

EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES

John 3:4-18

Salvation is a key and central concept of Christianity. One could argue that this is **the** most important thing with which we must deal during our lives. We toss the term about and make professions of whether we are saved or not, and yet most of us are not really sure what it means to have salvation. To many this concept is related to the question of whether we will go to heaven when we die. The answers that some people give to the question “are you saved?” show that they think it is a reward for having more credits for “good” things than debits for “sins” that we have committed. If we have been paying close attention in Sunday School and Church, then we will likely mention something about the importance of believing in Jesus as opposed to good works as the means of our salvation.

Toward the end of chapter two of John’s Gospel we see an interesting statement in verse 23 regarding the response some people had to the signs Jesus was doing at that time. John wrote that “many believed in His name.” That raises a very important question: “Were these people saved?” To adequately answer this question, we find some help in looking at the way Jesus responded to their “belief.” In verse 24 we see that Jesus did not entrust (commit) Himself to them. The words *believe* and entrust or *commit* are the same Greek word. As Warren Wiersbe wrote in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, “These people believed in Jesus, but He did not believe in them. They were unsaved believers!” That sounds like an oxymoron. How can one believe and not be saved? As we examine the encounter and conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, we will look for the answer to the question of what it takes to be a “saved believer.”

The Pharisees placed a lot of emphasis on the Law and on the traditions. Nicodemus was an important Pharisee. He was described as a “ruler of the Jews.” This means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jewish community. We don't know if Nicodemus came to Jesus as a representative of a group of interested Jews or strictly on his own. We can't tell from the account why Nicodemus came to see Jesus. We are not told. If he had a question, he didn't have a chance to ask it. He started out complimenting Jesus and acknowledging that He (Jesus) came from God. He also acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher. He was informed in that he knew of the miracles that Jesus had done and, being a Pharisee, he was careful to give God the credit for the miracles. Nicodemus was at the point of many people in the world today: they acknowledge that Jesus was a great teacher, that He was sent from God, that He did miracles and that God was with Him; however, they have not come to accept that He is more than all those, He is God.

Jesus apparently did not wait for Nicodemus to ask a question about the ministry Jesus was doing or on whose authority or whatever. He answered the question that Nicodemus should have asked and that is “How does one enter the Kingdom of Heaven?” Here is where Jesus introduced the phrase “born again.” “Unless anyone is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

Born Again – 3:4-8

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” John 3:4-8 (ESV)

Obviously, Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant because he started talking about a new physical birth. He was thinking about a second happening of an old thing, while Jesus was talking about a similar happening of a new thing. The “old” has reference to the flesh or physical part of our being and the “new” has reference to the spiritual part of us.

Jesus started with that which Nicodemus was familiar – the physical. How does one enter the physical life? By physical birth. How does one enter the spiritual life? By spiritual birth. The origin of our physical birth is our physical parents. Since flesh begets flesh and Spirit begets spirit, then we must conclude that the origin of our spiritual birth is the Spirit of God. We all tend to be closely tied to the physical world and have trouble relating to the spiritual. Nicodemus naturally thought of the physical and Jesus had come to point us (and move us) into the spiritual realm. This is the realm of the unseen and we should not confuse the spiritual with the physical. However, we can understand it because we deal with the unseen all the time. We cannot see the wind, yet we recognize its effects and can experience the benefit or destruction of it. Likewise with the Holy Spirit, even though we cannot see the Spirit we can recognize and experience His effects.

There is a school of thought and teaching that says what Jesus was talking about was a change that comes about in a person’s life, so drastic that is it *as if* one were as new person. The new birth is an actual point-in-time experience. The change in behavior results from the new nature acquired through the new birth. It is real. It is NOT just an idea or an analogy.

This was a difficult concept for Nicodemus. “How can these things be?” is a question that many have asked. Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus did not readily grasp the concept since he was a learned Pharisee.

How? – 3:9-13

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. John 3:9–13 (ESV)

Nicodemus should have known about the triune nature of man: that man is body, soul and spirit, that the spirit of man is that part which “died” when man disobeyed God, that new life is needed for the spirit of man if man is to be restored to fellowship with God and be in a family relationship with God (God is our Heavenly Father and we are the Children of God).

