

Piercing the Darkness – Part I
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John 3:9-13
May 15, 2011

Amen. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the third chapter of John. We come again to this passage which sets before us the new birth. Jesus' focus in this chapter is on what it means to be born from above, and the need of every single person to be born of God, born again, born from above. So he confronts us with the reality of our predicament. In previous messages, and I mentioned earlier that, also that biblically salvation is no small thing. It's not a small step to become saved. It is a giant leap, and in fact, it's not a leap, it's God picking you up and carrying you across the Grand Canyon. It's humanly in every way impossible. Left to ourselves, we're left in despair, but as Jesus Himself said when the disciples said, "Who then can be saved?" He said, "With man, things are impossible. With God all things are possible." So this passage, Jesus lays out before us the impossibility of our salvation that we might rely fully upon the power of God, and not upon ourselves.

So this passage addresses with great specificity a need in the modern evangelical church of today, and that is to dispense with easy believe-ism the idea that it's a small thing to be saved. It's a radical, life-altering event, and that is what Jesus is dealing with in this passage. We saw that He deals with in Verses 1-3 the necessity of the new birth. Unless a man is born again, he shall not see the Kingdom of God. Then in Verses 4-7 He deals with the nature of the new birth, what it is, an instantaneous, life-changing event done by the Spirit. Revealed progressively, we had a number of things, six things that we saw in that passage. Then last week we saw in Verse 8 that He dealt with the effects of the new birth, that though the new birth is mysterious, its effects are obvious. If not immediately, certainly soon, and in time, they are obvious as the wind has its effects.

What we're going to see today, we're going to begin looking at Verses 9-15. I think we'll have a two-part message. We'll start today, and the title of it is 'Piercing the Darkness'. This morning we are going to focus more on just how dark is the darkness because that's what Jesus focuses on first. We're going to see some hope because He only shows how great is our darkness so that we can see how wondrous is His light. But next time we'll focus more on the glory of the Son of Man who brings salvation. Next Sunday, Lord-willing. We see in this passage, you know it's so important as you read the Bible, especially when you are in familiar passages, to try to read them with a freshness, and try to imagine in a sense, that you are reading them for the first time. "What was the effect of this



when I first read it?” When you look at this passage carefully, and you see what Jesus does with Nicodemus, it is stunning. I mean, first of all, the way the whole conversation starts, and we saw that. Nicodemus comes, he’s a ruler of the Jews, he’s a Pharisee, he is a perfect candidate to take the Gospel out to the Nation of Israel. I can imagine the first time they are reading it there were people thinking, “Man, this is a great moment. If we could just get Nicodemus on our side the Gospel is going to go forth.” Jesus doesn’t handle it in a politically correct way. Nicodemus says, “We know that You are from God, You are a good teacher,” but Jesus says, “You need to be born again.” Not, “Thank you very much. I appreciate, glad that you are acknowledging that.” You know, “Let Me help You along the way.” No, “You need to be born again.”

Then He explains what the new birth is, and the effects of the new birth, and Nicodemus asks again a question, “How can these things be?” Verse 9. Then Jesus basically, now listen to me carefully, what He does in Verses 10, 11, 12 is He turns the knife on Nicodemus. In some sense, because Jesus has been telling Nicodemus that the reality is, “Nicodemus, though you are a Pharisee, though you are a ruler of the Jews, though you know the Bible, the Old Testament, in your head you are spiritually dead and unless you yourself are born again, you will not see the Kingdom of God. You are spiritually dead.” Verses 10, 11, and 12, in three different ways, Jesus basically asks Nicodemus to look at himself. It’s kind of like this: You meet somebody who is blind. This is not how you would treat them, right? I mean, you meet someone and you are talking about something, “Oh, I got a new watch. Look at my new watch.” This is a blind person you’re talking to, “You can’t see my new watch? Can you not see this?” “No, I’m blind.” “Well, I can’t believe you can’t see this!” This is essentially, it’s not exactly, it’s not that ludicrous, okay? But Jesus is talking to a dead man and saying, “You are dead. It’s appalling how dead you are.”

That’s what you are going to see, and He says it basically three times, three different ways. Now the reason He does it is because He knows Nicodemus needs to come to understand this with great clarity. Jesus, the great lover of our souls, is loving Nicodemus, and He is giving him a hard diagnosis that He wants to make emphatically clear the seriousness of the condition. “Nicodemus, you are used to thinking theoretically and theologically.” Theology is great, but you’ve got to apply theology. You can’t stay up in the realm of theory, and Jesus is saying, “Look, I’m looking at your heart and your heart needs to be changed.” He makes it painfully clear. Watch how it unfolds. Let’s begin reading at Chapter 2, Verse 23. We’re looking at the last three verses of Chapter 2, as we’ve seen, this sets the context for this discussion of the new birth because it presents to us the shallow

faith that many had that wasn't saving faith. Then Jesus explains the new birth, what you have to have, a new heart.

