

**The Cosmic Divide - John 3:1-21**  
**Argyle – 9/25/15 – 52 Key Bible Stories**

**Introduction to Scripture**

Last weekend Kim and I were in Denver, Colorado for her brother's wedding. Part of the wedding festivities was an early morning hike the day before the wedding to St. Mary's Glacier. Although the hike was only a half mile in distance, it was pretty much straight up and we were at 12,000 feet in thin air. It was a good challenge for us flatlanders.

Just a little west of where we were was the Continental Divide ([map](#)). I was first introduced to the Continental Divide on a Young Life trip while I was in high school. Our bus stopped at the Continental Divide where our YL leader explained ([picture](#)) how all the water east of the divide drained into the Atlantic Ocean and all the water west of the divide drained into the Pacific Ocean. To illustrate this he said that if you stood on the Continental Divide and spit one way it would eventually end up in the Atlantic and if you spit the other way it would end up in the Pacific. Well you know what happened next. All of the guys on the trip had to test out that theory.

I got to thinking about the Continental Divide as I was working on the sermon for this morning. In John 3 we encounter a divide of another kind, what I am calling the Cosmic Divide. It is the divide that determines not which ocean your spit will end up in, but where your soul will end up in for eternity. It is the

divide between life and death. It is best summed up in that famous verse that is part of this passage - John 3:16. Say it with me if you know it. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”(KJV)

The context for this verse is a conversation that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish ruling council. This group of 70 elders originated with Moses and was the group that a couple of years later condemned Jesus to death. So, Nicodemus was a pretty important Jewish leader.

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Some have suggested that may have been because he was afraid to be seen with Jesus during the day. Others have said that it may have been because of the busy schedules both men had during the day. Night time was probably the only time Nicodemus could get some alone time with Jesus.

Nicodemus began the conversation with a compliment. Jesus’ response, however, took the conversation in a very different direction than Nicodemus was expecting. (Read) (Pray)

### **Jesus Unwillingness to Accept Superficial Faith**

The first thing I would like you to see in this passage is Jesus unwillingness to accept superficial faith. Nicodemus said to Jesus, “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.” Unlike most of the Pharisees who were hostile to Jesus, Nicodemus was sympathetic toward in him. He acknowledged Jesus’ miracles. He called Jesus “Rabbi,” even though Jesus hadn’t gone through the training to be an official Jewish rabbi. Nicodemus seemed to like Jesus and wanted to know more about him.

But Jesus wasn’t interested in polite conversation. He didn’t respond by saying, “Thanks for that, Nicodemus. I appreciate your kind words.” No, Jesus said something that would have shocked Nicodemus. He said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Where did that come from? Nicodemus hadn’t asked how to get into the kingdom of God. In fact he would have been confident that he was already in the kingdom of God by virtue of his religious activities and good works. And that was the problem. Jesus’ statement about being “born again” was meant to be both instructive and shocking. Jesus was unwilling to accept superficial faith from Nicodemus, because he knew that Nicodemus was on the wrong side of the cosmic divide. And like most people, Nicodemus didn’t know it.

Lots of people have positive feelings about Jesus and even believe in him at a superficial level. The church is filled with people like Nicodemus who think they are okay with God based on their own religious activities and good works. Anyone who believes they are going to heaven because of something they have done is in

serious danger. That is why Jesus is unwilling to accept superficial faith from Nicodemus or anyone else including us.

### **The Radical Nature of Faith**

That leads to my second point which is to look at the radical nature of faith. Jesus used two illustrations in his conversation with Nicodemus which help us understand the radical nature of faith. The first is the idea of being born again. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” “I tell you the truth” is a phrase that is used by Jesus to introduce important statements. It is also translated, “Truly, truly” and is like saying, “Hey everyone, pay careful attention to his.” In order to enter God’s kingdom, you must be born again.

