

The Man From Heaven

John 3:31-36

Who is This Man?

Who is Donald Trump? If you follow the news, you know that Trump has been the number one story in all the news outlets for the past six months. The question is not about the facts of his life. Most people know, or easily learn that Donald Trump is a real estate investor who grew up in New York, is worth billions of dollars, and is running for president of the United States. If you dig a little deeper you discover that he has had three wives, four bankruptcies, and five children. Six months ago it was generally known by all the important people that Donald Trump was a buffoon, a clown, a tiresome blowhard who has no coherent policies and no chance of winning the Republican nomination. Now an increasing number of “experts” are saying it is conceivable that he could win the whole election. Wow! Now it’s even more important to know who this man is, and how he might affect us if he becomes president.

Two thousand years ago an unknown, unremarkable, and unimportant man rocketed to prominence in Judea. Like Donald Trump today – although 37 times more so – everyone was asking, “Who is this man?” What is the name of this riveting preacher? Where does he come from? Where did he study? Who is Jesus of Nazareth, and what is he doing?

This is the topic of each gospel, and each answers it a bit differently. Matthew portrays Jesus as a great teacher like Moses. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise, the Son of David come to take the throne of His father and restore Israel. Mark unfolds the story of Jesus as the superhero who defeats all our enemies – disease, tyrants, demons, and death. Mark’s Jesus is the Son of God. Luke shows Jesus as the new man who does what Adam was unable to do. Jesus is the perfect man who resists Satan’s temptations, cares for the poor, rises from the dead, and lives forever. Luke’s Jesus is the Son of Man. Each of these gospels shows that everything Jesus did was astonishing, and He drew unbelievable crowds everywhere He went. He was the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise to come to His people and rescue them, just as He had done in Egypt.

John and Jesus

After an introduction, John the Apostle opens the body of his gospel with John the Baptist bluntly declaring that “I am not the Christ.” OK. So now we have established that. But why does the Apostle open his gospel of Jesus with an extended account of John the Baptist, and not with Jesus?

John the Baptist was a megacelebrity. If you think that Donald Trump lacks the presidential aura, look at John the Baptist – a ragged man clothed in camel’s hair, a bizarre diet, and a message that was horribly offensive. Yet they came – swarms of people to hear this wild man tell them that they were sinners doomed to perish unless they repented of their evil ways. Of course people thought he might be the Messiah, the Christ, the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise. So when the Jewish leaders asked him “Who are you,” John replied, “I am not the Christ.”

As the Jewish leaders pressed him harder, John explained that there was a man among them who *was* the Christ. He pointed out Jesus, and called Him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Now if it is not immediately obvious to you why John did that, I am sure you are in good company. I doubt that anyone hearing John understood what he meant. So John clarified, saying that Jesus was the Son of God. Now is everything all clear?

Soon after this Jesus did two remarkable things. First He changed water into wine to provide for a wedding feast. Then He cleaned out the temple. The Apostle John is condensing the story here, and certainly Jesus was traveling and teaching before and between these two events. But the temple was not only the

holiest place on earth, it was also the center of Jewish political power. It was like the Vatican and the White House in one. And Jesus just marched in there and drove out the merchants so that people could pray in peace. If you think Donald Trump is rude and offensive, he is nothing compared to Jesus! Imagine driving the pope and the president and their aides out into the street with a whip!

The common people loved it! Finally, here was someone who would not only talk about their problems – he would actually *do* something about them! Let's go to John's gospel, chapter two, verse 23 and read how the Jerusalem crowd responded to Jesus.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. John 2:23-25

When the people saw the signs that Jesus did, they believed in Him. Praise God! What a great revival! Thousands were saved! No. Just because people believed in Jesus did not mean they were saved. John is pushing us to look deeper, a lot deeper into Jesus, man, and salvation.

We more easily understand what is going on here if we look at the root of two critical words. The Greek root of "believe" and "entrust" is the same. So let's reread this passage, and instead of using the English word "believe," let's use the word "trust."

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many trusted in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

The people trusted Jesus, but Jesus did not trust the people. Why? Because Jesus knew what was in man. So now we are faced with two new questions: what did Jesus know about man, and why did that make Jesus not trust man? What is in man that Jesus knew and we don't? Good question. Happily, we are immediately provided with an answer. John presents us with a case study in man, so the next verse reads, "There was a man..." Now we are going to find out what Jesus knew about man. Let's read John 3:1-8.