John 2:23-John 3:1-15 ~ Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus *said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. 12 If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Every word of it is perfect and true. Lord, it is given by You to address



the real needs of our souls, the real needs of our hearts. We come this morning confident that Your Word can meet the needs of our souls this morning, and we ask that Your Holy Spirit would open our minds, open our understanding, and open our hearts. That we might believe and obey Your truth. We pray this in Jesus' Name, amen.

This past Wednesday evening, I was sitting down for dinner and I saw Charlie and Thelma Winsell, two precious people in our congregation, and they were sitting down and many of you had seen an email going around about Charlie's health this week. I sat down with him to hear what was the latest of his diagnosis. He had been to the doctor, and you may recall a few weeks back he had some real trouble, was hospitalized for a few days with pancreatitis. They were trying to figure out what was going on. The pancreatitis can be a sign of some kind of pancreatic cancer, other things, and so great concern was over the Winsell family for a period of time. Then most recently, Charlie had gone and found out that he had a tumor in his stomach, and he told me what the doctor said to him. This is what the doctor said to him. Some of you may have heard Charlie share with you. He said the doctor said, "Charlie," he said the doctor had known him for a number of years, he said, "Charlie, your pancreas and what is going on with your pancreas is like a cockroach, and what's going on in your stomach is a roaring lion that will kill you if you don't act."

Now, I don't know about you but that seems kind of stern bedside manner. "What's going on in your stomach is a roaring lion, it's going to kill you." Charlie explained that his doctor knows him well and he knows that he has been prone at times not to act swiftly on his doctor's recommendation. He wanted him to know that this time the tumor in his stomach needs to be dealt with. I know that many of you are already praying, and if you are not praying, haven't been praying, pray for Charlie and Thelma, that the Lord would bless. There is a tumor the size of a lemon in his stomach and it is inoperable right now, but they are looking at options. Chemo is an option that can reduce the size of it, control it. We are hopeful the Lord is going to extend his days, many years, but that through this, regardless, Christ will be exalted and he'll be blessed, and Thelma will be blessed. Think about that. As he told me that, and Charlie wasn't upset with him. I mean, he might have been a little bit at first, I don't know, but he was happy that the doctor had made it clear. Sometimes we need that kind of clarity, don't we? We need someone to tell us, and this is what God is doing in this passage. God is doing this to Nicodemus. Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus, the Great Physician, is looking into Nicodemus' heart and He's saying to him, "Nicodemus, your condition is perilous, but if you act there is hope. If you act there is victory. If you act there is



healing, there is salvation, but you must know first how serious your condition is.” And that’s what He does in this passage. He underscores how significant it is. Now look, we’re looking at Verses 9-15. Nicodemus said, “How can these things be?” And Jesus asks a question in Verse 10, He asks two questions in the passage and makes one statement, Verses 10, 11, and 12. In each of these, each of these contains a key verb that highlights something that is wrong with Nicodemus. This is his diagnosis, three-part diagnosis, three-point diagnosis. He says in Verse 10:

John 3:10 ~ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”

If you were to underline like ‘do not’, or in the NAS it’s here every time. Some of the other translations don’t have it this way. ‘Do not’ occurs in Verse 10, Verse 11, and Verse 12, and it is leading in to the main verbs in those passages which underscore Nicodemus’ problem, and Israel’s problem, and our problem. We all have the same problem. He says, “***Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?***” Then He says:

John 3:11 ~ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.

Then Verse 12:

John 3:12 ~ If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

This is a three-pronged assault on Nicodemus’ self-righteousness and self-satisfaction. This is a three-pronged attack urging him to action. He is making it in the most forceful and emphatic way. I said you have to read the text freshly. I mean, think about this, Jesus, Verse 10, listen to the tone. I mean look at the words and imagine what the tone was. Jesus said, ...“***Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?***” How can that be? I mean the tone is one of incredulity, that is disbelief. That’s what is really happening. He says, “You don’t understand these things?” Verse 11, He’s basically going to say, “We’re giving you absolutely clear testimony, irrefutable proof and you are not receiving it. How can that be?” Then Verse 12, “I’ve told you earthly things, the most basic, simple things, and you do not believe?” Now why I say that is, put this in context. Who is talking? The One who knows the heart. The reason we read Verses 2:23-25 was so we could see that again. Verse 24, He knew all men. Jesus. ...***He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.***

There was a man, is this guy an exception? Jesus is like, “I know all men, but I didn’t know you, Nicodemus, and I’m just astonished at how blind you are.” No, He knew what was in Nicodemus before Nicodemus came, but the Lord in His graciousness, allows Himself to express in His humanity in a way we could understand the awesome fact of it. How can you miss it? He is indignant about it, rightly so. It’s not that Jesus is strictly speaking surprised, but it is that He is, as He looks at it, astonished.