It is clear from Nicodemus’ response that he caught the radical nature of this idea. “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!” When a baby is born it is a radical transformation. We could spend the rest of the morning talking about the radical changes that take place from the mother’s womb to this world. Birth isn’t a minor adjustment. It is a radical transformation. And it is a process that we don’t initiate and have no control over. It is the same with spiritual birth. Leon Morris wrote, “The way to the kingdom is not the way of human striving or of human excellence of any sort. We enter the kingdom because of what God does” (*Reflections on the Gospel of John*). A little later he wrote, “The natural

man always likes to think that he can merit acceptance by God by the kind of life he lives, the great deeds he does, or some other aspect of human striving. But twice over Jesus says that nothing of the sort is the way. The way is regeneration, by being reborn by the power of God.” The illustration of birth helps us understand both the power for and the radical change that takes place when we believe in Jesus.

The other illustration Jesus used for the radical nature of faith was one from Israel’s history. As the Israelites were wandering in the desert, they grew impatient against God and Moses. They 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!” So God sent poisonous snakes among them. Many people were bitten and died. 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 and the Lord told him to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole so that everyone could see it. If the people were bitten, they were to look at the snake and they would live. And that is exactly what happened. Notice that people were saved not by cleaning out the wound or drinking an antidote or anything else that they did. No, they were saved by simply trusting in God. There was no magic in looking at that bronze snake, but simply an acknowledgment that God was the one who saves.

Jesus applied this lesson to himself. He said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus was referring to the coming time when he would be “lifted up” on the cross. If we look to him; if we believe in him we will have eternal life.

### **Eternal Life**

What exactly is this eternal life that Jesus was talking about? That is the last thing I would like to talk about this morning. I think if you asked the average person to define eternal life, they would talk about in quantitative terms. They would say that eternal life is living forever. And they would be right - partially. Eternal life is both a quantitative and a qualitative term. It means living forever, but it also means living in a certain way.

To help us understand this it is helpful for us to understand the Jewish concept of time. For the Jews, time could be divided into three ages - the age before creation, the present age and the age to come. The age to come is the age that will be ushered in by the Messiah. The adjective that is translated as “eternal” literally means “life appropriate to the age to come.” The translation “eternal” emphasizes one aspect of that age - it lasts forever. But that is only one aspect of the age to come. The other, perhaps, more important aspect is the quality of life that people will have in the age to come. This is what Jesus was referring to when he said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Again, Leon Morris - “The point, then, is that to believe in Christ ‘lifted up’ for us is to enter a wonderful life, a life whose quality nothing earthly can produce or match.” It is an abundant life.

So when we think of eternal life we want to think not only of its quantity, but also of its quality; not only of its length, but also of its depth. To help us do that there are words like “perish” and “condemned” and “darkness.” The opposite of eternal life is to live a life without God - a life of confusion, alienation and futility. The opposite sides of the cosmic divide couldn’t be more different - death vs. life, eternal life vs. perishing, condemned vs. accepted, darkness vs. light. And the thing that determines which side of this cosmic divide we are on is how we respond to Jesus. We read in verses 17 and 18, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”<sup>18</sup>

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:17-18)

### Conclusion

By the end of his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus was faced with a choice. Was he going to continue trusting in his efforts for his salvation or was he going to accept Jesus offer to be born again? We are all faced with that choice and it is a difficult one. It is not difficult to choose which side of the cosmic divide we want to be on. Who in their right mind would choose death over life? The

difficult part of the choice is that to choose to be born again means giving up control and completely trusting our lives to Jesus. None of us likes to give up control. That is one of the biggest obstacles keeping many people from coming to Christ.

If you have never been born again, is that what is keeping you from faith in Jesus Christ. This morning I challenge you to consider the cosmic divide that separates Jesus' followers from the rest of the world. It is not that Christians are smarter or better or more religious than others. It is that we have surrendered our lives to Jesus. We've stopped striving and instead have looked to the lifted up Jesus. If you have never done that, I invite you to do that this morning. Talk to God while the offering is being collected. Or, come talk with me after the service or pray with Bryan and one of the elders back in the office following the service. The stakes couldn't be any higher.

So, how did Nicodemus respond to this choice? We don't find out in this account, but Nicodemus makes two brief appearances later in John's gospel that help us answer this question. In John 7 Nicodemus, at great risk to himself, stands up to defend Jesus in the Sanhedrin. And then following Jesus' crucifixion he came with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body down from the cross and bury him. Nicodemus had crossed the cosmic divide from death to life.