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An Insufficient Intellect

John 3:2-4

Intro: Last week, we introduced ourselves to Nicodemus; a very accomplished individual in his day. He was a man who had reached the pinnacle of success; excelling above all others in the areas of religion, culture, education and politics. But despite all his notable achievements, Nicodemus was a spiritual failure. In spite of all his worldly accomplishments, he still didn't have the one thing he needed most - he didn't know God! Nicodemus stands in **ch3** as a representative of all men and tho all men may not match his worldly success, all men mirror his spiritual failure.

The Bible dedicates much of its text to declaring the full extent of **man's desperate spiritual need**. In fact, it's 1 of the 2 greatest themes of Scripture: **1) the complete inability of man to save himself**; and **2) God's gracious provision of a way of salvation thru the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ**. In a round about way, the scope of man's need is reflected in **vs1**. It shows us man's spiritual need in light of his external accomplishments. Nic had it all in the natural but he was **lost!** He needed to be **born again**. But one might ask, "**What about human knowledge? Man's greatest strength is in his mind. Can't he find true happiness and peace with God thru his intellect?**" Now, we wouldn't really ask that question but there are many in this world who would. The truth is, most people take issue with the fact that they are completely unable to please God in any way by their own efforts. In fact, when they are confronted with this truth, they reject the whole idea of it and immediately start looking for exceptions.

To understand **why man's mind is an *inadequate tool*** for discovering God, we must go back to the story of the fall in Genesis. **Gen 1:26** tells us that when God created man He created him in His own image. This means many things but one of them is that since God is a trinity, man was also created as a trinity. God exists in 3 persons: **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**. Likewise, man was created as **body, soul, and spirit**. We all know what the **body** is: **the part we can see**. Man shares the fact that he has a body with the plant world. But besides a body, man also possesses a **soul**: **the part that gives man his identity**. It's with the soul that man **thinks, feels, reacts,**

and **aspires**. Man is linked to the animal world by his soul, since animals also have a sense of identity. That's why Jesus said, "**The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests**" = they know who they are and they return to what is theirs.

In addition to body and soul, man also possesses a **spirit**, or (more accurately since the fall) man possesses the **capacity** for a spirit. It's this **capacity** that sets man apart from the animal world and the rest of creation. The **spirit is that part of man that has consciousness of God**. Thus, **man worships**, while the animals do **not**. This was the man that God placed in the Garden, a man with a **body, soul, and spirit**. What was God's singular stipulation? **Gen 2:16-17** "**...you shall surely die.**" What did Adam do? Either he thought God was bluffing or he just didn't care. His **desire** for **self-dependence** eventually overrode his desire for **self-preservation** and he ate of the fruit!

What happened when Adam ate of the forbidden tree? **He died!** But how did he die? He **didn't** die **physically** at 1st. That came later. **1st)** his **spirit** died. That was **the part of his being that had communion with God**. Thus, **that communion was broken** and Adam **proved** it was broken by **running away** when God came to him in the Garden.

2nd) Adam's **soul** started to die. Since **the soul is the seat of man's intellect, feelings, and identity**, Adam began to **lose** his **identity**, **give vent** to **bad feelings**, and **suffer** the **decay** of his **intellect**, as did all men who came after him. This type of intellectual and spiritual **decay** is described quite vividly by Paul in **Rom 1:21-23**. This is the **inevitable** and **unenviable** result when man gives up **the worship of the one true God**.

This is **not** to say that man has completely lost the **ability to reason**. That is not the case at all. We live in a world that has seen amazing advancements in technology, science, medicine, physics; things that seem to defy reason and all possibility. Of course, in this same world, nearly every advancement has also been used in some way to draw men and women away from God. No, humanity did not lose its ability to reason but unfortunately, what humanity **has** lost is **the ability to reason its way back to God**.

A few years ago, I lost the ability to move the very tip of my right index finger. It wasn't life threatening or anything like that but it sure was

aggravating. I would drop things, couldn't hold a pen correctly, some difficulty typing. The doctor called it "trigger finger" – don't know why, I couldn't have pulled a trigger with it if my life depended on it. He said it was a fairly common occurrence and that it could come back in 6 months or it could never come back. It did. Thank the Lord it did, but while it was out, try as I might, I could not get that 1 little piece to move on its own!

There is a medical condition known as *myasthenia gravis*, where the muscles no longer respond to the signals being sent from the brain. In the human body, the brain sends signals to a muscle for it to expand or contract. The signal is sent to the muscle through a nerve and it's received in the muscle by a thing called the **motor-end-plate**. In this particular medical condition, the **motor-end-plates** are *missing*. Thus, the signal is being sent to the muscle through the nerves, but it's never received by the muscle. Because it is not received, the muscle doesn't respond, and since the muscle can never respond it eventually will atrophy, wither away and die.

This is precisely what happened to humanity when Adam's spirit died through the fall. In the human system the **spirit** was meant to play the part of the **motor-end-plate**. The **spirit** was meant to receive the divine signals from God. When Adam and Eve sinned, the **motor-end-plate** **died**. Thus, although the signals are still there, although God is still speaking, people do not hear Him and their spiritual life withers. Eventually, even the human body dies.