Have you ever, you know something is a certain way. Like say, let me think of an example here. My kids are pretty good at cleaning their rooms, so this isn’t a personal testimony time, okay? But there have been times where maybe it was a personal testimony, but you know, “Hey, I know your room is a mess and you need to go up and clean it up.” You go upstairs and you look at the room, and you know they don’t know how to clean the room, and then you go in the room and you see exactly what you knew was going to be there, but as you see it you are just astonished again. “I cannot believe how bad it is.” Right? I mean, that happens all over the place. Wives have that for husbands, you know? Patti is like, “I know he’s going to forget to do this or that,” and then she comes and she finds out, “Sure enough, he forgot to do this or that. I’m astonished at you. Not surprised, but astonished.” That’s kind of what is happening here. Jesus knew what was in his heart, but as He looks at it, He pulls it up and looks at his heart and He’s like, “This is unbelievable how bad it is.”

Now, God allows this to be in His Word because God doesn’t need to sit there and just say, “I can’t believe how bad it is.” He’s trying to make us look at it because Nicodemus doesn’t want to look at it. Nicodemus doesn’t understand how bad it is, and you and I don’t want to look at it. We don’t want to know how bad it is. So when you understand that, you realize it is really that Jesus is making this emphatic. He knows everything that is in the heart of man. The way I would think, “I already know that you don’t know anything, Nicodemus. I’m not even going to bother going there with you because you just don’t have a clue,” and I wouldn’t say anything. Jesus is saying, “No, it is helpful to expose at times the utter ugliness of the situation,” even though you may have already known it. It helps people to repent. God opens the eyes through it. He’s going to use this to cause Nicodemus to be born again.

So it’s a three-prong assault on his self-righteousness, and on ours. In fact, you can see, and it’s made very clear that it’s not just for Nicodemus by the flow of the passage. In Verse 10, Jesus asks the question ... ***“Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”*** The pronoun ‘you’, ***“Are you the teacher of***



Israel... is singular, second person singular. The verb, *'you' do not understand these things?* Is second person singular. He is talking to Nicodemus himself, but He's continuing to talk to Nicodemus in Verse 11 when He says, *Truly, truly, I say to you,...* That is you plural. *...we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you...* plural, *...do not accept our testimony.* Verse 12: *If I told you* (plural)... I hate saying you plural, can we just say 'ya'll', right? "If I told ya'll earthly things and ya'll do not believe, how will ya'll believe if I tell ya'll heavenly things?" He's saying to you plural, to the body of Israel. Jesus speaking to Nicodemus is actually addressing the whole nation. He's addressing all the Pharisees. Nicodemus, I think he is by himself when you look at the context, but he says, "We know that you came from God," Verse 2. "I'm representing some other Pharisees. We've been talking." And Jesus says, "Well, you and all your buddies, and you because you are a Pharisee, and a ruler of the Jews, you are the prototypical man of Israel, the whole nation. What I'm going to say about you is true of the whole nation, and if it is true of Nicodemus, who is the prototypical Jewish man, and if it's true of the whole Nation of Israel, it is certainly true of you and me gentiles. I mean, if they are lost, we are lost too. That's the point.

What He deals with, from a theological standpoint, this is very practical theology, but basically He is dealing with what sometimes theologians call the *'noetic effects of sin'*. The noetic effects of sin, that is a fancy way to say *'the way sin affects the mind'* or I think more biblically correct, *'the way sin affects the heart'*. He's basically saying, He's using the three-pronged assault at Nicodemus' heart and saying, "Look at your heart. Look at your heart. Look at your heart," and He does it in three different ways, because the Bible, when you look at the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Bible speaks of the heart differently than we do. We think of the heart in terms of just love and affection, you know Valentine's Day and stuff like that. In the Bible the heart is the seat not only of the affections, or of the emotions, it is the seat of thinking, it is the seat of the will. All three of those things converge in the one reality of the heart. The Bible says, for instance, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." It's not just affections, it's the thinking. It's also the deciding. He set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it. That's Ezra, he set his heart. Do you see? That's an act of the will. It's the heart, and what Jesus is doing here is He is basically doing a heart exam on Nicodemus, and He's finding exactly what He knew would be there but He's taking the time to point it out clearly to Nicodemus so that Nicodemus will take action. That's the glory and goodness of God. He never does it to just show us our ugliness, He does it so that we might, from seeing our ugliness, see the glory of His salvation, and become His children.

Now, three points this morning. How great is the spiritual darkness? The title ‘Piercing the Darkness’, I mean first of all you have to see the darkness that sin has put us in, the darkness that we have put ourselves in, and these three angles of the heart. We’re going to talk about the mind, we’re going to talk about the affections, and we’re going to talk about the will, but what we’re talking about are all three subsets of the heart. It’s kind of like you can’t really divide it. It’s not like we think the mind, will, and emotions as separate things. The Bible sees it as three things coming out of one. It is inseparable. You think, and you feel, and you act. We’re going to look at, first of all, the darkening of the mind. Secondly, the alienation of the affections. And thirdly, the bondage of the will. Those are our three points.

