

The Gospel of John

Nicodemus had a difficult time with Jesus. He thought he was going to have a nice conversation, but things did not go as he planned. Jesus knew how to be polite, but He also knew that was not what Nicodemus needed. We understand the story because we have heard it many of times and we have had terms like “born again” and “Son of Man” explained to us. But Nicodemus has never heard of the Son of Man. He does not understand Jesus when He says, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” But the scene happened for our sake, as John explains.

There is some disagreement about the speaker in John 3:16, but I think it is best understood to be John, making an editorial comment, rather than Jesus continuing to speak to Nicodemus. The verse says, “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.” Jesus did not refer to Himself as “the Son,” though He did call Himself “Son of Man.” He did not use the former phrase because He was veiling His identity during His life on earth so people did not get the wrong idea. He was not yet revealing He was the Son of God. It was not time, for this was the beginning of His ministry and people would not have understood it properly. So in John 3:16-18 the author is explaining to us what Jesus means, so we will not be in Nicodemus’ position.

John writes so that his readers will understand and believe. The goal for Nicodemus is also to believe, but in order to believe, he has to realize how desperate his situation is. So the answer is not yet given to Nicodemus. By the end of the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is a believer. But to be a believer, he had to first realize he was an unbeliever. The same thing is true today for nominal Christians. They need to understand that the Gospel they heard may not be the real Gospel. Being nice to each other is not the Gospel. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is not the Gospel. “God exists” is not the Gospel. So even to this day, growing up in a Christian home is not enough.

In chapter 2, John taught us that observing a sign is not enough—you must interpret the sign. And in chapter 3 he taught that calling Jesus teacher is not enough. The story of the woman at the well in chapter 4 shows that calling Jesus a prophet is not enough either. This story is even more interesting when juxtaposed Nicodemus’ story. Nicodemus is a Jewish male ruler, who is respected, powerful, trained, and prominent. The woman at the well is a female Samaritan, who is an outcast, despised, rejected, untrained, ill-informed, and ill at ease. Nicodemus wants to talk to Jesus as an equal, whereas the woman at the well can hardly believe Jesus is talking to her. The occasion for the interaction is that Jesus is walking through Samaritan territory, which many Jews did not do. Jesus is tired and stops at a well while His disciples go into town to buy some food. He asked a woman, who came at noon, if she would give Him a drink. The woman is astonished and cannot even believe that He is talking to her. There are many factors for this: He is a Jew and she is a Samaritan; He is a male and she is a female. She has also been divorced five times, making her an outcast in her own society. The Jews did not talk to the Samaritans and there are many examples in ancient Jewish literature that convey their disdain for the Samaritans. Furthermore, Jewish rabbis were vehemently opposed to interacting with women at all, especially about matters of the law. Jesus, on the other hand, had a persistent habit of associating with the wrong people and of lifting up the outcasts and nobodies of the world. We would go a long way, as the church, if we could begin to do likewise.

In Jesus’ talk with this woman, He uses words with double meaning. They are talking about water, and after she gets done sputtering about Him asking her for a drink, Jesus says in John 4:10, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” She replies, “You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?” Then Jesus says, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but

whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Now that well exists today, and its water is not from a river or lake but from a spring. So Jesus is saying, “You come to a spring to gather water everyday. It fills the well day by day, bubbling up. But I am going to tell you there is water that comes up within your spirit that fills you up from within and gives you eternal life. That is the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Salvation is not a matter of trying hard and being drained. While you are pouring out yourself for ministry, you are not draining your supply. I am not saying you do not get tired in ministry. But I am saying that you do drawing upon your own supply. It is bubbling up within you, and it keeps on bubbling up. That is what Jesus can give you.

The woman has a difficult time receiving this. Jesus offers her salvation, and she misconstrues what He is saying. When Jesus shows He knows she has been divorced five times, she says she knows He is a prophet. But Jesus says the issue is not whether He is a prophet or not; the issue is true worship. She does not need to call Him “Prophet”; the goal is to realize He is the Messiah. Jesus is the Savior and should be worshipped—that is the point of their conversation. We do not know exactly what happened to her, although we do know that many people from that town believed because of her. And we begin to see the way Jesus works—with signs that are a bit cryptic and discussions that give people what they need. Nicodemus needed confusion, and this woman needed a sign that He knew her past and then plain talk about who He is.

John 4 contains another sign that is also revealing, though it is a bit different. Jesus is again in Canaan when it says in John 4:46-47, “There was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.” Then Jesus made the statement, “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe.” They are not really believing in Him, for they just want signs. But when the man says again, “Sir, come down before my child dies,” Jesus replies that the man can go home and his son will live. The man took Jesus at His word and did not wait for the sign or wonder before believing. We might say He took the rebuke Jesus gave and he believed in advance. By the time he got home, his son was better. The father realized his son was healed exactly when Jesus had spoken. Thus his faith was completed when the child was healed. This sign is more hopeful because there is some hint that people can start to believe before they receive a sign. This person showed a better way to take a sign—beginning to believe and sealing it by the miracle.

