

BaptistWay Bible Series for December 10: Have a little talk with Jesus

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- John 3:1-16

By David Wilkinson

Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth

Faith and conversation go together.

In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, we are invited to overhear a one-on-one conversation between two religious teachers. One is a formally educated teacher and recognized leader within the religious establishment of his day. The other is a “grassroots” leader, an outsider, an untrained teacher and itinerate preacher with a motley band of followers.

This nighttime question-and-answer session serves the Gospel writer’s purpose of piling up the evidence for his testimony to the truth—that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. This evidence, in turn, is intended to lead us to a deeper understanding of the person and mission of Jesus and ultimately to call us to a decision.



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Layers of meaning

This famous conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus comes in condensed form. We are let in on part of the discussion, but we must navigate the course of the conversation without the advantage of seeing the men's faces, hearing the inflections in their voices, or observing their gestures.

Nicodemus comes at night, hinting at a conversation shrouded in mystery. The way the conversation unfolds fits John's method of depicting faith, or belief in Jesus, at different stages. People who encounter Jesus respond in different ways and with varying degrees of understanding and commitment.

Those who follow him begin a spiritual as well as a literal journey as they come to understand Jesus more clearly and begin to recognize more deeply what discipleship requires. Nicodemus likely represents many Jews in Jerusalem who had responded to Jesus' signs with partial but inadequate faith (John 2:23-25).

The conversation begins with Nicodemus' affirmation that Jesus is a "teacher who has come from God" whose actions clearly indicate the work of God (v. 2). In his response (v. 3), Jesus immediately moves the focus from signs and wonders to the kingdom of God, implying a true spiritual leader would recognize that the reign of God—the kingdom of God—was what

Jesus was all about.

In the phrase, “born from above,” Jesus uses the first of several double entendres, a favorite literary device in the Gospel of John. Through a string of double meanings in this encounter, the reader sees the emergence of “two widely divergent views of life in the kingdom,” according to theologian Fred Craddock.

Nicodemus, like the woman at the well we will encounter in next week’s lesson, responds to Jesus at a naïve and literal level. Misinterpreting Jesus’ use of the Greek word *anÿthen*, which can mean both “again” and “above,” Nicodemus asks, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4).

Jesus’ response that one must be “born of water and Spirit” reinforces his message: The kingdom of God is a spiritual realm and to enter that realm is a gift of the Spirit.

Here Jesus employs a second play on words through his use of the Greek word, *pneuma*, which can mean “word” or “spirit” (v. 8). The world of the Spirit, he says, is like the wind. It is a deep mystery that defies easy explanation. You don’t know where it’s coming from or where it’s going. And even the best religious training won’t automatically guarantee understanding (v. 10).

Clarifying the mission

Verses 11-13 return to theme of the prologue: Jesus as the preexisting Word of God has come into the world in human form. To further clarify his identity and purpose, Jesus compares himself to the bronze serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness. The people who had been bitten by fiery serpents and were sick nearly to death could be healed by lifting their eyes

to look at the serpent (Numbers 21:4-9).

Jesus, as God-in-human-form, has come to be “lifted up” and in obedience to God to die on a cross (v. 14). There is yet another double meaning here. The Greek word *hupsoy* means to lift something up; but it can also mean to exalt someone to a place of honor or dignity. Just as the people who followed Moses were saved, so everyone who looks to Jesus with eyes of faith will be saved.

Verse 16, one of the most beloved verses in all Scripture, has long been recognized as a summary of the gospel. God’s love—*agapay*—is the basis for sending God’s Son into the world. Verse 17 is a commentary on this principle: God’s purpose in Christ was not condemnation and judgment but the salvation of all humankind. The gift of God’s Son came from God at God’s initiative as an act of divine love.

Invitation to conversation

The Gospel writer does not tell us how Nicodemus responded to Jesus. Many scholars believe later references to Nicodemus (7:50-51, where he tries to keep the Pharisees from silencing Jesus, and 19:38-42, when he comes to the tomb with Joseph of Arimathea to bring spices to anoint Jesus’ body for burial) imply he became a secret follower of Jesus. If true, there remains an element of sadness in his story, because it may suggest that those with the most to commit and the most to lose are less likely to commit openly and wholeheartedly to Jesus. The greater their risk, the more cautious is their approach to Jesus, theologian John Killinger points out.

Wherever we may be in our journey of faith, Jesus invites us into conversation. He welcomes our questions, our thoughts and even our doubts. Life in the kingdom is a life-long conversation with Jesus, always

tinged with mystery for “we see as through a glass darkly,” always filled with yet more to learn and discover, and always calling us to respond in faith.

Discussion questions

- Why do you think the Gospel writer does not tell us how Nicodemus responded to Jesus?
- If you were to have had a conversation with Jesus before choosing to follow him, what would have been some of your questions?