1) The Darkening of the Mind:

Now, He deals with the first in Verse 10.

John 3:10 ~ “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”

I said the three key verbs expose these different aspects. ‘*You do not understand...*’ He’s dealing with the understanding, the mind, that aspect of the heart, the thinking. The word is *ginōskō*, which Jesus is going to paint a contrast between Verse 10 and Verse 11. When He speaks of Nicodemus not understanding, it’s not knowing, it can be translated, “You don’t know these things.” He’s contrasting that with Verse 11 when He says, ***...what we know...*** and He uses ‘*oida*’, a different Greek verb which speaks of fullness of knowledge. In Verse 10, He’s saying to Nicodemus, “You don’t *ginōskō*,” which is progress in knowledge, the inception of knowledge, the growth of knowledge. He is basically saying, Nicodemus, you haven’t even begun to know. You haven’t even begun to understand. Are you the teacher of Israel and you don’t even have a clue about these things?”

In fact, the word order is also emphatic in the Greek text. Verse 10, after it says ... ***Jesus answered and said to him...*** the first word in Greek is the pronoun ‘*you*’. That’s the first word and the way the New Testament is written, the first word and the last words in sentences, they can move their word order around a lot more than we can in English. So the first word and the last word are the emphasis. In this sentence, ‘*you*’ is the first word, ‘*don’t know*’ is the last word. So the emphasis is on his lack of knowledge. Also, ***“Are you the teacher of Israel...*** the ‘*you*’ is emphatic in another way. ‘*You are*’ is the verb ‘*to be*’ in Greek and one of the things about many other languages that English doesn’t have is often other

languages have the pronoun in the verb. We don't have that. 'Are' is, if I just say 'are', what are I saying, right? I haven't said anything yet. I have to say something else, 'you' or 'we are'. I have to put a pronoun there, but in Greek, the form actually already says that. 'You are' is a word in the sentence. 'You are the teacher...' but then He adds an extra pronoun 'you'. It's like saying, "You yourself are the teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?" I mean, He's making it painful for Nicodemus, and I think when He says, "You are the teacher of Israel," He's saying that apparently Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was also a ruler of the Jews, which was a rare thing to be a Pharisee and a ruler in the Sanhedrin. "You are the teacher of Israel," He's saying, "You not only are a ruler, and a Pharisee, you are the guy that everybody looks to as the preeminent preacher/teacher in Israel and you don't know? Be astonished at yourself!" That must have hit Nicodemus, here he is thinking, "I'm leading the nation and I don't know where I'm going." If the blind lead the blind, they both end up in a pit.

Jesus is amazed, appalled at his spiritual blindness. Now He knows it's there but He wants Nicodemus to be appalled at it. The Scripture teaches us that in sin, under sin, before we are born again, the reason we need to be born again is we don't know anything spiritually. We're cut off. We can only know the things of the flesh. 1 Corinthians 2:14 speaks about the effects on the understanding that sin has done. Listen to what it says.

1 Corinthians 2:14 ~ But a natural man does not acknowledge the things of the Spirit of God...

Does not acknowledge them, does not know them, does not understand the things of the spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 ~ ... for they are foolishness to him; for he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

It is impossible for the natural man to truly understand the things of God. That's the noetic effects of sin, that's the effect of sin upon the understanding. This is why, and this idea of God being appalled about it, and expressing it, is because we tend to always, we have a misplaced locus of amazement. That's the phrase I heard R.C. Sproul use one time and it just stuck with me. I know I had to figure out what he was talking about, right? A misplaced locus of amazement. He says, "We're always amazed about the wrong things." It's a part of just the fabric of humanity. Even after we're redeemed, we still struggle because we have this old nature and we continue to be amazed at the wrong things.

This is the kind of thinking that the natural mind comes to, and we still have to put this off as Christians, but unbelievers they just think this completely. We wonder why, if God has the power to save everyone, doesn't He? We're appalled at God at times, aren't we? In our fleshly foolishness. God is always appalled at us. We say things like, "How can I possibly know?" I mean, if we begin to understand these things, I don't have the ability to know, so it's up to God to make me know and I'm appalled that He hasn't done it yet. That's not the way God sees it. God does know He has to make us know, but He wants us first to be appalled at ourselves. I mean, the whole Bible is replete with this kind of picture that God is always making Himself known, making Himself known, making Himself known, and we will not know! He's never thinking, "I didn't do enough." He's thinking what is wrong with you and me. Psalm 19, the heavens are telling the glory of God, the firmament speaks forth His praise. Day after day they utter knowledge. Night after night they proclaim His truth. Their line has gone out in all the earth. There is no place where that word, that message has not been received. Do you see that? What is God saying? "I am speaking. I am speaking. I am speaking. I am revealing Myself, but nobody's acknowledging," because we won't. We want a shortcut. We know that, well, if God's got to change the heart, let's don't bother with this being appalled about it. Just change the heart. No, God says, "Be appalled! Be appalled at yourself." We need to be appalled at ourselves and our own unbelief, because that's how the Bible continually presents it.