But it does not always work that way. There was another man who received a miracle, a sign, but it went very much the other way (John 5:1-9). This was the man by the pool called Bethesda, who was lame and Jesus healed him. He had waited 38 years to be healed. Can you put yourself in his position? Maybe we can imagine 38 days or even 38 weeks, but 38 years is hard to fathom. He has been waiting for a miracle because the waters of the pool will heal whoever enters the water first, yet for 38 years, he has not been able to make it in first. So Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to get well?” The answer might seem obvious, but he probably has a life as an invalid, and it is probably bound up in his identity. Nevertheless, the man says he does want to get well. So Jesus says, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” The man was cured on the spot; he picked up his mat and walked.

This all happened on the Sabbath. Somebody saw the man carrying the mat, which is illegal on the Sabbath, and started a commotion about that (John 5:10-17). They asked him who told him to pick up his mat and walk with it. The man did not actually know who it was because Jesus had slipped away. Later Jesus came and found him at the temple and told him to stop sinning or something worse will happen. This is a warning Jesus gives several times to people that He heals. Sometimes people are

crippled or diseased because of their sin, and somehow this man's infirmity was connected to his sin. So Jesus warns him to be careful. He needs to repent because he needs to deal with more than just his physical illness. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. That is not how you take a sign. The best possible understanding of what the man does is that he was a great fool. The worst understanding is that he deliberately turned Jesus in. But he certainly did not understand or make proper use of the sign.

There are others who did not make use of signs, such as the 5,000 people who received bread from Jesus (John 6:1-15). This is the next sign that takes place and it shows that Jesus is the bread that comes down from heaven. Without summarizing the narrative, I want to focus on the response to the sign. After the pieces are gathered up which fill twelve baskets, the people began to say that Jesus is the prophet who was to come into the world. They say "the" prophet and not simply "a" prophet. The term "the prophet" was the word Jews used for the deliverer, the Messiah. It says furthermore that they intended to come and make Jesus king by force, but He withdrew. The next day the crowd realized that Jesus had gone to the other side of the lake so they followed Him. What might be a good question after Jesus performed a miracle like feeding 5,000 people? Perhaps one would ask, "How do I join?" Or they might have said, "What are you going to do to deliver us?" Those would be good responses, but the one they came up with was, "When did you get here?" What a wasted opportunity! Jesus says to them, "I tell you the truth; you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:26-27).

Their next response is a bit better. They ask, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus replies, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." Next they say, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" He just gave them that sign, but they only seem to be interested in more free bread. Jesus points out the error of their ways, and teaches them about the bread of life. Jesus tells them that the bread He gave them to eat points at something else—that He is the bread of life. But they will not look beyond the bread. The sign means that if you want to have your deepest hunger satisfied, you must feed on Jesus (John 6:28-51).

Even though the people have a difficult time grasping the sign, Jesus begins to divide them by teaching in ever more difficult ways that He is the bread of life (John 6:52-69). He says to them, "My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." The people cannot accept this either because it is too hard. Only disciples can accept hard sayings. Only from someone you admire, from a friend, from someone you trust, can you accept a hard rebuke or a difficult task. If someone you do not know rebukes you, you will have a tendency to disregard it. But when someone near and dear to us says something hard, we listen. So Jesus is dividing His crowd. Those who are not truly alive with Him are driven away from Him. But He asks His disciples, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" The expected answer is "no." They may not like what He is saying either, and they find it unpalatable, but they are loyal to Him. Even if we do not understand Him, we trust Him for Jesus is the bread of life.

John next shows us in chapters 7-8 that Jesus is also the water of life. This comes up at the feast of tabernacles, the most popular, well-attended feast in Israel. They built booths, danced, rejoiced, had music, threw branches on the altar, and prayed. It was the greatest party in Israel, a celebration of God's provision for the past year, and they conveyed that through certain rituals. One ritual was a light ritual and another was a water ritual.

The light ritual involved huge bowls, several feet across, and they would take old underwear, soak it in oil, and set it on fire in the temple. It was quite a sight to see. The water ritual involved a priest who would go on a procession with a golden flag and a large container of water from the pool Siloam (which is still there today). Certain people there would pour water in a silver bowl on one side of the altar. On the other side of the altar they would pour wine in another bowl. And they would run down and mix together and the people would say, "Lift up your hand so we can see the water pouring out." That mingling of the water and wine symbolized that God had provided water in the past year and had given abundant fruit, the wine. They thanked God for the wine and water.

They did this every day of the festival, and it was especially important on the last day, the seventh day. On the last day, after all the celebration was over, it says in John 7, "On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.' Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." This is the time of the year when the people celebrated God's provision of water and abundance. They celebrated, gave thanks, and petitioned for water in the future. And Jesus is telling them that He is the living water; He is what they really seek; He fulfills their hopes and aspirations.

