press of crowds to distract. Whatever he learned in private he could mull over later without being asked to take an immediate *agree* or *disagree* position. Disciples who had accompanied Jesus openly for three years went into hiding after his death ([John 20:19](#)). But two other men, members of the council ([Mark 15:43](#)), did the opposite; Nicodemus was one of those two ([John 19:38-42](#)). People absorb information in different ways. We must give them a chance to do so.—L. M. W.

2b and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Nicodemus speaks highly of Jesus, since *Rabbi* is a title of great respect (compare [John 1:38](#)). Nicodemus affirms that Jesus' miraculous signs demonstrate decisively that God is with him. Jesus' miracles are polarizing: they cause some to believe in his divine identity ([John 2:11](#), [23](#); [7:31](#); [9:16b](#)) while not being persuasive to others ([9:16a](#); [11:47](#); [12:37](#)). The only right response to these signs is faith in Jesus as the Son of God sent to give life ([John 20:30, 31](#)).

What Do You Think?

How should we respond when people speak well of Jesus but don't acknowledge his full authority?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what we say and don't say
Regarding what we do and don't do

B. Truth About Rebirth (v. 3)

3. Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Jesus' response takes the form of a blunt and authoritative statement of what is required to *see the kingdom of God*—and Nicodemus hasn't even asked a question yet! At least, one is not recorded.

The succinct phrase *the kingdom of God* serves as a summary of the promises God gave to Israel about his making the world right again. Truth, justice, mercy, life—these are the blessings of God's kingdom, the ultimate fulfillment of his loving purpose for humanity.

As a religious teacher, Nicodemus understands that when God establishes his kingdom, his people will experience its blessings. Nicodemus further understands that belonging to God's people means being a faithful Jew, one who was born into the nation and who honors the Law of Moses.

But Jesus challenges all that. Birth into the 12 tribes of Israel does not confer automatic membership in the kingdom of God. To be a subject of this kingdom requires birth of a different kind.

In relaying Jesus' response, the Gospel writer uses a word in the Greek language that has two possible meanings for the context at hand: “again” and “from above.” (Most Bibles have a footnote on this.) Which does Jesus mean? If “again,” he means an experience separate from and after physical birth. If “from above,” he means an action that God performs. Because both suit the context well, we may see a play on words here, as Jesus implies both meanings.

II. Nicodemus Engages Jesus

([John 3:4-8](#))

A. Birth, Age, Womb (v. 4)

4. “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!”

Jesus' answer perplexes Nicodemus. Understanding "born again" in a physical sense, his questions serve to protest that a second such birth is impossible. As long as Nicodemus holds to his concept of what is required to be in God's kingdom, he will fail to understand Jesus.

B. Water, Wind, Spirit ([vv. 5-8](#))

5. Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."

Jesus continues to challenge the conventional understanding of membership in God's people. Like the previous challenge, this one compares entry into *the kingdom of God* with birth. This birth is *of water and the Spirit*. In the Greek text of John's Gospel, this phrase is constructed to show that the two items belong together, forming one idea. So *water* is not one kind of birth and *Spirit* another, but the two comprise a single event.

Interpretations vary, and one popular proposal is that *water* refers to baptism. This is natural to think, since the New Testament associates water baptism, in the context of faith in Christ, with becoming part of God's people and receiving the Spirit ([Acts 2:38](#); [22:16](#); [Romans 6:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 12:13](#); [Galatians 3:27](#); [Colossians 2:11-14](#); [Titus 3:5](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#)). But if Christian baptism is what is meant, then [John 3:10](#) (below) would have Jesus criticizing Nicodemus for not understanding something that will not come into being until the Day of Pentecost!

Jesus' point seems to be broader, with a good possibility that he is drawing on the Old Testament's depictions of water and Spirit in relation to each other. In that regard, most important for the case at hand is [Ezekiel 36:25-27](#). There "water" indicates cleansing from impurity, while "new spirit" and "my spirit" point to transformed hearts.

The previous chapter gives us a brief glimpse at the connection between water and ceremonial purification in first-century Judaism ([John 2:6, 7](#)). Taken in tandem with *the Spirit*, the reference is to cleansing performed by God. Therefore Nicodemus can *enter the kingdom of God* only if God cleanses him of what he cannot cleanse himself: the guilt of his sin. This is the very thing that

Christian baptism will depict when it is instituted a few years after this conversation. So these two interpretations are not far apart.

6. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Jesus emphasizes that God alone can accomplish the transformation. *Spirit* contrasts with *flesh* as the immortal God contrasts with mortal humanity. To receive God’s blessing requires his action. Any status Nicodemus holds means nothing.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to trust less in our own capabilities and more in the Holy Spirit’s?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As we respond to blessings ([Job 1:1-5](#); etc.)

As we respond to hardships ([Job 1:21](#); etc.)

7. “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

Repeating the thought of [verse 3](#), the translation “again” can be “from above,” with Jesus perhaps intending both. Either way, Jesus reaffirms that God’s action is what gives a person the blessings of his kingdom.

8. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Continuing to challenge Nicodemus’s lack of understanding, Jesus makes a comparison between God’s *Spirit* and *the wind*. That comparison is especially pointed because in Greek the same word can mean either *wind* or *Spirit*. Wind, Jesus says, blows as it wants, without influence of humans and without their understanding.

God’s Spirit is the same: the Holy Spirit does his work regardless of the approval or disapproval of religious leaders like Nicodemus.

That man’s familiarity with Israel’s Scriptures should help Nicodemus understand this point. God’s actions often defy human expectation. He called aged, childless Abraham to be the father of a great nation. He called enslaved Israel to overcome mighty Egypt. He worked through unlikely prophets and kings against the

most powerful human empires. Now in Jesus, God is doing the same.

THE UNCONTROLLABLE WIND

Wind is a constant in Nebraska. No matter the season or the weather, the wind blows. Author Willa Cather described grassland under its influence: “There was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.”

Wind becomes dangerous during thunderstorms. Every year we hear of tornadoes destroying homes and even entire towns in our part of the country. I grew up in Indiana, so I was no stranger to tornado drills in school. At the signal, we would all hurry to the safest spot, crouch down, and wait for the “all clear” signal.

In time, however, I began to disregard the danger, since so many of the alarms proved false. But longtime Nebraska residents, many having had firsthand experience with damaging winds, take the warnings seriously.

Those who have experienced tornadic fury personally know all too well how true it is that “the wind blows wherever it pleases.” We have no control over its course or its power. So it is with God’s Spirit. We cannot control him. We cannot dictate our plans to him. Our response, rather, is that of respect and submission.—L. M. W.

III. Jesus Critiques Nicodemus

([John 3:9-16](#))

A. Contrast ([vv. 9-13](#))

9. “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

Nicodemus remains perplexed. Jesus’ words have defied the core of what Nicodemus believes about his relationship with God.

10. “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

Jesus’ reply now turns from the general to the personal. Nicodemus is a recognized authority, with the word translated *teacher* the same as the one also translated “teacher” in [John 3:2](#). He believes that his position within God’s people is secure. Yet he fails to understand Jesus’ teaching.

If Nicodemus takes these words to heart, he will begin to discount his high position and surrender his cherished ideas (compare

[Philippians 3:4-11](#)). Otherwise, he will have to deny Jesus' mighty deeds ([John 3:2](#)) and compelling teaching.

What Do You Think?

What should we contemplate before presuming to become teachers of the Bible?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what is to be taught ([Titus 2:1-6](#), [9](#), [10](#); [Hebrews 5:11-6:3](#); etc.)

Regarding personal responsibility ([Titus 2:7, 8](#); [James 3:1](#); etc.)

Regarding one's own teachability ([Romans 2:21](#); [Titus 2:12](#); etc.)

Regarding spiritual giftedness and ability ([Romans 12:7](#); [2 Timothy 2:24](#); etc.)

Other

11. “Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

A person can give *testimony* (not just opinion) about what the person knows as a witness. Jesus affirms that he and others are in such a position. Given that Nicodemus has already acknowledged the godly origin of Jesus' teaching and miracles ([John 3:2](#)), will he be inconsistent in daring to reject such witnesses?

12, 13. “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Jesus knows *of heavenly things* because he is *from heaven* (compare [John 8:23](#)). But Nicodemus has had no such experience. So in speaking with him, Jesus has been using language and comparisons that are accessible to that man, given his earthbound experiences: birth, water, and wind.