In fact, turn over to Romans 1. We looked at Romans 3 earlier. In Verse 18, remember I said the Gospel? Paul says in Verse 16:

Romans 1:16 ~ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

He's saying, "I'm going to tell you my gospel. This is my purpose." This is his purpose statement for his book, his epistle. Right after he finishes with the purpose statement, he then opens with these words:

Romans 1:18 ~ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...

Look at this:

...who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Suppress means hold down, actively push down the truth in unrighteousness. He says the problem is not that there's not enough truth. The truth is everywhere. I mean, think about it. Isn't that true? As you come to know God, you know that, don't you? I mean, we watch nature shows as Christians, and we watch them talk about how some animal is so complex, and the way that an ecosystem works together, and we're sitting there saying, "Wow, look at the hand of God." That's what we're thinking. And then the guy on TV says, "Isn't evolution amazing?" What? I mean, that is so illogical. It just accidentally happened? And it's like the whole universe is an accidental happening of all of these things that have to converge, that the probabilities... I mean, there are not enough zeros. We couldn't write enough zeros to establish the probability that even just a few things would happen. It's ridiculous. God is revealing Himself everywhere. Romans 1 says that the problem is not that He's not speaking, but the problem is man is not listening. He's suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Look at Verse 19:

Romans 1:19 ~ because that which is known about God is evident within them;...

It's on the inside of man's heart. I saw an article this week that was forwarded to me, and it said that a study is now saying that it seems that this idea of God is inherent in all human nature. Surprise! We knew that. I'm always excited when they come around to finding something like that, though. You know, give them enough time and maybe they'll stumble onto some more truth. That's wonderful, but listen, the only reason we know, and we have to watch out – even as I say that, I have to watch my own heart, because we can't be proud, can we? What do we have that we've not received? The only reason you and I see it or receive it is if He's changed our hearts. There but for the grace of God go we. This is what we were doing. We were suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Even though that which is known about God was evident within us:

Romans 1:19 ~ ...for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

That's how God sees it. "I've made it abundantly clear over, and over, and over." Every time an unbeliever walks outside and looks at the sky, they see testimony to God. Every time they squish a little bug, and think for a second about, "That's an impressive bug," maybe before they squish it they think that, and they're seeing God's hand, and yet they will not receive it.

Romans 1:21 ~ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,...

You see, there is unwillingness. There's a darkening of the mind. There's something radically wrong with our understanding. The truth comes in and we cannot comprehend it, and God says, "Be appalled at yourselves. Be appalled at what sin has done." See, God didn't make it this way. He made man perfect in the Garden of Eden. Why is man like he is? He's like he is because man sinned. In Adam, we all sinned and we all bear the consequences of that sin, and we ought to mourn over our sin. Sin has darkened the mind. The darkening of the mind is the first effect that Jesus deals with back in John 3. "You do not understand these things." And not only the darkening of the mind, but the next thing he deals with is Verse 11, the second sally on the heart is:

John 3:11 ~ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.

2) The Alienation of the Affections:

He's saying, "You do not receive. You won't receive it." He's not talking about the understanding as much as He's talking about the affections. You don't want to receive it. Remember I talked about the affections last time, or not exactly the emotions, but they're the inclination of the heart, inclined towards some things and away from other things. He says, "The truth comes to you and you push it away. It's not just that you can't comprehend it, but you push it away." That's really what was going on in Romans 1. "You won't receive it. You push it down." And look how we see this.

In Verse 11, how emphatic He is on Nicodemus' unwillingness to accept the testimony. What He's basically saying is, "Nicodemus, Israel, humanity, you have received and you are receiving continually, unmistakable, irrefutable, perfect, complete, trustworthy, absolutely iron-clad evidence of who I am and what I require, and you will not receive it." It's like the verdict in a courtroom is so incredibly clear that everybody can see it, but the jury comes back with the wrong verdict. He's saying you and I are the jury and we come back with the wrong verdict. Look how He makes this – He underscores this by saying first of all, look at Verse 11:

John 3:11 ~ Truly, truly, I say to you,...

The King James says: *Verily, verily...*

The NIV says: *I tell you the truth...*

Isn't it extraordinary of Jesus to bother saying something like that? And He says it a lot. "I tell you the truth. Truly, truly I say to you. Listen, I'm telling you the truth." Now, we should know He's telling us the truth, but it's like He knows we're so skeptical. We're so darkened that He even gives this underscoring of, "I'm telling you the truth."