I believe that the text from John 7:53-8:11, which is the story of the woman who was caught in adultery, is not part of the original text of John's Gospel. It does not appear in manuscripts until about the fourth century, so I cannot see how it could be original. It may have happened, but I do not think John wrote it. It is also the case that the flow of thought works perfectly when you skip from John 7:52 to 8:12. Jesus is having a long discussion with the Jews about who He is and what He offers to Israel and at the end He says, "I am the light of the world," which is a reference to the light ritual.

This topic sidetracks us briefly by the issue of the Bible's reliability. The basic question people ask is: "Is my Bible reliable?" There are four ways to understand that. Number one, with regard to the autographs, which are the very writings of the apostles and prophets written in Greek and Hebrew, the answer is yes. The Bible is totally inerrant, reliable, and without flaw. But the Bible is also a real book copied by real people. Could the copyists make mistakes? Yes, and they did, which we know because every manuscript copy you look at is a little different. There are many tiny variations. Even in this regard, when we compare the copies we have 99.9% reliability. The next question is whether a translation is reliable. The answer to this is, "Mostly," maybe 97% reliable. The various translations quote things differently, but not much. Someone may also ask whether the notes in a study Bible are reliable. Maybe there the number is 80%. So when I say that John 7:53-8:11 does not belong, I am saying that realistically, there are mistakes in the process of copying. I am not saying Jesus never spoke to the woman caught in adultery. I am saying John did not write it, so far as the majority opinion goes.

The passage in John 9 is one of those somewhat humorous parts of the Bible. It starts off without a lick of humor in that there is a man born blind and the disciples see him and say, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." As soon as He said this, He spit on the ground, made some mud, and smeared it on the man's eyes. Then He told the man to wash in the pool Siloam. By the time he got back, the man could see. Again this happened on the Sabbath. So when the Pharisees asked the man how he received his sight, and he said Jesus had put mud on his eyes, the Pharisees said Jesus could not be from God for He does not keep the Sabbath. But others asked how a sinner could do such miraculous signs. Then they turned to the blind man and said, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man said, "He is a prophet," which is not the best response, but on the other hand, it is not bad.

The Jews do not like Jesus and so they did not believe the man was really blind. They went to the man's parents and asked them. The parents know this could turn into a bad situation. So they say they know he was born blind and now he can see but they do not know who opened his eyes. Next the Jews again talk to the man born blind and say, "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner." The idiom "give glory to God" means, "Tell the truth." In other words, if he says Jesus is a sinner, he will glorify God by telling the truth. Then the man says, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" Again they ask how Jesus opened his eyes, to which he says, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" The Pharisees then hurl insults at him and say that they are disciples of Moses. The man says, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." And to this, they replied, "You were steeped in sin from birth; how dare you lecture us?" And they threw him out. This is a man who has been healed of a blindness he has had from birth and the Jewish leaders heckle him, tell him to give false testimony, revile him, ridicule him and throw him out. That is how they take the sign and that is how they help him celebrate God's deliverance from his life of blindness. But Jesus treats him quite differently. Jesus finds him and starts a conversation with him by asking, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" In the end, the man believes and even worships Jesus.

In chapter 8 Jesus had said, "I am the light of the world." Now in chapter 9 here is a man who was blind, and Jesus gave him physical light and then spiritual light. He believed Jesus was a prophet, but then he believed that he was the Son of Man and then he came to saving faith. The Pharisees treated the man badly. They were evil shepherds, as described in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 9. They did not lead the broken sheep by still waters and they did not restore his soul—they beat up his soul. In chapter 10, Jesus says that He is the good shepherd. For the man born blind, Jesus is undoing the harmful deeds of the evil shepherds. He is the good shepherd.

John's Gospel is famous for the "I am" sayings of Jesus. I have discussed some of them: "I am the bread," "I am the water," "I am the light." The phrase "I am" is one that people ordinarily used. If you knocked on the door, the proper answer would be, in Greek, *ego eimi*, "I am the one." So Jesus is using something people would know and that He said from time to time. For example, when asked, "Are you the Christ?" He replies in Mark 14:62, "I am." And when Jesus walks on the water, He says, "Be comforted, I am." So it is something people used and knew, but the main use for it is actually in the Old Testament Greek translation, the Septuagint, which the people used in that day. In many statements that God makes, He used that "I am" in the Septuagint: "I am the one who blocks out your sin," "I am who I am," "I am the one," "I am the one who comforts you," "I speak to you." All of those "I am" statements are *ego eimi*.

So when Jesus says "I am" and uses *ego eimi*, He is claiming the name of God for Himself. For example, when He says, "Before Abraham was born, I am," He is saying He is God. He is saying, "I am the preexisting Lord of Israel." And when He is arrested and people are looking for Him, He says *ego eimi* and they all fall down to the ground. So He says "I am" to claim He is Yahweh, the God of Israel. But He also uses it to tell us what His signs signify. He uses long discourses to explain what the signs mean. He feeds 5,000 and says, "I am the bread of life." He is saying He is God and God is the bread of life—the real bread that lasts for eternal life. Before healing the man born blind He says, "I am the light of the world." God is the one who gives real light—physical and spiritual. After caring for the man born blind Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." God is the good shepherd. And after raising Lazarus He says, "I am the resurrection and the light."