

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part thirteen

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THE SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY

John 3:11-13 - "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. [12] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? [13] No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Last Sunday we gathered our thoughts around the first ten verses of this pointed conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three. And our text today immediately points out a contrast with the last words Nicodemus speaks to Jesus in that whole encounter.

The last words of Nicodemus to Jesus are words of *misunderstanding* - **John 3:9** - "Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be?" Jesus is stunned that an expert on the Jewish Scriptures still doesn't *know* (that's the important word here) who Jesus is and why He came - **John 3:10** - "Jesus answered him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?'"

So our text from last week *ends* leaving emphasized what wasn't known by Nicodemus. Our text today *begins* with what is known with absolute certainty by Jesus - **John 3:11** - "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen...."

And all of this raises one of the most fundamental, rubber meets the road issues any disciple of Christ can confront. We're brought - thankfully, by Jesus Christ Himself - face to face with the issue of *what do we know for sure* and *how do we know we know?*

Jesus was never afraid to be dogmatic about what He knew and what we could know. He didn't buy into the current trend of *romanticizing uncertainty*. He avoided the *"We're more interested in questions than answers"* mentality like He avoided sin. He spoke about knowable truth in such a way that many in the church today would find arrogant and presumptuous. And He seemed glad to do so.

Of course, Jesus knew and we all know that we don't and can't know *everything*. But over and over, as in this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus was stunned by what the religious crowd *could* know but *didn't* know. He never glamorized *unwarranted* ignorance.

I have three thoughts to pursue from this important text:

1) THERE IS A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR NEW TESTAMENT CERTAINTY

John 3:10-11 - "Jesus answered him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? [11] 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."

The first striking feature is the use Jesus makes of the *plurals* in addressing Nicodemus - **John 3:11** - "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." We expect Jesus to express high confidence in what *He* says, what *He* knows, and what *He* has seen. But who is He lumping in with Himself with such bold certainty?

And getting the right answer to that question matters. It matters because it builds the foundation on which the whole structure of revealed knowable gospel truth is established. Jesus says *"we speak,"* and *"we know,"* and *"we have seen,"* because He includes the apostle John and the other apostolic authors of New Testament revelation with *His own* knowledge and *His own* words and *His own* witness.

This is incredibly important. Jesus never wrote a thing - not a single sentence. We have not one recorded word from Jesus except through the apostles who documented Him. And Jesus makes it very plain to all who will hear that, to *His* mind, the words of the apostles recorded for the church carry just as much revelation and certainty as the actual first uttered words from His own lips. The truth doesn't get diluted or watered down. Nothing is lost in your New Testament. You don't have less certainty of Jesus' words than the first hearers of Jesus.

One of the truly great books on the nature of the inspiration of the Bible is the old classic, *“The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament”* by **Thomas Bernard**. On the very first page of the very first chapter he lays the foundation of his whole thesis on Jesus’ words in **John 17:8** - **“For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”**

Bernard’s point is Jesus didn’t say He gave His disciples the **word** from the Father, but the **words** - **plural** - from the Father. He gave them **words** - nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, sentences.

No wonder John labors to lay bare the living connection between the words recorded by the apostles and the revealing work of the Spirit of God Himself:

John 14:25-26 - **“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. [26] But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”**

Take notice. Jesus makes it clear that He won’t always be with them. But the ongoing, **abiding** reliability of the revelation of His words would be permanently guaranteed by the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the Apostles.

John 16:12-15 - **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. [13] When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. [14] He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. [15] All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”**

While these words apply to the Spirit’s reminding work, faithfully done in all our minds as we follow Jesus, their **primary** application is the way Jesus spoke these words, first of all, to the first apostles who would be responsible for recording the words of Jesus after He had ascended into heaven. The second Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit Himself, would **insure** accuracy. The church down through the centuries could confidently lean on the New Testament.

