

“Seeing the Cross”

Introduction: We’re exploring the various clues that John lays out for us in his gospel to help us hunt for the treasure that is Jesus. So far, we’ve seen Jesus turn water into wine at a wedding reception in Cana and cleanse the Temple at a Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Some of these clues John calls “signs,” which gives us the hint that if we want them to be helpful to us in our search, we need to follow where they lead. You can, of course, see a sign, ignore it, and keep driving or walking right on by it.

In this regard, the cross, which we could call the ultimate sign, is perhaps the ultimate challenge. We can see it as a piece of jewelry, as part of the decorations in a church, or as something tragic that happened to an innocent man, none of which really reveal what happened there. To see the cross, and any of the other signs we find, requires the aid of the Holy Spirit, in particular, the new, or second birth that he brings. Without this new birth, we won’t ever really be able to see who Jesus is, or what he is about. Jesus seeks to make this clear in the encounter he has with a man named Nicodemus.

I. Nicodemus – A man on a Hunt

A. As John sets the scene for us, the Passover celebration was winding down and a man sought Jesus out. Undoubtedly, he had heard all about the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus that had taken place earlier in the week. It seems as if he had also heard about Jesus having changed water into wine some days before that. We read that he was a Pharisee, which meant that he was highly educated and took the law of God seriously. He was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, or Sanhedrin, which means that he was a highly respected member of society and had many political connections and power. His name, Nicodemus, means “victory of the people” (Nike = victory; demos = of the people).

B. Interestingly, John tells us that this man sought Jesus out at night. On one level, this probably indicates that he didn’t want his colleagues, or the people, to see him talking to the one who had just pronounced judgment on the Temple. This could be either risky, or just flat out embarrassing! On another level, “night” is used by John to stand for those who are still in the dark concerning the person and work of Jesus and are not yet living within the realm of kingdom of God. Nicodemus evidently wanted to find out more about Jesus without anyone finding him out! He, after all, was the one who people looked up to. He was a scholar and a holy man. He, supposedly, had all the answers. And yet, he didn’t, and it seems like he knew he didn’t. Nicodemus was one who was still searching. He was a man, as we all really are, on a hunt for meaning and purpose in life.

C. Notice that Nicodemus starts the conversation with what he’s good at – knowledge: “We know...” Nicodemus begins. He began by trying to flatter Jesus, recognizing that Jesus was a teacher who, given all that he had been doing, must have some real connection with God. But Jesus refuses to get caught up in who knows what or how much. Instead, he declares: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Goodness, what a response! It sends Nicodemus into a tizzy wondering how he can enter again into his mother’s womb!

It reminds me of the Sunday school teacher who was trying to help her class understand this passage. She asked, “Were any of you born Christian?” “No,” a little girl answered. “We were born normal!”

Essentially Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the greatest thing he needs, if he wants to “see,” if he wants to be in touch with all God is doing in the world and in his life, requires more than a “normal,” physical birth. Nicodemus had an intellectual belief in God, he taught others about God, and he offered sacrifices to this God. But he was missing real life. What Nicodemus needed is not more knowledge but new birth.

Illustration: Perhaps the evangelist, George Whitfield, was thinking of this conversation when wrote in a letter to Ben Franklin in 1752: “As I find you growing more and more famous in the learned world, I would recommend to your diligent and unprejudiced study the mystery of the new birth.”

## II. The New Birth

A. What is this new birth? Those of you who were alive in 1978 might recall that it was Jimmy Carter, at a national prayer breakfast, who brought the phrase “born again” into the public eye as he used it to describe his own Christian journey. Unfortunately, it has become politicized since then and even considered radical or weird. But what Jesus was simply yet powerfully seeking to convey is that we don’t just need a physical birth to live; we need a spiritual birth to see spiritual truth. We need that birth because, as the apostle Paul explains in his letter to the Ephesians, we are dead: “. . . you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . . gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph. 2:1, 3). As the church father, Augustine explains it, we’re not sinners because we sin; we sin because we’re sinners, because we came into the world with a sin nature.