John 3:11 ~ ...we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen,...

There's that word *testify*. It's such a key word in John's Gospel. Testify, testimony, witness – those three English words all translate one Greek verb, concept: μαρτυρέω (martyreō), to bear witness to what one has seen, to give testimony in the court, to testify, as it's translated here, to testify in a courtroom. Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you, what we testify, we're telling you of what we have seen and what we know." The key question we ought to ask is, "When He says *we*, who is He talking about?" We testify. This is one that commentators have different ideas about. Some think that this is kind of an anachronism, and John is actually inserting the *we* basically to say to the readers – he wrote about 85 A.D., probably about 50 years after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, somewhere in that area – that he's writing, saying, "We Christians testify." It's like John has stepped in and is talking now.

Some commentators believe that. I don't think that's faithful to the text. To me, it's clear Jesus is talking. He says, "Truly, truly I say to you," that's the third time in the passage He said that. He's talking to Nicodemus. He just said: "***Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?***" And it's natural what flows next. So He's not saying *we* as in me (John) and all the Christians. And I don't think Jesus when He's saying this – another idea is Jesus is talking, which is clearly right, but the idea that's not right is that *we* means *Me and the disciples, we know what we have seen*. The disciples don't know much at this point. I don't think He'd be including them. They're constantly missing it, right? And this is the beginning of His ministry. That's not what He means. What does He mean? I think He's speaking here of Him and the Father and actually the Spirit. I think He's speaking Trinitarily. "What we know, we testify to."

Now, what's interesting is Jesus knows that Nicodemus knows his Old Testament, and Jesus knows that Nicodemus knows the idea about legal proceedings. In Deuteronomy 19, the Lord makes this principle, establishes this principle, that on the basis of two or three witnesses, every fact must be confirmed, and this is a condescension to Nicodemus, a coming down to his need, saying, "Look, My testimony ought to be valid in itself, but I'm going to condescend down and come to you and plead with you, and show you that it's not only Me, but other witnesses." And maybe, particularly, He's speaking about the Father.

In fact, turn over to John 8 just to show you that I think this is where He's going with this. In Verse 13, they had basically said, "Hey, You're testifying about Yourself. Your testimony is not true. You're the only one testifying." Verse 14:

John 8:14 ~ Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. 16 But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent Me.

Listen to this:

John 8:17 ~ Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. 18 I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me."

In fact, He goes on down a little bit later and says, "The Scriptures testify about Me." I can't find that verse, but the point here is the Father is testifying also about Jesus. He says, "Look, I'm testifying about Myself. I'm telling you I'm the Son of Man. I'm telling you I'm the One of God who has come to save the world. I'm the One sent by God, and the Father is testifying about Me."

I think in context in John 3, we would also see the Spirit is testifying. He's talking about the wind of the Spirit in Verse 8. The wind of the Spirit is blowing all over wherever Jesus goes. I mean, the miracles that He's doing are the Spirit working. What He's saying is that when the Spirit works, that's the Father testifying, because the Father has given Me the Spirit. Jesus is God Himself, but He's not using His own power in His earthly ministry. It's the power of the Holy Spirit, because Jesus is living as a Man. The Son of God, the eternal Son of God, not ceasing to be God in any way, but in His life, is living a life of dependence.

What was the temptation Satan gave Him after He'd been fasting for 40 days? Satan says, "Hey, if You're the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." What was he doing? He was tempting Jesus to use His own intrinsic power to meet His human needs. Jesus recognizes that as Satan trying to get Him off the mission, and what does He say? "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. I'm living as man, depending upon the Father. His Word satisfies Me, and I live as Man." So here the Spirit is testifying, the Father is testifying, and Jesus is testifying. Back to John 3:11:

John 3:11 ~ ...we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen,...

You have this incredibly clear testimony. "Truly, truly I say to you, we're testifying, it's verified, and you will not receive it." Such is the heart of man. Such is our heart that the evidence can be staring us in the face and we will not accept it. That's what Romans 3:10-12 we read earlier said. The natural man does not seek God. We turn aside from God. We run away from God. So Nicodemus, your heart is darkened in your understanding. Your heart is alienated in your affections. And then thirdly, He comes to the bondage of the will.

3) Effective Sin is the Bondage of the Will:

John 3:12 ~ If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Here's the interaction of the understanding with the will, though, but the idea is you do not believe. That's the key verb here in this passage. Verse 10 was, "You do not understand." Verse 11 was, "You do not receive." Verse 12 is, "You do not believe." *Believe* in the Bible is not just intellectual ascent. It's trusting. It's committing oneself. And He's saying, "You're holding back. You will not believe. Your will is bound." Now, when He says, "I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" what does earthly things refer to? There are differences of opinion here. Some think He's talking about being born of water. Some people believe that's physical birth, as we talked about. I think it's really a picture biblically of Spiritual birth – born of water and the Spirit is one thing. It's the new birth that happens in Ezekiel 36.

