

“Nicodemus: Limiting Factors”

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John 3:9-13

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If you’ve labored under questions of faith or doubt, you’re in the right place. We continue today this series in John chapter 3, consisting of an exchange between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader among the people. He comes to Jesus by night, not to confront him or to accuse him of blasphemy as would often happen otherwise, but to hear more from him. He was curious. He wanted to understand more about what he taught and, perhaps even more, to understand more about who he was.

As we’ve seen, understanding may not be the primary thing on offer in this exchange, as Christ responds to Nicodemus in terms neither he nor we could easily grasp. That continues today, but somehow embedded in the confusion is this word of good news and of grace. Let’s go to God’s Word together, John 3:9-13.

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Superheroes have an origin story. Superman the last son of Krypton, sent to Earth, and has powers because of the sun. Wonder Woman sculpted from clay and given life by the Greek gods as an Amazon. Spider-Man bitten by a radioactive spider. They have an origin story.

Those stories might have amazing things in them, unbelievable things in them, radioactive spiders and all that, but the fact that they had a beginning, we can understand that. There was a start to it all; there’s an account for where they came from; so straightforward even a five-year-old could understand it.

So it was from that understanding that I got hit with the following classic on the way to school one day earlier this year.

“Dad, how did God get his powers?”

It’s a fair question. After all if your frame of reference has been Spider-Man or Sonic the Hedgehog, that’s what you want to know. I’m honestly glad he never asked how Batman got his powers—“Well he was ridiculously wealthy and driven by terrible childhood trauma. Those were his superpowers,” but that’s another matter. But when you hear in Sunday School or from your parents about all the amazing things God has done, you rightly wonder, “So how did God get his powers? Where did God come from?”

Took me surprise at the time, but even if I had all day to think about it, I'm not sure it would've helped my answer. The theological answer is that God has no beginning, no end, there was no moment when God was not; time does not predate God; nothing made God; no one sculpted God from clay. God eternally is, was, and will be, all at the same time.

But how exactly do you explain eternity to a five-year-old? How do you explain self-existence? I mean, yeah I think he's a sharp kid—I'm biased—but that notion is beyond any frame of reference he might have. It's beyond any frame of reference I might have. How do I even begin to grasp that which doesn't just last forever but is beyond time, beyond space? It's beyond me.

Yet there I was in the car that day trying to fumble my way through explaining it, and here I am today trying to fumble my way through understanding it myself. It is beyond me.

Nicodemus had to be feeling in pretty well over his head by this point. He was by all indications a pretty sharp guy, educated, and not just educated, but educated and trained in the very sort of thing, the very sort of theological, spiritual thought that Jesus is engaging him in. He's a Pharisee, which meant he not only had familiarity with Scripture and with it the thought behind it, notions of the eternal, of the holy, even some of the themes of renewal by water, even renewal by Spirit (those are far from absent in the Scriptures as Nicodemus knew them), but it meant he also had the inclination to dive in deep, to dedicate his study, his prayer, his life to understanding and following the way of the Lord, the way of the Law. He of all people should be able to get up to speed on this sort of thing.

But yet he, even he, responds to Jesus' words about the Spirit, the wind, and being born of water and Spirit, with "How can these things be?"

Jesus kind of calls out the irony there. He of all people would be a prime candidate to track right along with Jesus: "Are you a teacher of Israel," he says, "and yet you do not understand these things?" But I don't think Jesus said it to chide him specifically. I think it was more, if you of all people don't understand, can't understand, won't understand, maybe it's not about intellect or training or education or religious dedication.

He follows up: "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." You've seen yourself the sort of amazing things that are happening, the signs being done here at this Passover festival. You've heard yourself the testimony of those who follow. "Yet you do not receive our testimony." Maybe it's not about what you know.

There's a story of a scientist, an astrophysicist in fact. He once gave an interview describing an episode he had while on jury duty. They were screening and selecting jurors for a certain case, and he was in the jury pool. The nature of the case was such that the main piece of evidence was one person's eyewitness account. Someone had been robbed. The police arrested a suspect, but the suspect hadn't been found with any of the person's possessions. But an eyewitness said that the suspect was the robber.

So the jurors were being asked if they felt they would not be able to convict based on the kind of evidence and information available in the case, that is, of an eyewitness account.

The scientist spoke up, telling the judge that he would not feel able to convict, to trust the evidence to the degree necessary to put someone in jail if the only evidence was one person's eyewitness account.