It would appear that Jesus thought the problem in understanding that Nicodemus expressed was somewhat of a *reluctance* to believe rather than genuine confusion. Jesus admonished him that He knew what He was talking about because He had personal experience of spiritual things. The situation with most people today is **not** that they CAN not believe, but it is that they WILL not believe. Jesus had taught principles of the Kingdom of God using earthly examples so that people could understand it and the Pharisees had refused to believe what He taught. This was what was behind Jesus’ statement that He didn't think that it would do any good to tell Nicodemus direct spiritual truths (that would be very hard to understand) when the Pharisees would not believe the simple truths that even a child could understand.

Believe – 3:14-18

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that

the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. John 3:13–18 (ESV)

If Nicodemus wanted to learn about heavenly things, then he could find no better teacher than Jesus since no one had ever gone up to heaven and came down again to tell what it was like. Jesus had come from Heaven and He knew spiritual things. Where was all this leading? Jesus was essentially giving Nicodemus His credentials as the basis of the authority by which He was speaking so that Nicodemus could have a basis for believing. The central truth that Jesus wanted to convey to Nicodemus about “how this could be” was about to be given.

Jesus had the answer. As usual, He related the answer to something to which the listeners knew about. Nicodemus was familiar with the incident given in the Old Testament about the plague that struck the Children of Israel and how people could be saved from the plague by looking on the brass serpent that Moses put up on a pole in the midst of the congregation. That was an act of faith on the part of the people. As they exercised faith, they were saved from the plague. In a literal sense, Jesus was also to be lifted up on a pole in the midst of the congregation in His crucifixion. In another sense, we are to lift up Jesus in our praise and exultation and in doing so we can help others to believe in Him. Just as in the days of Moses, as those Israelites believed and did not perish, but lived; so it will be in a spiritual sense that those who look by faith to the Cross of Christ believing that He died in their place to pay the penalty for sin and to give them new life will also not perish, but live.

The motivation for this is simply the love of God – for God so loved the world that He gave. Look to Jesus and lift Him up so that others too may believe. People sometimes view God as Someone who is just waiting for the chance to catch us doing something wrong so He can punish us. In fact, this philosophy is so pervasive that in our legal documents only “bad things” (earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.) are referred to as “acts of God.” We do not see a timely rain shower that waters the earth or an abundant crop of grain as an act of God. We do not see the near accident that was avoided as an act of God. What a distorted picture of God we have! The true character of God is that He loves us and wants to help us rather than condemn us. This was the very reason God the Son came to earth in the person of Jesus.

God loved, God gave, God sent. The world was already in a condition of lostness. We see this in verse 18: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” The coming of Jesus (the Living Word) exposed the lost condition in a way that was more effective than the written word could. He brought light into darkness. Those who were in darkness did not realize their condition until the light came on. Since the light exposed their evil deed, it was not welcomed by the majority of people. Those who were disposed toward God, those who were seekers of truth, would recognize the light as helpful and would come to the Light.

Without the intervention of Jesus, we were subject to the “law of sin and death.” This law is essentially a “cause and effect” phenomenon. It is simply stated as “the soul that sins shall die.” It is a cause-and-effect relationships since our life Source is God and since sin cuts us off from God, then death must follow when we sin. With the sacrifice of Jesus, we can escape the condemnation of this law since He paid the debt of death for us. If we reject God’s remedy, then we have no other alternative and remain under the condemnation of the law of sin and death.

When Adam sinned, he was cut off from his life Source and he lost the inner light God had put in him. Man learned to live by his wits rather than by his relationship with the Creator God. Man made up his own rules to suit his purposes and became enamored with the works of his own hands. Consequently, he loved the imperfect existence he had created and rejected

God's best way. The imperfect way of man is deemed "evil" by God.

We are reluctant to bring our own way into the light of the truth of God's word since we know our way will not measure up. If we abandon our way and adopt God's way, then we find ourselves in a position of having to give God all the credit (glory) and there will be none for us. This is not acceptable to the fallen nature of man that takes after the pride of Lucifer who exalted himself against the throne of God.

Have we discovered the answer to the question of what it takes to be a "saved" believer? The key to the answer may be in the subtle differences in the various meanings that the Greek word "pisteuo" has. In one case it was translated as "believe" and in the next verse, it was translated as "commit." The people "believed" in His name, but, Jesus did not "commit" Himself to them. Belief without commitment is simply a mental exercise and, as James wrote in his letter to the church, even the devil believes. One thing we know is that devil has not repented as John the Baptist called for people to do as the acceptable way to "prepare the way of the Lord." Repentance and commitment (life altering faith) result in God responding to us by "committing" Himself to us by initiating new spiritual life in us. This is the "new birth" that is essential for salvation.