

An Evening Conversation

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There are few texts as beloved as John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). We cannot help but be encouraged by the hope of this passage. Yet, these words of Jesus came near the end of a perplexing conversation.

An inquiring member of the Sanhedrin Council quietly visited Jesus one evening. Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus. There was much Nicodemus misunderstood about Jesus. His confusion would persist until the darkness gave way to light.

For most of my adult life, I have been captivated by this evening conversation. Like the rest of the Gospel of John, each phrase is rich with meaning. Unfortunately, much of this discussion has been ignored, downplayed, and even dismissed. Once again, let’s approach Jesus’ words with the greatest humility and seek to learn what He taught.

This Conversation Is about...

1). The identity of Jesus. Nicodemus began this conversation by telling Jesus what he and his colleagues had concluded about Jesus’ identity: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (John 3:2).

This was a rather bold assertion by Nicodemus. He was certain Jesus was a teacher from God. Nicodemus was comfortable with Jesus being a teacher from God. There had been other teachers like this in the history of the Jewish people. Like many of his day, perhaps Nicodemus thought of Jesus like one of the prophets. To the contrary, Jesus was much more than a teacher from God.

This perception of Jesus continues today. Many are willing to accept Jesus as a teacher from God. Others will accept Jesus as a teacher, but not from God. Few are willing to accept Jesus for who He truly is: the Son of God.

Jesus never responded to Nicodemus’ assertion. Nicodemus failed to accept what Jesus had begun to reveal by His signs and wonders.

2). God’s new world. Most are familiar with Jesus telling Nicodemus that he must be reborn. The concept of rebirth was well-known among the Jews and pagans. Each had ideas about a future new world. The pagans thought the universe was cyclical. Progress, decline, burning, and rebirth. The Jews thought God’s new world would begin at the end of time. In the wake of her brother’s death, Martha spoke of the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus spoke of God's new world differently. God's new world was being initiated in the present. The opening lines of the Gospel of John declares a new creation coming by Jesus. Nicodemus could become part of God's new world by being reborn. But how?

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 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?" (John 3:3-4).

3). Rebirth by faith in the Spirit & Son of God. Jesus answered Nicodemus' question by teaching him about the Spirit and the Son of God. Rebirth did not come by fire. Rebirth was not something that was coming at the end of time.

Rebirth had come in the present by water and the Spirit. Water and the Spirit are how new life is given. This echoes the prophet Ezekiel. He spoke about dry bones coming back to life and a desolate desert becoming a lush oasis. Both would be transformed by water and the Spirit (Ezek. 37, 47). These prophecies were finally being kept.

The Son of God had come to be lifted up for the sins of the world. However, we must believe. If we want to be reborn into God's new world, we must believe in what the death of His Son accomplished for us. Like the snake-bitten Israelites in the desert, we must look to the cross of Jesus for our salvation. Otherwise, we will be condemned along with the old world.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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. 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 3:14-18).

Conclusion

The teaching revealed by Jesus is deep with meaning. Jesus said enough to challenge the thinking of Nicodemus and stoke his curiosity. Nicodemus continued to seek a better understanding of Jesus. In time, Nicodemus would recognize Jesus as king. May we learn from his example.