

Survey of Biblical History – Part 1: Creation to Christ

#16 - THE BEGINNING OF CHRIST'S PUBLIC MINISTRY

Introduction:

Christ began His ministry around age 30. He was born around 6-4 BC. and began his public ministry sometime late in AD 26 or early AD 27. His ministry was largely confined to Jerusalem and Galilee and lasted about 3 years. The early part of Jesus' ministry was primarily in Judea (around Jerusalem), although he traveled extensively throughout the land of Israel. His first recorded miracle occurred at a wedding in Cana where He turned water into wine (John 2:1-11).

Early on Jesus set a solemn tone to His ministry by opposing the excesses and distortions of the Judaism of His day. He came into the Temple and wreaked havoc by overturning the tables of greedy entrepreneurs who sold Temple sacrifices to the poor, thus adulterating the Law of Moses. Much of Jesus' ministry was marked by confrontation with the Jewish civil and religious leaders. The Pharisees receive the most severe treatment. They controlled the synagogues, places of worship spread throughout the region. They had the most contact with the average citizen and therefore, the most direct influence. The second group of leaders was the Sadducees, Jewish aristocrats who had more control over civil matters. They had more contact with the Roman authorities than with the masses. They were less religious than the Pharisees (they had no problem adopting Hellenism—the reigning secular and cultural philosophy of the day) even though they controlled the Temple and its rituals, being of the priestly class. The third group was the Scribes who worked in conjunction with the Pharisees and maintained efforts to make copies of the OT. They were an association of professional lawyers, experts in the Mosaic Law (note however, that during the intertestamental period, the Jews greatly added and expanded to the Law in violation of the Law itself (see Deut. 4:1-2).

Jesus began His ministry by preaching that the Kingdom of God (or Heaven) was at hand. The central question which John the Baptist posed, and which Jesus took over was simple: will the Jewish people be prepared to accept her Messiah and all the implications of His message?

The Interview with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)

- Vs. 1—** Nicodemus was a Pharisee and member of the highest ruling body among the Jews called the Sanhedrin which consisted of 70 members, both Sadducees and Pharisees, plus the High Priest. Jesus calls Nicodemus “*the*” teacher of Israel, meaning that he was either the most important or perhaps the most popular teacher among the Jews (see vs. 10).
- Vs. 2—** Nicodemus came to Jesus at night perhaps in fear of what his fellow Pharisees would think. However, he shows considerable courage later on in his defense of Jesus (cf. John 7:50-51; 19:38-40). Nicodemus' question shows he had more than a passing interest in Christ. Jesus' recent Temple visit may have piqued his curiosity about the possibility Jesus was the Messiah.
- Vs. 3—** Jesus dispenses with small talk knowing deeper issues that lie beneath the surface of Nicodemus' question. What were the requirements for entering into the kingdom of God? “Born again” literally means, “born from above.”
- Vs. 4—** Nicodemus is confounded by Jesus' enigmatic statement (it was customary within rabbinic tradition to speak this way). He was confusing physical reality with the spiritual metaphor.
- Vss. 5-8—** The metaphor of “water” was used in the OT as a symbol for the purification of sin, especially as a promise of the New Covenant (see Ezek. 36:25-27). One must undergo spiritual regeneration to enter the kingdom of God. Furthermore, regeneration involves the removal of the consequences of sin/evil; a purification that is only accomplished by the Spirit of God (see Titus 3:5; cf. Eph. 5:26).

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Vss. 9-15— Nicodemus was clearly puzzled by these things. Jesus expresses wonder over Nicodemus' lack of understanding, especially as a premier spiritual teacher in the land. Jesus demonstrates that Nicodemus is among the spiritually dead (vs. 11) (see 1 Cor. 2:14-16). Furthermore, He makes the point that no one can ascend into heaven and face God in a spiritually dead condition. Here Christ places the focus upon Himself as the Mediator between heaven and earth. Christ identifies Himself as the antitype to the fiery serpent incident in the OT (see Num. 21:4-9), indicating that He Himself is to be the focus of faith resulting in spiritual redemption. Christ is alluding, in this passage, to His coming death.

Vss. 16-21— Verse 16 is the most popular verse in all of Scripture for good reason; it sums up the purpose of the NT and subsequently, the Bible and history itself. The difference between salvation and damnation is centered upon belief or disbelief in the person and work of Christ. Jesus came primarily into the world to provide salvation, and only secondarily to judge. It was not necessary for God to become incarnated in order to mete out judgment against sinful human beings; but it was absolutely necessary if he was to provide the means of salvation from sin. Note however, that faith objectively centered upon Christ is not the natural inclination of human beings (and thus the need for spiritual regeneration by the Spirit of God) according to vss. 19-20. Verse 21 indicates that the one who practices truth—and the subsequent transformative works attending the truth—is the recipient of God's internal transforming work (see John 1:12-13). The matter is summed up in 3:36: *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)

Vss. 1-9— Jesus left the region of Judea on His way to Galilee and passed through Samaria. Jews hated Samaritans, who were considered half-breeds; and so, they never traveled through the region of Samaria. However, Jesus was never one to follow the unfounded customs of the Jews. Furthermore, it was scandalous for a man to speak in this manner to a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman. Jesus' words and actions were consistently shocking and controversial.

Vss. 10-15— Jesus turns an ordinary situation into an opportunity to communicate the gospel. "Living Water" is a metaphor for spiritual life. Although this woman had a modicum of religious commitment, like Nicodemus, she mistook Jesus' words too literally. This water was not a perpetual fountain of physical youth, but an eternal fountain of life; the life that satisfies the deepest thirst of one's soul.

Vss. 16-26— Jesus knew that if this woman should come to really understand the "Living Water" that He spoke of, she needed to be exposed for who she was—a sinful outcast. He was indicating that if one was divorced from their spouse and remarried, it was regarded as adultery. Adultery for a woman in this situation was considered prostitution. Christ was exposing her need for salvation by revealing her sin. She tries to shift the conversation to a more explicitly "religious" tone upon realizing how Christ supernaturally knew these things about her. She began to suspect Him to be the Messiah. Jesus stated it plainly for her. Note that Christ is alluding to an age when Jerusalem would no longer be the place of central worship for the people of God, but in fact, the human heart would become the new Temple of God. *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* (1 Cor. 3:16).

Vss. 27-42— While the woman ran back to town to tell everyone about this Jesus, His disciples were puzzled by His conversation with her. Meanwhile, many of her fellow Samaritans believed upon Jesus, acknowledging Him as the Savior of the World (vs. 42).