Flesh and Spirit

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The key verse for us is verse six, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." There is a contrast between flesh and spirit. There are two types of people in this world. Some are born of the flesh, and some are born of the spirit. In verse five Jesus said, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Only one type of person enters God's Kingdom – the person born of water and Spirit. So those who are born of the flesh do not enter God's Kingdom. OK,

so who are the people born of the Spirit? How can we identify them, and where did they come from? In verse three Jesus said, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This is the verse that confused Nicodemus, because Nicodemus is a very modern man. Nicodemus is a Brown or RISD or Johnson and Wales man. He is not duped by sly tricks and huge crowds of riff raff and slick talk. But Nicodemus cannot deny the seismic impact of Jesus’ presence, so he employs the scientific method. He makes empirical observations so that he can discover the truth, unclouded by the superstitions of others. He came to see Jesus for himself. But Jesus took Nicodemus completely off guard when He said, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” That did not sound complicated, but what did it *mean*? So this very modern man, this very practical man, this very materialist man did what any thoughtful person would do. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Now if you are a modern person, and if you have never read this story before, I think this is the obvious, sensible question. Yes, indeed – how in the world can you squeeze back into your mother’s womb and be born a second time? This is how I naturally think. But it is a grotesque image! And when Jesus says, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,” we recognize that Jesus and Nicodemus are on two different wavelengths. Essentially Jesus says that the second birth will be a spiritual birth. It has nothing to do with your mother’s womb or the labor process. And in this one sentence Jesus exposes the gaping hole in Nicodemus’ worldview. Nicodemus is a teacher in Israel, but at bottom, he does not really believe in the spiritual dimension of reality. He might say that he does. He might teach about the spirit from the Old Testament scriptures. But his impulsive reply to Jesus reveals that in his heart he does not believe it.

And this is also true today. Many modern people admire Jesus and respect the ancient religious documents. Many say they believe in Jesus and call themselves Christians. But when they look for truth, the real truth about life, they turn to science. Now of course, science opens up the natural world to us. I studied biology! It is a wonderful field, and I learned so much that was real and true. I would never deny the value of science. But it is only half of the story. The other half of the truth is found in the unseen spiritual world. Do you inhabit this world? Do you look for truth there? When a friend, classmate, or professor raises a question about how to help the poor, or who should be president of the U.S., or how to treat diseases, or how to stop ISIS – do you instinctively bring the spiritual dimension into the discussion? Do you *ever* bring the spiritual dimension into the discussion? Would you dare to say in class, one way to help poor people is to introduce them to Jesus? Or are you a functional atheist?

Back to our text, what is going on here? How is Nicodemus, the teacher in Israel, so clueless? How could he misunderstand Jesus so completely? What is wrong with him? He is a man of the flesh. Nicodemus has not been born again. He has not been born of the Spirit. He is trapped in a world of the flesh and is unable to perceive spiritual realities.

Nicodemus is our representative man. He shows us what all men are like. Every man and woman enters this world through a birth canal and emerges into a world of the flesh. We live and work and play in this world of the flesh. But there is another world. You cannot see it, but it is every bit as real as the world of the flesh. It is the world of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God spans both worlds, so Jesus, the King in God’s Kingdom, came as both flesh and Spirit. He was born of a woman in the flesh, but conceived by the Holy Spirit, as the other gospels explain. Jesus is the first man who was born of the Spirit, and He calls the rest of us into that same life.

So now you can see why Jesus did not trust the people. The crowds loved Him. They believed Him.

But their belief, their faith was the faith of the flesh. They could only believe what they could see and hear, because they did not have the organs to see the world of the Spirit. And since Jesus is the man of both flesh and Spirit, they really did not know who He was. They only saw half of Jesus. And as the spiritual nature of Jesus emerged and became clearer – their faith of flesh will be insufficient. When Jesus turned out to be radically different than other men – men turned against Him.

Nicodemus, the great teacher, is speechless. Let's continue reading John 3:9-15.

Earth and Heaven

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? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus says. And now Jesus introduces another aspect to the Kingdom of God. It is a heavenly Kingdom. In verse 12 Jesus sets up a new contrast – between earthly and heavenly. Nicodemus is an earthly man, so he is incapable of understanding heavenly things. Jesus is the heavenly man – the one who descended from heaven and now tells heavenly things. This is really another way of saying the same thing as before. Earthly is another term for fleshly, and heavenly is another term for spiritual. So now we see that this spiritual world is not a state of mind, or an alternate consciousness. The spiritual world is not a dislocation of the space-time continuum. The spiritual dimension to reality is heaven. It is the place, or the dimension, where God dwells with the angels. It is not up past Pluto or outside our galaxy, because it is not part of our material universe. Heaven is the spiritual universe. But what is critical to grasp is this – heaven and earth intersect.

This has always been true. All through the Old Testament you see God piercing the physical universe in miraculous signs, in words to the prophets, and in human form. But now, at last, there is a radical reordering of both earth and heaven. Those two dimensions which once intersected, but were separate, are now permanently joined. Heaven and earth are united in one new person – Jesus. Jesus is God who took on flesh, the King of Heaven who became a servant of the earth. Jesus is the heavenly man. And His purpose is to make you a heavenly man also. That is the meaning of the last words of verse 15, "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This is eternal life, to be joined to the heavenly man so that you may enter the Kingdom of God.

