

The Story

A long, long time ago in a far-away land, a prominent citizen stood outside the assembly meeting for as long as he could. His heart was pounding. It would take courage to speak.

He could not help but remember the words his parents used to say, “Son, remember your name. We chose it with care... it means conqueror¹, one who with God’s help will overcome his foes.” Right now he felt more like a coward than a conqueror but as a leader he must do the right thing.

He belonged to an elite group within Judaism known as the Pharisees. True some members had the reputation of being rigid...sometimes holier than thou. However, his party was the progressive movement, unlike the rival Sadducees who were the status quo conservatives.² The Pharisees pledged to remain true to the whole counsel of God even when others no longer hid the Word of God in their hearts.

In addition to his party affiliation he also belonged to the Jewish High Supreme Court ...the prestigious Sanhedrin. Even under Roman rule the Sanhedrin was given considerable internal political power. Within Judaism their religious authority extended to every Jewish male in the world.

This esteemed leader also carried the title of teacher or rabbi. For quite some time now people in and around Jerusalem considered him to be “the teacher.”³ However, in his dual role as ruler and rabbi he was often conflicted. Now as he

¹ The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, K-Q (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962).

² Ibid 777.

³ Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995),94.

stood outside the hostile assembly he was never more conflicted. But he must speak.

A meeting was called by the chief justice.⁴ Without hesitation one member stood and said, 'as duly appointed religious leaders we must do something to silence this fellow Jesus. These common people are following him as if he was a legitimate rabbi. He has no credentials.' "The greater good calls that we be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice one man so that the majority will not be led astray."⁵

Others recounted how Jesus had committed blasphemy.⁶ Recently he nearly caused a riot in the Temple by turning over the cahiers tables and driving the sacrificial animals out of the sacred shrine.⁷ It was reported by reputable people that he actually said, "You have made my father's house a den of thieves."⁸ His father's house! Who does this son of a carpenter think he is calling Yahweh his Father? Yes this Jesus must be stopped by whatever means.

When the hostile voices subsided he stepped forward. A momentary silence fell over the assembly. He did not often speak but when he did people listened. The words of this esteemed member of the Sanhedrin and revered teacher of Israel could seal the fate of this renegade rabbi from Nazareth. Mustering all the courage possible he reminded the assembly that according to God's word a prophet should not be condemned without a fair hearing.⁹

Well his weak defense of Jesus seemingly had no impact. They shouted him down. They said, "Surely you know the scriptures better than that. This fellow Jesus has no legitimate reason to be making the claims he is making. If he

⁴ John 11:47(New International Version)

⁵ John 11:49

⁶ John 10:33

⁷ Matthew 21:12-13

⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, *World Biblical Commentary: John* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 47- notes that some modern scholars (not all) put John 3 in the final Passover week.

⁹ John 7:51

continues, then our whole religious existence could tumble down like the walls of Jericho. Besides, he comes from Galilee...no prophet is to come from Galilee.”¹⁰

The meeting ended with great confusion. His call for tolerance was rejected. But as he left the hostile assembly he resolved to meet this fellow Jesus and test his orthodoxy face to face. After all this was the Scriptural thing to do.

He decided to set up a meeting. Perhaps this could be accomplished through one of the followers of Jesus who had been hanging out around the Temple.¹¹ This disciple seemed to be on the fence regarding his rabbi. ¹² Some whispered... “For a small sum, this troubled disciple might be willing to arrange a meeting.” Well one thing for sure: whoever might arrange the meeting... it must be at night.

Evenings were a favorite time for rabbis to get together to discuss the Law and its application for life. But more over this meeting had to be at night for security reasons. It was a dangerous thing for a person of his stature to be seen with Jesus. Later as he thought back on that night he realized he came to the encounter out of his own spiritual darkness as well.

