

CHAPTER 23, Part 3, pages 269 – 272

Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman (Gospel of John, chapters 3-4)

Both of these stories are found only in the Gospel of John

Nicodemus

The first thing that Nicodemus says to Jesus is what he and the other religious leaders “know” about Jesus. **What does he claim that they “know”?**

Immediately Jesus makes a comment completely unrelated to Nicodemus’s opening compliment. The word translated by the TNIV here as “again” has a double meaning. It can mean “again” or it can mean “from above.” **Which does Nicodemus think it means?**

Nicodemus’s question shows that he thinks in literal, concrete terms. This way of thinking is going to be a real problem for some of the characters who try to have conversations with Jesus.

Jesus next talks about being born “of water and the Spirit.” Some people think that “born of water” means physical birth and “born of the Spirit” means spiritual re-birth. If that interpretation is taken, then Jesus is also talking about being born “again” but in a different sense than Nicodemus. However, water is a symbol for Spirit in the Gospel of John, so Jesus may be referring to spiritual birth and baptism; if so, he probably is using the word that Nicodemus takes to mean “again” as “from above.”

The Greek words for “wind” and “spirit” are the same: *pneuma*.¹ Jesus comments, “you cannot tell (literally, “you do not know”) where [the wind] comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” This may seem like an odd thing to say until you remember that Nicodemus has confidently said that he and his friends “know” that Jesus “has come from God.” That is literally true. Jesus has “come from God.” But Nicodemus actually knows nothing about what it means to “come from

¹ We have this same double use today: *pneumatic* tires and brakes are operated with compressed “wind.” And theologians write about *pneumatology* when they discuss the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

God.” He can’t even figure out what Jesus is talking about. And he is not going to know anything unless he is willing to be born from above of water and Spirit.

Suddenly the conversation shifts. It started out being between Jesus and Nicodemus, but the shift to the plural shows that now the author and his community of Jesus-followers are conversing with their fellow Jews who, like Nicodemus, just don’t get it.

“**We** speak of what **we** know, and **we** testify to what **we** have seen, but still **you people** do not accept **our** testimony. I have spoken to **y’all** about earthly things and **y’all** do not believe; how then will **y’all** believe if I speak of heavenly things?”

The reference to Moses and the snake comes from an incident in the Old Testament (Numbers 21:9) when God’s people were being killed by poisonous snakes, but when Moses made an image of a snake and “lifted it up” on a pole, everyone who looked at it lived rather than dying. Jesus says here that he will be “lifted up” on the cross and his death will make it possible for those who put their trust in him to have “eternal life.”

Now comes the famous John 3:16: God sent his one and only Son into the world because of God’s great love for the world. God does not want the world condemned, but saved (the word for “saved” means “healed” or “made whole” here). God’s desire is not death for God’s creation, but life. We rebellious, idolatrous humans, like Adam and Eve, are “condemned already” because we trust in ourselves or in other values or schemes and don’t trust in Jesus, who reveals God. Like Nicodemus, we need to stop exclaiming that the new life that Jesus offers us is absurd and impossible because we are too old or because we “know” too much. The only important question is not “how” but “whether”---whether we choose to be dead or alive. Because “eternal life” runs both ways. It doesn’t start when a person dies physically. Eternal life starts when a person is born “of water and the Spirit.” From Nicodemus we learn that it’s not what you know but Who is the source of your life.

The Samaritan woman at the well



Jesus “had to go through Samaria” not because there weren’t lots of other ways to get from Jerusalem to Galilee. Every Jew knew how to do that. He “had to go through Samaria” because God so loved the world that God sent his one and only Son to give life to Samaritans.

Again, Jesus and his conversation partner talk past each other. The woman wants to know how Jesus can get flowing water (the ordinary meaning of “living” water in that time) out of a well. Jesus says that he’s talking about an internal spring of refreshing life that never runs dry. The woman is still thinking about how much trouble it is to come to the well every day, so she asks for some of that “living water” (whatever it is that this strange guy is talking about).

Jesus is done talking about water. He starts talking about the woman’s husband. Just the way that the Jews of Jesus’s time assumed the worst about Samaritans, we assume the worst about this woman who has had five husbands. She couldn’t have divorced them because women didn’t have the right to divorce. So either the first one died and she was forced to marry his brother and so on and so on, or five men divorced her, which they could do for any reason or no reason. No wonder she has given up on marriage.²

² Some might wonder why she hasn’t given up on men altogether. But if she has no son she has to have a man or she has nothing to eat and no place to live.

The woman perceives that Jesus, like the OT prophets Elijah and Elisha, has supernatural knowledge. As a prophet, he should know what God wants: is the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim legitimate or is the Jerusalem temple the only legitimate place to worship? Jesus's answer is "none of the above." It's not where you worship but Whom you worship.

Wanting to show that she isn't completely ignorant about religion, the woman starts talking about what she **knows**. The Messiah is coming and he'll explain everything (unlike this guy who talks in riddles). Jesus's response to this changes everything. None of the translations really do justice to his answer. Literally he says, "I am---the one who speaks to you." Now the woman gets it. Even the Samaritans know that "I AM" is the name of the one true God (see the top of page 38). And the one true God IS SPEAKING TO HER! She leaves her water jar and runs to tell the good news to the rest of the Samaritans. Suddenly she is experiencing for herself that mysterious internal spring of unending life. Who needs a water jar?

Her message is the same as that of Philip to Nathanael: "Come see!" And after spending time with Jesus the Samaritans can say, "We **know** that this man really is the Savior of the world." If you have time to sit down and read the entire Gospel of John you will find a lot of talk about who **knows** and what is to be **known**. It is a major theme in John's Gospel.³

Thoughts on Christian maturity

Sometimes Christians get trapped in the cognitive. Biblical problems and ambiguities annoy us. We want to know why the Bible says that God did this or that and whether some miraculous event really happened or if it was just a natural phenomenon. The next step is often a retreat from trust. If I don't understand it, it's not trustworthy. Or if I do understand it and don't approve of it, it's not trustworthy.

Thinking about God is always good. God wants to be loved with "all your mind." Using intellect to keep God at arm's length is a form of idolatry.

³ For further reading, see Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 11-116.