

Misunderstanding God

Are You Ever Misunderstood?

I was recently substitute teaching in a fourth grade class and I did not hear a question one of the students had so I asked her to restate it. "I am an old man", I told her. "I don't always hear well". Before she could repeat herself, one of the kids asked me loudly, "How old are you?" The entire class perked up at this. In response, I asked them how old they thought I was. Now, I know that puts people in an awkward position, but I have an awkward sense of humor and waited for their response. "70", one child blurted out and others in the class nodded their heads in agreement. I was in shock...even a bit cross. My face I am certain showed it too. I guess, in my warped sense of self, I was hoping they would say "40" or maybe even "50" but certainly not "70". I stared at them for a brief, uncomfortable moment, and then chortled. "No, I am not seventy." I of course did not have the emotional strength to admit I was 66 and I left them hanging as to my actual age. To a 10 year old there is no difference between 66 and 70; they are the same... "granddad age", but to a 66 year old, they are "miles apart".

Sometimes we are the ones who are misunderstood and not appreciated for who we are but, rare as it may seem, we don't get it right occasionally in how we see someone else. Nicodemus, well remembered by John the Apostle was certain he knew who he was. He was a Pharisee, and one of the few Pharisees selected to be in the ruling body of the Jews. Pharisees were a confident bunch; certain they understood and followed the scriptures better than any other Jews. In fact, most Pharisees looked down on everyone who wasn't one of them. They proclaimed the following of the Laws of God down to the smallest detail but like most who see life as "my way or the highway", Pharisees weren't always great at doing what was right themselves. Nonetheless, this Pharisee, Nicodemus came to Jesus "at night. **Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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."** (John 3: 1-2 NIV) The symbolic nature of this description is not subtle in the original Greek rendering. Literally, Nicodemus came "from the night". We might say he was in the darkness when Nicodemus came to Jesus. Isn't that interesting. Here was Nicodemus, who was certain he had it together, yet he was in the dark about himself, Jesus and salvation. Do you know anyone like that?

It's funny, the arrogance Nicodemus showed. Rather than introduce himself, Nicodemus used the first person plural to begin the conversation. "We know..." Who's is the we? As far as we can tell, it was just Nicodemus there. He may have come representing other famous Pharisees, but it is more likely Nicodemus was just a bit full of himself. He addressed Jesus as "Rabbi" which of course Christ was but He was and is much more than that. Jesus is Messiah, Son of God, and God in flesh. Nicodemus probably thought he was doing Jesus a favor by confirming that Jesus was from God and had God with Him. I can imagine Jesus thinking, "Gee, thanks Nicodemus. I didn't know that! But now I feel better about myself." Did Nicodemus think he was the one who determined whether or not Jesus was from God?

Nicodemus, certain he was in the light already, came out of the darkness and found himself in the middle of the light, the light of Jesus. I am sure that Nicodemus was not prepared for Jesus' response. **In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** (John 3: 3 NIV) This is one of the most famous pronouncements Jesus is recorded as making to any particular person. And it most likely was just as jolting to Nicodemus as it was to the woman at the well when He told her that she had been married five times and the one living with her was not her husband. It is interesting that what Jesus proclaimed could be taken one of two ways. He was either informing Nicodemus that He needed to be fathered from above, which most likely is what Jesus meant, or he had to be born again if He was to see the kingdom of God, which is how Nicodemus understood it. Either of course works. Nicodemus was incredulous. **"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!"** (John 3: 4 NIV)

Nicodemus certainly was being sarcastic! That is how those who think they are smarter than everyone else act. Nicodemus was about to become fully immersed in Jesus' light. The Lord ignored the sarcasm. **Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 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."** (John 3: 5-8 NIV) Many have misinterpreted Jesus' instruction, "born of water and the Spirit". Born of water simply was a way of expressing cleansing. That's why John the Baptist baptized with water. It was a sign of the cleansing from sin through repentance. Born of water and the

Spirit is just this. If you want to have anything to do with God's Kingdom, you must have the Spirit of God cleanse you, not from dirt and grime but from the sin in you. It has to be taken away if you want to live with God forever. A transformation is required; the removal of sin from you. How does this happen? The Spirit of God does it.

This seems so strange. Many would ask and have asked the same question as Nicodemus. **"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.** (John 3: 9 NIV) Now there is something subtle and elegant Jesus said about the transformation required. It is like the blowing of the wind. You see the evidence of the wind. You hear the whistle of the wind as it blows and yet just because you have no idea its origin or where it will end doesn't mean it isn't so. The wind is and so is the transformation the Spirit brings. Your sin is taken from you by the Spirit and somehow you know when it has happened, that God has transformed you. You may not be able to explain it. It has not got a grab hold of it sort of working. You just know when the Spirit of God has transformed you. The non-God accepting part of the universe can't believe what we know is true because they can't put the transformation brought on by the removal of sin into a test tube to evaluate. It is the ultimate black box. The Spirit does something absolutely supernatural in the soul of the one whose faith is in Christ and the one who has experienced it is certain eventually of the transformation.

What triggers the removal of Sin by the Holy Spirit? Jesus said it was quite simple. He used an example from the history of the nation of Israel to explain it. **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.** (John 3:14-15 NIV) Let me recap what happened. The Israelites, because the LORD wanted to protect the Edomites from destruction and not create a potential for war between Israel and Edom, were commanded by God through Moses to go around the Edomite land on their way to Caanan. **They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"** (Numbers 21: 4-5 NIV) In response to this rebellious spirit, God decided to purge from Israel those who despised His leadership. The LORD sent deadly snakes among the people, and many were killed by their venom. **The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.** (Numbers 21: 7 NIV)

Notice what the issue was...the sin of the people. Why do you need to be born again? It's because of the sin in you. The solution for the people was simple. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and hold it up. Those who looked at the bronze snake lived. Whoever refused died on the spot. Faith in God saved them. Nothing so very easy to save sinners could ever have been invented. Look at a bronze snake on a pole and you are done with it. You are saved. It is ludicrous that anyone would refuse this offer. No effort on your part. Just trust the LORD in the matter. Eternal life is that easy. You put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you have eternal life. A supernatural transformation takes place. God takes your sins from you and salvation is yours. There was no waiting period for the Israelites to see if they really meant it when they looked at the bronze snake. As soon as they did so, the sin, represented by the snake venom, no longer impacted them. The same is true of the one who believes in Jesus for eternal life. The Holy Spirit comes into you and instantly your sin is gone from you.

Eternal life is not a work on your part and the very real psychological and emotional effect of having your sins taken away from you is dynamic but not the result of what you have done. Unless of course you call believing Christ has done it for you as doing something. We don't know how Nicodemus reacted to this good news. After Jesus made the following statement, we aren't told how the proud Pharisee responded. **"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."** (John 3: 16 NIV) Later there is an account of the growing hatred toward Jesus among the ruling Pharisees, of whom Nicodemus was one. Nicodemus questioned the group. He asked them if Jesus deserved to be studied more before they made a conclusion about Him. Rather than hearing Nicodemus out, the others insulted him and they all went home. After Jesus was crucified, it was someone named Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who went to Pilate and asked for the body of Christ so they could bury it. The text says that it was Nicodemus who bought a small fortune worth of burial spices to anoint the Lord's body. Do you grasp the supernatural transformation of Nicodemus? He was willing to pay whatever it took to extravagantly honor Jesus in His death. The transformation moment when we put our faith in Jesus Christ for our salvation brings changes to us that are tangible and real. As Jesus noted, "you must be born again". When you are, you will understand what that means.