As the two met he decided to speak first since he was the senior religious leader. He said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ¹³ Even though this fellow Jesus was not a credentialed Rabbi he chose to treat him with the respect that was due a child of God. The meeting would not be a shouting match regarding who had the greater reputation but rather a dialogue between two sons of Abraham who were both seeking after the Kingdom of God.

However, rather than reciprocating the compliment, Jesus went right around the accolade and surprisingly said, “Unless you are born again you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” ¹⁴ It was as if Jesus was saying let’s not talk about titles and credentials but let us talk about you and your spiritual life.

¹⁰ John 7:52

¹¹ Mathew 26:14-16

¹² John 18:2; Luke 22:1-6

¹³ John 3:2

¹⁴ John 3:3

Well as a revered rabbi he was not about to disclose details of his spiritual life to this young Galilean, so he deflected the personal observation and took Jesus on quite literally by asking a clarifying question. “Born again? How can a man be born again? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born again?”¹⁵ Now he knew that Gentiles, who became part of the household of Israel by choice, not birth, were metaphorically said to have become born anew. But in reality this change of status, from Gentile to Jew with all the regulations, was more of a legal transaction than any kind of spiritual formation.¹⁶ Anyway what need a son of Abraham to be made new either legally or spiritually? There is no need for a son of Abraham to be anything but a son of Abraham!

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are 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 (all)¹⁷ must be born again”.

The mention of being born of water and the Spirit caused a religious flashback for him. John the Baptizer, a controversial religious contemporary, was calling perfectly good Israelites to repent of their sins and be immersed in water as a testimony of a spiritual change in life.

This baptizing of perfectly good Hebrews did not go over well with his party! But after further reflection it appeared that Jesus was possibly talking on two levels: on one level the necessity of baptism by water for the remission of sin and on another level the contrast between natural birth and spiritual birth. In other words it is one thing to be born physically but another thing to be born spiritually.

Then Jesus began comparing the renewing work of the Spirit of God to the wind. “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

¹⁵ John 3:4

¹⁶ Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 95.

¹⁷ Ibid 92. “You” is in the plural meaning others besides the conversation partner.

Spirit.¹⁸ Jesus reminded him there is something uncontainable, unstoppable, and indescribable about the Spirit of God. God cannot be contained in a written text or in some sacred space. Jesus was disappointed that “the teacher” of Israel lacked this essential spiritual understanding.

Such a personal critique pricked like the sting of a bee. Truthfully, this painful critique only confirmed an already deep inner suspicion. From an historical perspective he realized his own religious party came into existence as a critique of a stale ceremonial temple practice.¹⁹ The Pharisees were a “back to the scriptures movement” that had now become rigid with layers of interpretive rules and regulations. Was there something new emerging on God’s Kingdom agenda? If so, would he choose to embrace this renewal or remain safe and secure on the sideline?

Then Jesus referenced the Torah, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert.”**²⁰ As “the teacher of Israel” he recalled often teaching on this passage. He reminded his followers that it was not the magic of the bronze serpent that brought the cure from the snake bite. The cure came from Yahweh alone.²¹ It was the looking up in faith... it was trusting in Word of God that brought healing. If the people of God would trust and obey they would live!

Jesus went on to compare the exalted bronze serpent with his own life. He said, **“So the son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”.**²² Jesus was quite specific in the analogy. He pointed to himself as the one, who when lifted up, would bring the cure. This cure would be for everyone who would believe in him. This was a hard saying.

The interview left him in a spiritual quandary. Would he go against all he had known previously? Would he go against everything that had always brought him security...his personal piety, his family connectivity and his religious exclusivity?

¹⁸ John 3:8

¹⁹ The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, K-Q (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962).

²⁰ Numbers 21:4-9

²¹ Bruno Barnhart, *The Good Wine* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1995) 106.

²² John 3:14-15

Or would he cast his lot with this young rabbi “and believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you (he) may have life in his name.”

As the interview closed, it was as though his eyes were blinking as he stood in the shadows looking into the fullness of the new light that had come. The question was... would he walk out of darkness into the light and receive the gift of eternal life?