B. In practice, this means that we’re by nature totally self-referenced human beings, that underneath the various lists of sins and vices we might find lies the inner dynamic of our tendency to trust in our self over God, to seek our identity and security in the idols of performance and possessions, and to promote ourselves even if it means stepping on others. This dynamic is played out in our personal lives, and it is also, as we are seeing today, being played out on the world stage as we watch one nation violently trying to swallow up another. And here’s the thing. Try as we might, we cannot change this dead, self-referenced nature by our own effort. There is nothing Nike, “just do it” demos, can do. There is nothing we can do. So how does this new birth happen?

C. “Regeneration” is the big theological term for it. It just means we need the Spirit to do something new and life-giving in us. Jesus doesn’t give us precise details, only that the Spirit often moves mysteriously like the wind. What both James and Peter help us understand is that the Spirit works in tandem with the word. As at creation, when God the word spoke creation into being, God the Spirit was there breathing life into what had been spoken, so, too at our new creation. Our heavenly Father “chose to give us birth through the word of truth” James explains (Jas. 1:18). “For you have been born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God” Peter describes (1 Pe. 1:23). Essentially, as we read and study and reflect and pray through God’s word, it has animating, life giving power. God’s word is, as Paul describes it later in Ephesians, the “sword of the Spirit,” the means through which the Spirit cuts out what is dead in us and gives shape to what needs to grow anew (Eph. 6:17).

D. Well, then, how do we know when it’s happened? Such a birth can come in a moment, or it can come after years of “labor.” But I do think, whenever it comes, that it is marked by seeing things differently, particularly the cross. I am reminded of the last week of Jesus’ life, when he was back in Jerusalem for the Passover, and a group of folks came up to Philip and said, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (Jn. 12:21). And when Jesus was told this, he responded by talking about the cross, and how his hour had now come. Seeing Jesus clearly somehow involves seeing the cross clearly.

E. Jesus takes Nicodemus to the cross as well when he recounts for him an event recorded in Numbers 21 which, as a scripture scholar, Nicodemus would have known. Briefly, God's people had been grumbling as they made their way through the wilderness. Even though God had just dramatically rescued them from slavery in Egypt, they found many things to complain about. At one point, God had had enough and sent poisonous snakes among them. Some got bit and died. When the people recognized their sin they asked Moses to pray for them. God's response was to instruct Moses to make a snake and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten and looked at the snake would live. There was nothing they could do but trust in the mercy and healing power of God.

F. This, Jesus went on to explain to Nicodemus, is what the cross is like. Jesus had come to heal the human race from the snake bite of sin, and all of the unhealthy, evil effects that flow from it. And what we might say is that we have experienced this new birth when we are able to see the cross in this light, not as a hip piece of jewelry or furniture, or something tragic that happened to an innocent man, but where something beautiful and necessary took place for us, through Jesus, who is not just a teacher but the God who is our Savior and who revealed the full display of his love on the cross.

G. And from that sight we begin to seek to live life differently, recognizing that the new birth is just a beginning. We get some hints of this in Nicodemus's life as John 7 shows Nicodemus now publicly standing up for Jesus during a meeting of the Jewish leaders (7:50-52), and, along with another disciple of Jesus, taking Jesus down from the cross and bringing him to his tomb (19:38-39). When Jesus was lifted up, John wants us to know that Nicodemus was there. Being born anew, we also need to say, doesn't mean that we'll never experience dry or wilderness times, or never wrestle with doubt, or never have our sin nature poke its ugly head out. But it does mean that as we look back, the fruit of the Spirit has been growing in us, and we are more characterized by love joy peace patience kindness goodness gentleness faithfulness and self-control than before.

So, as we come to the table of the Lord today, we will sing *Open My Eyes, That I May See* (#367). As we do, ask God the Spirit to open your eyes to help you see the fullness of love he has for you as revealed on the cross, and to help you see how he might be calling you to love him in return.