In fact, I forgot to tell you one of the reasons I believe that. It comes to mind now as we're talking. When I was giving evidence – some people believe it's born of human birth and then born of the Spirit, like two separate things. It's one thing. And one of the reasons is there is only one Greek preposition in the phrase in

Verse 5: *born of water*. It would say *born of water and born of the Spirit* if it was talking about two different things. It's talking about one thing, born of water and the Spirit. Sorry, that was just a little commercial interruption.

What are earthly things? "I've told you earthly things and you do not believe." It's not talking about that. It's not talking about the wind. It's talking about what He's been saying, which is the new birth. He doesn't mean earthly things versus heavenly things, as in, "I've been talking about earthly things that are of the earth." He means simple things. "If I've told you things that are just so basic and simple, and you will not commit to that, how, if I tell you more complex things of the glories of heaven or eschatology, the coming of the Kingdom, how will you commit to those?" He's saying, "Look, the problem is your will is bound and I can't give you any more and expect you to trust if you won't trust in what you've already received."

So essentially what Jesus has done is He's told Nicodemus three times, "Look at yourself." Three times He said, "You do not." You do not know. You do not receive. You do not believe. Remember, when something's said three times, it's raised to the highest, superlative degree. He's saying three times, "Your mind is dark. Your affections are blackened. Your will is clouded." He's saying, "You are utterly hopeless, helpless, so dark that you can't see anything. You are in the dark. You are in the dark. You are in the dark." That's what He's saying. Matthew 6 comes to mind, where Jesus says, "The eye of the lamp is the body. So then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, then your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness."

He brings Nicodemus to this diagnosis. He brings the nation of Israel to this diagnosis, and He brings everyone in this room who's not been born again, to this same diagnosis, and we are to be left to say, "What shall I do?" Here we, along with Nicodemus, would be left in despair if Jesus ended the discussion here, but praise God He doesn't. He has laid the groundwork. He has laid out the black cloth so that He can put His diamond on it, so that Nicodemus can see the brilliance of it. He's laid out the black cloth of our sin and the noetic effects of the sin – the mind is darkened. The affections are alienated. The will is bound, and now He says, "You must look to the Son of Man." That's what He's saying.

John 3:13 ~ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.

The first part of that verse is basically saying there's no one that can help. No man has ever gone up into heaven and found out the things of God, and brought them back to us. But there is One who was there and who has come down: The Son of Man. In fact, the word order here, it's just like the English renders it perfectly. The last phrase is 'the Son of Man' in its emphasis. ***No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.*** Jesus is saying, "Look, in all of your darkness, Nicodemus, see how dark it is. See how bad the diagnosis is. See how bad the prognosis is, and realize that you are standing in the presence of the One who can save you."

He wouldn't say this if He wasn't willing to save. "Look to the Son of Man." When Nicodemus heard those words, what was he thinking? "The Son of Man." In the Gospels, this is Jesus' favorite self-designation. It's the favorite way Jesus has of referring to Himself. Why is that? First of all, it emphasizes His humanity. Son of Man in the Old Testament is used most often to speak of the fact that the Son of Man is obviously a man. I quoted earlier, and I think when I was praying, Psalm 8. *When I look at the heavens and see the glory of God, I wonder what is man that thou dost take thought of him, or the son of man that thou dost notice him? How would You ever notice a man? How would you notice his son? How would you notice humanity, O God?*

In Ezekiel, it's what God continually says to Ezekiel. "Son of man, son of man. You're just a man called by Me, but you're a man." When Jesus takes that title, He's saying partly that, "I am truly, truly man. I'm one of your flesh and blood. Nicodemus, I have come all the way down. I am near." He's not just saying that, though, and I think Nicodemus when he heard that title, especially in the context, whether he knew it instantly or he reflected on it later, the good news is we know, we have great confidence that Nicodemus who was in the dark completely, came to see the light, because later in the Gospel we have him kind of standing up for Jesus among the Pharisees, and then later when Jesus is crucified to be buried, Nicodemus helps bury the body of Jesus.

There he is willing to associate himself completely with the One who has been rejected by Israel. Why? Because he's seen that He's not just a man. He's the one who got me out of the dark. That's what Jesus is saying. As Nicodemus hears that, I think he had to think of another passage. The reason Jesus uses that title as His favorite self-designation is so that we would know that He was truly Man, but also He was thinking of Daniel 7. I know Nicodemus would have known this, because knowing the Old Testament like he did, he certainly would know all the high water marks of the Old Testament. There are just a few of those.