A short time later, public sentiment got its way and Jesus was sentenced to die on a Roman cross outside the city. The thought of such a horrible execution was more than he could bear. He chose to suffer alone in silence. However, his solitude was shattered when a colleague from the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea,²³ called him out.

“Nicodemus... Nicodemus, I have received permission from the authorities to secure and bury the body of Jesus. Come with me. For too long we have been hiding in the shadows. I have purchased a Garden tomb. Join me in giving Jesus a fitting burial.” Nicodemus agreed and purchased “seventy-five pounds of spices” for burial.²⁴ The two of them lovingly wrapped the body with strips of linen and laid Jesus in the tomb. It was a burial fit for a king.

As Nicodemus prepared the body for burial he could not help but remember the beautiful words Jesus spoke on the night of the interview. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that **whosoever** believes in him shall not **perish** but have **eternal life.**”²⁵ “For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.”²⁶

What a sight it must have been. There they were two secret disciples, taking a public stand, only after the death of Jesus on the cross. But strangely it was the cross that made the difference. The cross was intended to inflict suffering and shame. The cross was intended to stop Jesus once and for all. The cross was

²³ John 19:38-39

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ John 3:16-17

²⁶ John 3:17

intended to disband his followers forever. The cross was intended to undo all for which Jesus stood.

But in reality the cross has become the emblem that has unified our understanding of whom Jesus is and what he came to do. **“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”²⁷**

When we survey the cross it reminds us of many things but one thing in particular. **The cross reminds us that we cannot count on the things we sometimes think we can count on for our salvation.** We cannot count on our good works (philanthropy) to save us. We cannot count on our religion to reconcile us to God. We cannot count on the faith of our parents or grandparents to assure us of eternal life.

But what we can count on is God’s love, grace and mercy freely given on the cross. What we can count on is, if by faith we receive God’s gift, we will not perish, but have eternal life. Eternal life, an abundant life, beginning in the here and now and opening up into God’s forever.

This is my story and with God’s help I am sticking to it. Many years ago, a bi-vocational minister shared the story with my father. My dad was an eighth grade educated, coal miner from eastern Kentucky. He wanted to provide some security for his family so he bought an insurance policy. This bi-vocational minister collected the premiums every week. He inquired about my dad’s business, family, dreams and concerns. In a very natural way, he talked about the goodness of God, what God was doing in the lives of people. He often invited my dad to church. One day my dad took him up on his invitation. As a result of this faithful witness over time one Sunday my dad began his journey with Jesus. As a result my father began taking his five sons and one daughter to church. On August 9, 1959, as an eleven year old boy, at Wednesday evening prayer meeting, I too embraced the story of Jesus and by faith received the gift of eternal life.

²⁷ John 1:29

This story has become my song. Whether we know it or not we all live out some story or script. Some live by the script “row, row row your boat gently down the stream merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream.” Others live by the script, “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die (and when you are dead you are dead...end of story).”

There are many stories by which we live but today if the Holy Spirit is prompting you, I invite you to lay all other stories aside and embrace the Jesus story. Receive the gift of eternal life. You can do that by acknowledging you have sinned and fallen short of God’s intent. (You are in good company for all of us have sinned. There is non-righteous not even one.) Believe in Jesus as your savior. Confess him as your Lord. Receive the gift of eternal life.

Preachers and teachers of the Gospel resolve in your hearts “to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.”²⁸ In other words in all the many things we do (raising budgets, settling conflicts, running organizations) keep the gospel of Jesus at the center so that others will come to know and make Jesus known to a world that needs saving.

“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

²⁸ 1 Cor. 2:2

Bibliography

Barnhart, Bruno. *The Good Wine: Reading John from the Center*. New York: Paulist Press, 2011.

Beasley-Murray, George R. *World Biblical Commentary: John*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2011.

Sloyan, Gerard. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2011.

Witherington, Ben III. *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, K-Q. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1962.