

TRINITY SUNDAY

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jesus Answers Life's Most Difficult Questions

John 3:1-17

^{NIV} Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is 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 I tell you the truth, 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 desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Bible's teaching of a triune God is one of the most difficult teachings for our human reason to comprehend. God is three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet there is only one God. That is clearly what the Scriptures say. But how it works remains a very difficult question. When it comes to questions of God and faith, there are not always easy answers. But that does not mean that these questions are not worth asking. The key is in our being satisfied with the answers the Lord gives in his Word. In our Gospel today, we see Jesus giving answers to some of the most fundamental and difficult questions a person can have: How do we know who God is and how can we have a relationship with that God? As we look at Jesus' words, we see how he gives us the perfect answer to our most difficult questions.

The man who came to Jesus with these questions in our text is a man named Nicodemus. We learn that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. This means that Nicodemus was associated with a group of people that normally had a very low opinion of Jesus. In fact, this is the group of people that would eventually devise a way to have Jesus killed. Yet Nicodemus was not able to go along with the conventional wisdom of the Pharisees so he sought Jesus out in the secrecy of nighttime to try to get some answers to his burning questions.

The first thing that Nicodemus speaks to Jesus isn't really a question, but rather it is a statement of fact: "*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.*" Nicodemus might have liked to believe that Jesus was nothing more than a fraud and a rebel, yet he couldn't avoid the facts. Jesus had performed some amazing miracles. Whether Nicodemus had witnessed Jesus' work with his own eyes or heard eye-witness accounts, he could not deny that Jesus was doing things only God can do—turning water into wine, driving out demons, healing the sick and lame. Implied in Nicodemus' statement is the question: How can this be? Or who are you really?

Jesus' reply might seem a little odd at first. He said, "*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" What does being born again have to do with Jesus' great miracles? The fact is it has everything to do with Jesus' miracles. What Jesus was saying was that there was no way that Nicodemus was going to truly understand who Jesus was and how he worked those miracles unless he was born again. This, of course, led to Nicodemus asking the question: "*How can a man be born when he is old?*" Jesus let Nicodemus know that he wasn't talking about a physical rebirth, but a spiritual one. Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*" There was no way Nicodemus was going to understand Jesus' work and his words unless he looked it with the eyes of faith.

There is an important lesson here for all of us. If we want to know who God is and understand the deeper truths of the Scriptures, we must first be born again. When we come into this world, we are only sinful human flesh. There is no way for our corrupted human reason to comprehend God. We can look at nature and certainly understand that there must be a higher power out there somewhere. Everyone is born with that ability. But there is no way to see who that God truly is except through a spiritual rebirth, which gives us the eyes to see.

And how does that rebirth take place? Jesus points to Holy Baptism in his words to Nicodemus—that great washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. In other sections of Scripture, we learn that the Spirit uses the Word of God to open our eyes and give us spiritual understanding. If you are out there looking for answers to difficult questions, you are not going to find them by staring at the trees and swaying back and forth. The answers are only revealed by the Spirit. And the Spirit only works through the Word and Sacraments. Dig into that Word and God will reveal his truth to you. He will give you the eyes to see.

This idea of needing rebirth to gain spiritual understanding is difficult for Nicodemus to comprehend. He asks Jesus pointedly, "*How can this be?*" Jesus is taken aback by his question. Nicodemus is supposed to be a leader of God's people. As a Pharisee, he claims to know the Scriptures better than your average Israelite. Yet he did not know this fundamental truth that mankind on his own cannot find the answers but needs the Spirit to reveal them? Jesus calls this truth an "earthly thing" as it deals with the basic reality of sinful mankind's need for rebirth. In spite of Nicodemus' lack of understanding, Jesus then moves on to Heavenly things.

Jesus now gets to the heart of the matter. He speaks of the great truth about God that can only be understood after one has been born again. This truth is the truth of the Gospel. This is the truth of who Jesus is and why he came to this earth. All those miracles were only proof for a far greater

revelation—Jesus Christ is the world’s Savior. Jesus spoke this truth so plainly to Nicodemus that his words are often used as a summary of the whole truth of Scripture. John 3:16 “*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 could not have stated it more simply. This is the great message that the Spirit reveals. Jesus Christ came to this earth to live and die for sinners so that they have forgiveness and peace through his blood.

This is the truth that we teach again and again in this church and in our homes. In fact, we hear it so often that we are tempted to downplay just how important it is. The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals to us the heart of God. It is a heart filled with love for a sinful world. So much love that it prompted God to sacrifice his one and only Son on a cross for those very sinners. And by faith in that perfect sacrifice, those sinners find forgiveness and everlasting life. Those sinners are you and me. You know this to be true. You know that Jesus is your Savior. And how do you know it? You have been born again by water and the Spirit and God has revealed these heavenly truths to you.

The message of the gospel is on the one hand very simple and on the other hand extremely complex. It is complex because there are so many different facets to God’s amazing love. Seeing all those different facets is where true spiritual understanding begins and where you receive answers to your difficult questions. Seeing God’s love present even in suffering, seeing how God’s love also means discipline at times, seeing how God’s love affects every decision you make day in and day out—these are truths that are revealed by the Spirit in his Word. Are you looking for answers to difficult questions? Let the Spirit provide those answers through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It’s not always in easy process. Our sinful human nature and our corrupted reason often get in the way. Sometimes we see the answers but we don’t want to accept them. That is why the Christian’s life is always about growth—growing in knowledge of the Scriptures, growing in spiritual understanding, growing in faith and godly living. It is all part of the process while we live on this side of eternity. In heaven, all things will become clear. Then we will know even as we are fully known. On earth, we need to always be seeking answers. And when the place where we are seeking is the Word of God, we know that our quest for understanding will not go unfulfilled. God bless each and every one of us as we continue to seek him in his Word and continue to be amazed by the grace-filled answers he reveals to us. **Amen.**

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