Yet Nicodemus does not understand. So Jesus calls on another Old Testament connection in referring to himself as *the Son of Man*. In [Daniel 7:13, 14](#), “one like a son of man” receives authority from

God to rule the earth, defeating the beastly empires. Jesus claims that role. He asserts that because God has authorized him and sent him down from heaven, he speaks with unique knowledge and authority. The fulfillment of all God's promises is tied to Jesus (compare [Proverbs 30:4](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we better show our need for the knowledge and help of one "from heaven"?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Before undertaking a project or ministry

During a difficult situation

After failing at something

B. Comparison ([vv. 14, 15](#))

14. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

Jesus makes another connection with Israel's Scriptures. When God sent "venomous snakes" among the unfaithful Israelites *in the wilderness*, he instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Those who looked at *the snake* lived, their action being one of faith in God's mercy ([Numbers 21:4-9](#)). Jesus, *the Son of Man*, will also *be lifted up*, but on a cross ([John 8:28](#); [12:32-34](#)). Unlike the bronze snake, Jesus is worthy of worship (compare [2 Kings 18:4](#)).

15. "that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Like Moses' lifting of the bronze snake for the stricken Israelites, Jesus' crucifixion will mean life. This will be life that is no longer plagued by the ancient serpent, the deceiver of humanity ([Genesis 3:1-15](#)). Daniel's triumphant "son of man" defeats the kingdoms of evil and establishes the reign of God (again, [Daniel 7:13, 14](#)).

We wonder how Nicodemus reacts to Jesus' declarations. The text does not say, but Jesus' words must seem to be an unsolvable riddle. The earth-shattering events of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension will be needed to make the meaning plain. For now, Nicodemus is challenged to set aside his own claim to authority and listen submissively to the one from Heaven.

C. Compassion ([v. 16](#))

16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus' discourse reaches its climax in what is probably the most famous verse of the New Testament. Having challenged Nicodemus with a new way of understanding God's plan, Jesus now focuses on the self-giving love of God for all humanity. Such love transcends the kind that focuses on the attractiveness of the object or on one's connection to the object. This is more than the love of friendship, family, or romance. God loves humanity despite its unloveliness, failure, and open rebellion. *The world* that God loves is the world that refuses to listen to him ([John 1:10, 11](#)). For God's love to be effective, he must take the initiative—and he does.

God reaches out by sending *his one and only Son*. God had challenged Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his unique son of promise ([Genesis 22:2](#)), and by faith Abraham had declared that God would provide the sacrifice ([22:8](#)). Now God provides that sacrifice to the world.

This gift, like all God's gifts, must be received by faith ([Acts 10:43](#); [1 Corinthians 12:9](#); [Ephesians 2:8](#); etc.). To believe in the one whom God sends is to affirm (1) that God has truly sent him, (2) that God truly saves through him, and (3) that one trusts persistently in what God has done through him. The promised blessing has two sides: escaping the eternal death we deserve and gaining the *eternal life* we do not deserve. Eternal life is life in the era of God's fulfilled promise. It is life restored to his ideal. It is life characterized by faith in the self-giving God. It is life in which believers in Jesus reflect God's self-giving love in their own self-giving service for one another ([John 13:12-17, 34, 35](#)).

What Do You Think?

What steps can our church take to express God's saving love to our community?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of evaluating ministry resources

In terms of evaluating need
In terms of prayer
Other

Conclusion

A. The Mystery of God's Love

For Nicodemus, the story of God's love was a mystery for two reasons: it challenged his view of his own importance, and it was still unfolding before his eyes. For us the story may be a mystery as well. Though we might not think ourselves important, we still hold stubbornly to our independence. Though we know the story's climax, it may be so familiar to us that we find it commonplace. Perhaps we need to reclaim the mysterious wonder of the Bible's storyline as it is summarized in today's text. The God who created us has acted time and again to undo the guilt and power of sin. Jesus predicted that such efforts would reach their climax in himself as the one who went on to be lifted up on the cross. The one and only Son of God surrendered to death so that undeserving humans would not have to.

You and I are those undeserving humans, the ones whom God so loved that he gave Jesus over to death ([Romans 3:23-26](#)). By his resurrection he claimed authority that belongs to God alone. By his authority alone can people enter God's promised kingdom, the full realization of his gracious love.

B. Prayer

God of unfathomable love, we thank you for your unspeakable gift in Christ! We commit ourselves again to trust in him and him alone, now and forever. We pray this in his name. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

Only Christianity has a [John 3:16](#).

Standard Lesson Commentary 2016-2017 (NIV)