But there’s still more. These words reveal **how** God Himself has chosen to reveal His Son to us. He has marked out divine limitations. This is so important. This doctrine isn’t just about the **certainty** of the truth we have. It’s equally about the **confinement** of divine truth to the pages of the Scriptures. If I am to place responsible faith - **belief** - in Jesus Christ, I must come to Christ through the revelation of the New Testament. The final resting place for faith in Christ isn’t visions or voices or present day prophetic declarations.

When Jesus says **“We speak what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen....” (3:11)**, He tells us the path to certainty is found in His recorded words **through** the writings of the apostles in the New Testament.

2) **EARTHLY THINGS BEFORE HEAVENLY THINGS**

John 3:12 - **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”**

Notice again the very last words of **verse 11** - **“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.”** It’s this last phrase that sets up Jesus’ words in **verse 12** - **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe....”**

Then Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is his rejection of Jesus’ teaching about **“earthly things”** that keeps him from believing **“heavenly things”** - **John 3:12** - **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”** Only Jesus doesn’t explain - nor does the apostle John - what He means by **earthly things** and **heavenly things**. Not a word.

The only clue we get is there is a definite **order** in understanding implied in Jesus’ words. It’s **because** Nicodemus doesn’t believe these **earthly things** that he **can’t believe** heavenly things. The unbelief of what is earthly **blocks** the entrance of heavenly truth and belief. That much seems clear from Jesus’ words in **verse 12**.

Which leads me to deduce this. Jesus starts with Nicodemus **at the point of his deepest need**. Gone are the lofty truths of John’s prologue in chapter one about the Word being both **God** and **with God** at the same time (1:1-2). There are no more statements about Christ being the creator of all - **“...without Him was not anything made that was made”** (1:3).

No. Now Jesus talks about **Nicodemus** - right here **on earth** (**"earthly things"**) - right now - who has a serious problem. Nicodemus needs a new heart. He needs a fresh start. And he needs to **admit** this is his deep, personal, human, internal problem. Nicodemus, this great religious leader of the Jews, **can't get** to God as he is. And he has to humble himself and **kneel** before he's going to **understand** anything more.

This is the only starting place to know Christ. Jesus doesn't play intellectual games. He's after your honest, repentant, responsive heart. This is what opens up the door to knowing God through Christ. There is no entrance into eternal life - the things of heaven - apart from this starting point.

3) **BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHERE YOU GET YOUR INFORMATION ABOUT HEAVEN, GOD, AND THINGS SPIRITUAL**

John 3:11 & 13 - "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...3:13...No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Jesus claims a **unique authority** when it comes to heaven. In no uncertain terms He actually says He is the **only** one who has ascended into heaven - **John 3:13** - "**No one** has ascended into heaven **except** he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

I might as well say it right up front and get everyone equally mad at me at the same time. Please don't bring me the next best seller - and there will always be more coming - of some saint, or prophet, or four year old, or grandmother, or escaped prisoner, or probably soon, a converted cocker spaniel, who claims to have died and come back to earth with revelations of either heaven or hell. I'm not interested. I just don't care one hoot.

I have Jesus' very words recorded by the Spirit-inspired apostles. And He quite bluntly tells me He is absolutely certain of heaven because that's where he came **from**. And that's very different from someone telling me what he or she has learned from a brief **visit**. Do you see that difference?

When Jesus says, "**No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man,**" He is dropping a bomb on our pluralistic culture. He shakes up this world crammed full of religions and gods and prophets and sacrifices and temples by telling everyone flat out that there is **no one else with access to Father God** - "**No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**" The rest are all **imposters**. That's what Jesus is saying. This is what Nicodemus needs to understand.

Jesus is the **exclusive bridge** between Father God and mankind. There is no other way across. All other visions, mystics, and visitations are immediately put into question by Jesus' words in **verse 13** - "**No one** has ascended into heaven **except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**"

There are no others words of salvation. No angelic message or visitation can override Christ's central place. There are no other transportations to heaven. Don't expect any other offers. The space between Father God and mankind is now permanently **taken**. It has been eternally filled by Jesus Christ.

I close with these emphatic words from the Apostle Paul on this very subject. He's as wondrously stubborn as he can be - **1 Timothy 2:5** - "**For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus....**"