What Shall We Do?

So far tonight we have covered a lot of things which seem theological. This message has not had much in the way of what people call "practical," and that is because the gospel of John is rather theological – especially compared to the other gospels. Apparently we need to hear and think about these things. Why do you think God gave us this gospel? Don't you think it is because we need it? And if so, mustn't it be useful for something?

Here is one practical question that comes up at this point. How can we get eternal life? If you grew up in the church, particularly an evangelical church, you know the answer. You get eternal life by believing in Jesus. And sure enough, this last verse we read says that belief is the key: "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." But be careful how you take this verse. Notice that it is not a command. In fact, if you go back over this whole chapter, you never find Jesus commanding Nicodemus or anyone else to believe in

Him. Every transitive verb is in the passive voice. All through this passage Jesus tells Nicodemus and us that belief is the key to eternal life, but He never commands us to believe. You might think that verse seven is the exception, but an accurate translation reads, “It is necessary for you to be born again.” Every reference to belief is a declaration, not a command.

And the reason for this is that you cannot obey such a command. Why not? Because you are a man of flesh, a woman of the earth. You are, or were, blind, deaf, and ignorant of the heavenly world. How could you possibly believe in something you have never heard of, you don’t know exists? Elsewhere in scripture we are taught that faith is a gift. We believe because God enables us to believe. God plants faith in the heavenly man into people who are earthly, and they believe in Jesus. Faith is the key to eternal life, but faith comes only from God.

Does this seem hopeless? Are we then trapped in a material world, unable to do anything for ourselves? Yes, in a sense. But God has declared that when we tell each other about Jesus, that is the moment when He gives faith to us. Paul says in Romans, “faith comes from hearing.” (Romans 10:17) It is counterintuitive – very counterintuitive – but when we talk about Jesus, God plants faith in the lives of those who hear us.

So what are we to do? How can we obey the scripture we read tonight? Talk about Jesus. Listen to others tell about Jesus. Go to Bible study, come to RUF, and above all, go to worship on the Lord’s Day. And ask God to keep His promise. Pray for God to grant us faith to believe so that we might receive eternal life.

Now with that introduction out of the way, let us turn to the scripture assigned for tonight. Let’s read again John 3:31-36.

The Covenant Surprise

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Now it should be apparent that this paragraph is a summary of the first three chapters of John’s gospel. Jesus said in another gospel that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet who ever lived. But John was a man of the earth. He spoke of earthly things, like loving your neighbor, and doing business honestly, and caring for the poor. Now note – these are important issues! Jesus said that these are the weighty matters of the law. John said the people would burn in hell if they failed to keep these laws. And what did we say about John the Baptist? He was the greatest prophet ever! So his message was righteous and godly and powerful – and earthly. By saying it was earthly Jesus was not saying it was wrong. No! John was exactly right! John was doing what all the prophets did. He was preaching the covenant.

Remember, God entered into a covenant with His people. God bound Himself to Israel, as a husband binds himself to his wife. And God laid out the terms of the covenant – the laws that the people must obey. If they obeyed, God would bless them. If they disobeyed, God would punish them. But God would never reject His people forever. The prophets were God’s messengers of the covenant. They came to remind the people of the covenant laws, to warn them to turn from sin, and to offer them salvation. And John the Baptist was the best of these prophets. John was amazing.

The point is that the best that man can do is no match for what God can do. John was the pinnacle of the prophets, but when the heavenly man came, John's significance dwindled to nothing. Jesus is the king who came from heaven. He is above all. And Jesus came not to remind people of the covenant – Jesus came to tell us what He saw and heard in heaven. Jesus' words are not merely inspired – His words are divine. Simply to hear His words is to receive the breath of the Spirit of God. Jesus' words do not call us back to covenant obedience – they draw us into heaven where there is no disobedience.

Finally, at the end of the ages, in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem His people. Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant. Jesus is the offspring of the woman who crushed the serpent's head. Jesus is the father of the nations, the Son of Abraham. Jesus is the great lawgiver who sits in the seat of Moses. Jesus is the glorious King who rules on the throne of David. This is what we were looking for. Jesus is the man the Jews were praying for, longing for, hoping for. But when He came, Jesus was so much more than all these things. Jesus was the fulfillment of the covenant promise, yes, but He was far, far more than anyone expected. He not only brought salvation, to Israel, He brought heaven to earth. He brought life and health and freedom, but more – He brought eternal life. And this eternal life, this place in the heavenly kingdom is true and real now, and it is ours to enter by faith. As tonight we hear these words of the heavenly man, we are brought further into the heavenly Kingdom.

Do you believe this? If you do not believe this, you will not survive. The wrath of God, God's righteous anger, His divine crusade against evil – is aimed at you. Cry for mercy, lest you perish in divine justice. Jesus said He will not turn away any who come to Him. He will give you faith to believe if you ask Him. The door to heaven is open now. Come on in!

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