Now, having described the full scope of death as it relates to the human experience, it is also possible to describe the full scope of salvation as it relates to the 3 parts of man's being. Man sinned and man died: spirit, soul and body. When God saves an individual, He begins to do the work of salvation in that same order. 1st, there's the **salvation of the spirit**. This is **justification**; by it man receives a *new spirit*. 2nd, there's the **salvation of the soul**. This is known as **sanctification**; by it man receives a *new soul* (*nature*), God doesn't just fix up the old one. **Salvation of the body** comes last: this is **glorification**; at the resurrection when the redeemed receive new bodies: salvation is complete.

This is God's great plan of salvation and **ch3** is going to deal with this in great detail. But, before we move on, we 1st must recognize the 2 major

results of man's fall into sin. **1) Man doesn't seek God** anymore; in fact, **he runs** from God – just like Adam and Eve did. This is man's **natural, instinctive** behavior. Why? Because, **God is good** and **man is sinful**. If man's intellect were working properly, it would tell him that all **truth & joy; all fulfillment & happiness** is only found **in fellowship** with his Creator. But when man fell, his mind became **warped** in relation to spiritual things so that now he thinks **happiness** is to be found in **independence**. God graciously comes to him with the offer of **salvation** and **renewed fellowship**, but man says, "**No, not that. Anything but that.**" And he runs away.

2nd result of the fall is **2) man requires revelation** if he's to **know anything** about God. It isn't just that man **refuses** to come to God by reason of his intellect – truth is, he is **incapable** of coming! Man just doesn't have it in himself! Paul says as much in **I Cor 2:9-10**. Man can never understand spiritual truth 'til God saves him & reveals it to him.

All this theology was merely an introduction to **vs2**. How does the **deficient human intellect** line up with our text?

1-2 – We know – Nic came to Jesus by night. A lot of preachers try to make hay out of that by saying it was a reflection of the darkness in his heart or something to that effect. Now, you can be as metaphorical or symbolic as you want to be when crafting a message, to a certain extent (**within the realms of believability**) but I think Nic came to Jesus at night because he knew that'd be the best time to have a nice, quiet, undisturbed conversation with Jesus.

But notice, other than the word "**Rabbi**" (**direct address**), everything Nicodemus said was a claim to his **considerable intellectual knowledge**. "**We know**" a strange phrase: either he's been conversing with others about Jesus or he has a mouse in his pocket! What did Nic "**know**?" We can deduce 3 things: (1) that **Jesus was performing many miracles**; (2) **these miracles authenticated Him as a teacher sent from God**; (3) **Jesus was a teacher Nic should listen to**. It is obvious that Nic has thought quite a lot about Jesus and His miracles. Tho he didn't quite grasp the true significance of the signs, he could see by their character and results that they could only be performed by the power of God. Sadly, the point of the story is that Nic's entire concept of Jesus was **wrong** in spite of his intellectual knowledge.

Nic's intellect had **deceived** him! That's why Jesus rebukes him in **vs3**. There'd been hundreds of teachers sent by God during the long course of Israel's history. Many of them had also been **authenticated by miracles**. But Jesus was **not** one of these teachers. **They were men. Jesus Christ was God**. They had come to **teach about God** but Jesus **was God who came to teach, to die and reveal Himself to men**. Nic's conclusions were valid as far as they went but their failing was that **they didn't go far enough**. Jesus was able to look past his flattering greeting and see the deficient state of Nic's soul and He answered him in terms which, (**though unintelligible to Nicodemus at the time**) were carefully calculated to speak to Nic's lost condition.

3-4 – again – Jesus starts with that which is familiar: birth, a universal experience! The word translated **again** can also be translated as "**from above**." Tho every human on earth has experienced natural birth, if they want to go to heaven they must also experience a supernatural spiritual birth from above – even the Jews!

Nic illustrates the effect of the fall on human intellect in another way: He responds to Jesus' words in purely natural terms. What Jesus says in **vs3** is simple spiritual teaching but it was a mystery to Nic. Jesus was talking about the need for **new, spiritual life** but all Nic could think of was **obstetrics**. When Jesus said, "**You must be born again**" Nic thought of all the things related to the only kind of birth he knew: **physical**. When that didn't make sense Nic asks, "**How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?**" (4). Jesus answers in effect, "No Nic, I not talking obstetrics. I'm talking about the birth that occurs **by means** of God's **Spirit**!"

What's the solution to man's deficient intellect? It must begin with man's spirit because that's where communion with God was broken. **New birth** means **God's restored communication with us**. Before **new birth** the **motor-end-plates** were **gone**. Now they're restored, and **the believer begins to receive and understand** what God is saying.

We mustn't think by this that our salvation stops there. **The fall** affects our **minds**, but **so** does **salvation!** Except salvation affects it **positively**. Scripture speaks often of **the transformation** God wants for our minds after

conversion. **Rom 12:1-2**; **Isa 26:3**; **1 Peter 1:13**, “*gird up the loins of your mind*” and **2 Cor 10:4-5**.

This is the responsibility set before every believer in this life. This is why you *must* **study the Bible** and you *must* be **exposed to sound teaching**. God doesn't save men by means of the human intellect. God wants *new men*. But He also wants to *transform the thinking* and *reorder the intellect* of those *new men and women* to reflect His will. 😊