Isaiah 6 is a high water mark. “I saw the Lord high and lifted up.” Isaiah sees God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” That’s a high water mark. There’s Exodus 34, where Moses says in Chapter 33, “Show me Your glory.” Israelites reading that from every generation as they read that for the first time, Moses is about to see God’s glory,’ and then the glory of the Lord passes by. “The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin, but who by no means will leave the guilty unpunished.” Everybody who had read their Bibles and studied knew these are the key passages. These are the great apexes of God’s self-disclosure, and Daniel 7 was in the short list. Daniel 7 is the only place in the Bible where God the Father is represented in any way visually. This is mysterious. When we were going through Daniel last year, this was something that just blew me away, really, looking at this. Look at what Daniel says in Daniel 7:

Daniel 7

- 9** *“I kept looking
Until thrones were set up,
And the Ancient of Days took His seat;
His vesture was like white snow
And the hair of His head like pure wool.
His throne was ablaze with flames,
Its wheels were a burning fire.*
- 10** *“A river of fire was flowing
And coming out from before Him;
Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,
And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;...*

Thousands and thousands were worshipping Him. This is an amazing vision.

- 13** *“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold,...*

This God who had made Himself visible to Daniel, fire, purity, holiness come out from His throne. Unapproachable, unapproachable. Look at Verse 13:

Daniel 7

13 *I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.*

Here is a man who's presented before this Holy One, the Ancient of Days, and look what it says:

14 *“And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.*

That they might worship Him... Here's a man who's to be worshiped. Here's a man who comes up to God. Here's a man who is God. That's what He's saying, and when He said that back in John 3, Jesus says:

John 3:13 ~ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.

When He's been talking about coming down from Heaven, it's clear that He's talking about Daniel 7, and Nicodemus is being encouraged to see, “You see, I am Man and I am God. I'm the One who brings the Kingdom of God to the earth.” He's saying, “I am He. I AM. You need to end your bondage to sin and your rebellion. You need the Kingdom to come. You need the Kingdom of God to break the reign of sin, and I am the One who does it. I have come down to set you free.”

That's the first time Nicodemus has heard those words on Jesus' lips – the Son of Man – and he hears it twice, and then He says, “Look at the Son of Man lifted up, in Verse 14. “Look to Jesus. Look to the Son of Man who comes down, the One who is God, the One who is Man, hanging on the cross. You need to be born again. You're in the dark, but the answer is the Son of Man lifted up, dying for your sins, lifted up raised from the dead, lifted up ascended back into heaven, conquering death, conquering all of the darkness.” It's also helpful to remember that this wasn't the first time in John's Gospel that the term Son of Man was used. It was also used in Chapter 1. Nicodemus didn't have access to this fact, but everybody who was reading the book did.

The second time Jesus uses the term Son of Man, He uses it with Nicodemus, but in John 1:51, we saw that He said that to Nathanael.

John 1:51 ~ He said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

He said basically to Nathanael and those around, “Listen, you will see the heavens opened up, the angels of God ascending and descending.” He said, “Look, I am Jacob’s ladder. The Son of Man is Jacob’s ladder,” alluding to Genesis 28 where Jacob, in despair, and loneliness, and hopelessness, and helplessness, afraid, lays his head on a rock to sleep, he sees the heavens opened, and the Lord speaks to him out of Heaven, makes promises to him, and while He’s talking, there’s this ladder, and angels are going up and down from God, Yahweh speaking, “I will take care of you. I will save you. I will keep you.” Those are the promises, and the angels are ascending and descending.

What we said when we were looking at that in John 1:51 was the point of Jacob’s ladder, when Jesus says, “You will see the angels of God ascending and descending,” is, “I am the ladder. I am the place where Heaven’s fullness meets earth’s need. You are in the dark. You are in despair. I am the One who will meet your need.” Here in His amazing grace, you see He’s turned the knife on him. He turned the knife and said, “You are in the dark. You are in the dark. You are in the dark,” but He does that so that He can say, “Look unto Me and be saved!” That’s the character of God. He only exposes our sin so that we will in our despair cry out.”

Listen, if you wonder if you’re born again today, the answer is keep looking at Jesus. Keep reading His Word. Keep crying out to Him. Keep looking to the Son of Man and know He came down to bring life. You don’t have to pry it from His fingers. He’s loving Nicodemus, here. He’s lavishing love on him, here, and sometimes His words come to you in pain. Sometimes circumstances have to really come hard upon us before we really open up to God, and every time that happens, it’s God loving you enough to help you look to Him. That’s the glory of our God of salvation – Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, who left Heaven and who has brought Heaven to earth, and will take us who believe in Him, back to Heaven.

Let’s pray together...

Father, we rejoice in You and the glory of Your salvation. We pray that You would help every person in this room to understand the depth of our need and the sufficiency of the Savior. Lord, let us cast off everything and love only Christ. And those who are not saved yet, may You grant them grace, may You grant them new life, and may You keep their eyes on Jesus until new life becomes real. We thank You that You are compassionate and gracious, abounding in lovingkindness. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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