The judge then turned to the rest of the potential jurors, asking, okay are there any other jurors who would need more than one witness before feeling able to convict?

The scientist said in the interview he was about to jump back in at that point, but another juror beat him to it, chiming in, “Your Honor, that’s not what he said!” At it was everything Tyson could do, he later said, not to add in, “You were an eyewitness to what I said twenty seconds ago and got it wrong.”

He was rejected from jury duty.

Maybe there’s something in us, something that even if we were to see something with our own eyes or hear the testimony of someone else, that is prone to doubt, that is slow to believe.

I think there’s a bit of that in what Jesus says next: “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

We may make deals with ourselves, or maybe try to make deals with the Almighty. If you just give me a sign, if you just make yourself known or reveal yourself in this particular way, or if I only could have seen Jesus with my own eyes or heard it straight from one of the disciples or from one of the people he healed, then I would believe it. But the tendency in the human heart is to look for any way not to believe, to be skeptical, to look for another way out, something that would help us stay in the comfortable cocoon of skepticism.

And so Christ says to this Nicodemus, fumbling around in the dark, who had seen with his own eyes, heard with his own ears, what had been happening, you’ve seen and heard all these things and yet you don’t believe. What makes you think you’d somehow be convinced by talk of heaven, the Spirit, and the kingdom of God?

Again, I don’t think he’s picking on Nicodemus. Interestingly enough, that “you” in verses 11 and 12 isn’t singular, it’s plural. Y’all may have heard me share before how the word “y’all” should be used in Bible translations, and these verses are a big reason why. Here in verses 11 and 12, Jesus refers to a plural “you,” to “y’all.” In other words, “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet y’all do not receive our testimony. If I have told y’all about earthly things and y’all do not believe, how can y’all believe if I tell y’all about heavenly things?”

I know it can sound a bit hokey to put “y’all” in there, but it changes how we hear it. Jesus isn’t picking on Nicodemus for not believing. He’s saying something about us. It’s more a statement on our condition, our slowness, our inability to grasp and to believe that which is truly beyond us. We are limited, in many ways, incapable of fathoming the curiosity, the questions that seem planted in our hearts.

And that would be a pretty sad state of affairs if that’s where he left things. Oh, little Nicodemus, fumbling around in the dark, trying to understand that which he is incapable of understanding. Oh, these silly little humans, diving in vain into a pool they can’t swim in. What hope could there be for them? That’d be pretty discouraging if that’s all Jesus had to say about it: “Don’t bother,” in other words.

But that’s not all he says. If you’re tracking along with the verse numbers, you may have noticed that we’re getting closer and closer to that all-too-well-known verse 16, John 3:16, but before he gets to that, Jesus adds here, “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

It may not sound like it when you first hear it, but that's grace; that's good news. "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." What does this mean? Why does Jesus say this here? And how on earth is this possibly good news?

For all of our vain grasping at straws, for all of our fumbblings in the dark, for every frustrated notion we have to seek after that which is beyond us and yet to doubt and misunderstand what we ourselves see and hear, our seeking, our striving, our questions, our doubts are not in vain. Is it because through sheer force of will and intellect and meditation we might elevate ourselves to that heavenly plane, leave this crude material stuff behind and reach some point of heightened existence? Call it nirvana, call it enlightenment, call it epiphany, is it because we might hope to reach it by our own qualities? Or maybe not all of us, but maybe someone like Nicodemus, of all people, who had the education and inclination and intellect to seek after it. Maybe if we were more like him, we could get there.

If we're reflective enough, if we're insightful enough, if we're profound enough, if we're smart enough, if we pray enough, if we serve enough, if we study enough, could we get there?

No, Christ says. "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things." It is beyond us.

But he doesn't stop there. "No one has ascended into heaven," that is, no one can claim to step up into this higher plane, this enlightened existence just by virtue of their own piety or practice. No one, but one. And what did that one do? Stay up there, far out of reach, untouchable, unknowable, beyond us? No. "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." The unknowable has made himself known. The unreachable stands with arms outstretched, saying "Come with me. I'm not just here to teach you the way. *I am the way, and I go before you, behind you, alongside you, and within you.*"

Friends, if you've ever been one frustrated by questions or doubts, by answers that don't strike you as satisfying, by uncertainties that never seem to resolve, it's not the end of the world to keep asking, to keep striving, to keep seeking, but may you hear the good news today that you will never be defined by your failure to fathom the unfathomable, but rather by the faithfulness of the one who finds you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.