

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Unable or Unwilling

John 3:9-13

Intro: As most of you may know, I was previously employed as a departmental supervisor for many years; decades actually. Part of my job duties was the hiring and training of new employees. My department performed specialized work which means we never really hired anyone who already knew how to do the work. Everyone had to be taught what the work was and then trained how to do it quickly and accurately. Some people excelled in the job, some people did well, some people just barely scraped by and, unfortunately, some people just couldn't seem to get it. Of course, with such specialized work, it was difficult to tell who would be good at it and who wouldn't. There were a few characteristics to look for but none of them were fool proof. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say out of all the people I trained to do the job, nearly a third of them did not succeed at it. After counseling and coaching hundreds of under-performers, I came to the reality that there were two basic reasons why a person failed to perform: they were either *unable* to do the job or they were simply *unwilling*. Inability wasn't a big problem. Maybe they needed further training or would benefit from having a more experienced worker sit with them and give them pointers. Inability was something I could work with. On the other hand, I couldn't do anything for someone who was unwilling to do the job.

I mention this because as we come to Nicodemus' question in [vs9](#) and the Lord's subsequent answer in [vs10](#); we must ask ourselves, "What's up with Nicodemus? How can he be so thick?" But as we read through the rest of our text today, we begin to realize there is more going on here than just a guy who's a little slow on the up take. This is the question we should be asking, "Is Nic really unable to comprehend what Jesus is saying or is he just unwilling?"

Most everyone understands the difference between a believer and a skeptic, but not everyone knows the difference between an honest skeptic and a dishonest skeptic. An honest skeptic is someone who may have doubts about certain truths or doctrines but will ultimately *face up* to them when presented with proper evidence; and, as a result, they will alter their life. A dishonest skeptic is someone who has doubts about truths or

doctrines but *refuses* to *face up* to the evidence. So, when one long held argument is defeated, they immediately take refuge in another. If that one is destroyed, they start looking around for a third. It's not that they're unable to understand, they *refuse* to.

What about our guy Nic? Is he incapable of understanding the reality of the new birth or just unwilling to accept it?

9 – *How?* – We've already established that Nicodemus was an intelligent man; intelligent enough to become an important figure in both religion and politics in Israel. So, how is it that he cannot seem to grasp what Jesus is saying about the new birth? The OT is full of promises as well as imagery that points to the reality and necessity of the new birth and this is exactly what Jesus has been referring to. As I read the passages, look for promises made to Israel: **Deut 30:1-6; Jer 23:1-8, 31:31-34; Ez 11:16-20, 37:21-22.** Did you catch them? There were essentially 3: 1) the re-gathering of Israel; 2) the cleansing and spiritual transformation of God's people; 3) the reign of the Messiah over Israel and the whole world. From the time of Moses all the way through to the Prophets, Israel had been standing on these promises. But, in Jesus' day, the accepted interpretation of these promises had created a cultural blindness that may have contributed to Nic's befuddlement. The common teaching was that the 1st 2 promises had been fulfilled. They saw Israel re-gathered from Babylonian exile (at least in part). They saw strong spiritual movements in Israel like the morality of the Pharisees, the faithfulness of the scribes in copying God's Word and the asceticism of the Essenes as a fulfillment of the promise of spiritual transformation. All they waited for was the reign of Messiah!

But there were other signs in the OT – the “salvation” of Noah and his family from the flood to start a “new life” in a new world. The Israelites “redeemed” from Egypt, crossing the Red Sea to become a people “set apart” to God. The story of Naaman's healing from leprosy – dipped (baptized) 7 times in Jordan where “**his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.**” (II Kings 5:14b). These and other OT events were parables of truth that pointed to both the reality and the necessity of the new birth. Clearly, Nicodemus must have been aware of them. Was he really oblivious to all this truth or was there something else going on here? Is Nic an honest skeptic or a dishonest one?

10-13 – Sadly, there are parts of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that lead us to believe that Nic was a dishonest skeptic, like many folks are today. Don't get me wrong; he arrived with real problems. There was a lot in the Lord's public teaching that he didn't understand. But, Jesus appears to conclude His talk with Nic, not by harping on things that were beyond his understanding but by *faulting* him for *not believing those things that were well within it!* It wasn't that Nic was mystified by things he didn't know. He's *refusing* to accept the things he could know and he was rebuked by Jesus precisely for that refusal. But what exactly is Nic refusing to accept? What exactly are "*these things*" that Jesus is so surprised that Nicodemus doesn't "*know?*"

If we're going to understand Jesus' response, we must make an effort to determine precisely what He is saying here.

Most people understand these verses to be referring only to the *fact* of the new birth and in a sense, they are. But, if Jesus is merely referring to the *fact* of the new birth then He is rebuking Nicodemus for failing to *know* about the new birth and the roles of the Holy Spirit and Scripture in producing it in men. But this strict interpretation really leads to some difficult questions concerning certain elements of Jesus' response that don't seem to fit this picture.

Case in point: in **vs11**, Jesus stops using the *singular* voice and begins to speak in the plural, "**We speak ... we know...We have seen...Our...**" If He's just referring to the new birth then who are the others that He's talking about? The Trinity? Not likely. OT prophets? The disciples? Maybe. But why include them in a lesson on the new birth?

There's another problem in vs12 with the contrast between **earthly things** and **heavenly things**. It sounds like Nic is being *chided* for *failing* to believe in things that pertain to the earth. But how can this be a reference to the new birth since Jesus has been saying all along that the source of the new birth is from God in heaven? Now, none of these problems are earth shattering but they should prompt us to seek after a better explanation.

Things begin to make more sense when we realize Jesus is *not* referring here to the new birth *itself* but actually, to the *results* of the new birth! He's *not* chastising Nicodemus for his failure to understand the new birth (who can?) No, He's rebuking him for his failure to *believe in it* based on the

observable changes it brings. Granted, Jesus had been talking exclusively about the new birth: the necessity of it, its origin, means by which it occurs (3-7). But His focus changed in vs8. Jesus doesn't just start talking about the mysterious movement and work of the Holy Spirit here. No, He only mentions this to emphasize that everyone who is born of the Spirit *will* reflect His presence in their life. In effect: that which is born of the Spirit is spirit and the characteristics of the Spirit will be observably displayed by them.

Likewise, the **earthly things** referred to in vs12 are the results of the new birth that can be observed by anyone through earthly senses. You can see their changed behavior; you can hear their changed speech; you can sense that this person is different. Who knows, they may even smell better! The **heavenly things** must then refer to things which can only be known through revelation: the *nature* of the new birth, *the atonement* (vs14). Thus, the "**We**" of vs11 refers to everyone who has observed these things and are then convinced of the power of God to change lives.

A good paraphrase of our text would be: "Nicodemus says, 'I've never seen this. How can the new birth be possible?' Jesus, 'Do you mean you've risen to the position of being *the* teacher in Israel and have *never seen* the transformed life of a person touched by My Spirit? Truly, We all speak about things We know personally and testify of things we have observed in others. You don't believe us. If I have testified to transformations in others that can be clearly seen and you *refuse to believe*, how can you believe if I tell you things that can only be known by revelation?" If you still refuse to accept the things you can see, how will you ever be able to accept the things that you cannot see?

This truth has an application for those who aren't Christians and an application for those of us who are. I'd like to illustrate the 1st with an excerpt from the life of Harry A. Ironside: evangelist and Bible teacher on the West Coast early in the 20th century. He was invited to give his testimony at a Salvation Army street meeting. He spoke to a crowd of over 60 people of how God had saved him through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As he finished, a well-dressed man approached and handed him a card. The man was a socialist who regularly lectured for Socialism and against Christianity. On the back of the card was a challenge to debate Agnosticism vs. Christianity.

Mr. Ironside was happy to agree to this debate on one condition. In order for the challenger to prove that he had an idea worth fighting for and debating about, he must bring two qualified individuals as proof that agnosticism actually has real value in changing human lives and building true character. The qualifications were simple... If he could produce one man and one woman who lives had for years been wrecked by the bondage and degradation of sin; who existed under the power of evil habits; who were social outcasts, helpless to extricate themselves from their wretched condition. Yet, one day they heard you lecturing on agnosticism and ridiculing the message of the Bible and were changed. Hope was born in their hearts as they became intelligent agnostic. As a result their whole being revolted against the wretchedness of the life they'd been living. They fled from the iniquity that had held them captive so long; and today are rehabilitated; they've won their way back to an honored position in society and are living clean, virtuous, happy lives—all because they have become agnostics.

If you promise to bring those 2 individuals, I promise to come to the debate and will bring at least 100 men and women who lived for years in just such sinful degradation as I have described, but who have been gloriously saved through believing the gospel which you ridicule. I will have these folks with me on the platform as witnesses to the miraculous saving power of Jesus Christ and as present-day proof of the truth of the Bible.

The challenge was withdrawn!

Jesus changes lives. He's done it *through the centuries*; He *continues to do it today*, in our time. If you are not a Christian, can you honestly say that you have never seen any examples of the real transformation that comes about in a person as a result of their hearing and responding to the Gospel? Not likely. So, if you're not a Christian, you need to face the reality of these things and yield your life to the One who is also able to make you a new creature.

If you are a Christian? What about your life? Sadly, it's possible for a Christian to have a lifestyle that's so much like the world they'll never be able to bring someone to a saving knowledge of Christ based on their life. Ask yourself, "*Has my life been changed? Is it still changing? Is there*

anything in my life that can serve as tangible evidence of the power of God through Jesus actively working to transform my thinking and my lifestyle?”

There are plenty of reasons for unbelief among the lost. It's mostly sin: sin keeps people from God. Sometimes it's skewed priorities. Sometimes, people are kept from Christ by the low standard of living among those who are called by His name. Your life *should* be different (peculiar even). It should reflect the reality of Christ's life within you. If it does, others will see it and both the truth and the power of the Gospel will be *confirmed* in their hearts!😊