

You Must Be Born Again

John 3:1-7

A number of years ago, a newspaper carried an account of a speech given by the president of a well-known university to a group of influential businessmen and civic leaders. The president told of a recent experience which he, his audience, and the newspaper reporter found humorous. The president was shopping during the Christmas season and happened to pass by a Salvation Army volunteer, standing by a "donation kettle" and ringing a bell. As he paused to make a donation, the woman volunteer asked him: "Sir, are you saved?" When he replied that he supposed he was, she was not satisfied, so she pursued the matter further: "I mean, have you ever given your full life to the Lord?" At this point, the president told his audience, he thought he should enlighten this persistent woman concerning his identity: "I am the president of such and such university, and as such, I am also president of its school of theology." The lady considered his response for a moment, and then replied, "It doesn't matter wherever you've been, or whatever you are, you can still be saved."

The most tragic part of this incident is that both the seminary president and his audience actually thought his story was amusing. I can imagine that if Nicodemus had been confronted by this Salvation Army volunteer, he would have thought—and said—just about the same thing as the university president. Nicodemus is a Jew, but not just any Jew, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures. Can you imagine being Nicodemus and having Jesus tell you that all of this is not enough to get you into the kingdom of God? Yet this is precisely what Jesus tells Nicodemus. If a man like Nicodemus is not good enough for the kingdom of God, then who is? That is the question, and Jesus has the answer, which John records for us.

Listen to John's account of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-10

- 1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.**
- 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."**
- 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."**
- 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"**
- 5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."**
- 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**

7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?

The setting: We want to keep in mind that there's a direct link with the end of chapter 2. In our last study, we looked at John 2:23-25, where many believed in Jesus as they saw the signs that He did, but Jesus didn't believe in them, because He could see the true condition of their hearts.

As I explained, those verses serve as an introduction to the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. John 2:25 concludes that Jesus **"had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man."** John 3:1 begins, **"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews."** Nicodemus is a man that illustrates a kind of belief that does not save. Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus. He could see beneath Nicodemus' religious veneer. Jesus knew that Nicodemus' religion could not save him. He needed the new birth because religion can't save you. To enter God's eternal kingdom you need the new birth by the Holy Spirit.

The story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus runs from John 3:1-21, but somewhere after 3:12, Nicodemus fades into the background as Jesus speaks about the Son of Man being lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. And probably the direct words of Jesus fade away after verse 15 and in verses 16-21 we have John's commentary on the truth that this story teaches. Today we will concentrate on verses 1-7 as I begin to answer the question, "What does it mean to be born again?"

And of course Jesus gives us the reason why the answer to that question is so very important. Why should we care about what the new birth means? Because as Jesus says in verse 3, **"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."** There may be some here in this room who have confused morality or religion for spiritual life. This message is for you. You must be born again.

It is also for those of us who have been born again. I want you know what really happened to you when you were born again. If you know what happened to you in your new birth, you will love God and His Son and His Spirit and His word more than you ever have and God will be glorified.

So let's turn to the question "What does it mean to be born again?" First I want you to see that the new birth is:

1. New life, not just better religion.

What happens in the new birth is not getting new religion but getting new life. Look at verse 1 again: **“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”** John makes sure that we know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The Pharisees were the most rigorously religious of all the Jewish groups. They separated themselves from the rest of the Jews by their strict adherence to their many regulations and rules.

In chapter 1 John has already told us that the Pharisees had taken notice of the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke 5:17 tells us that at some point early in Jesus’ ministry when He teaching and performing miracles, **“there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem.”** The Pharisees, for the most part, will become enemies of Jesus along with the chief priests in Jerusalem. But for now at least, there is one Pharisee who comes to Jesus. Nicodemus was apparently a leading Pharisee, because Jesus calls him **“the teacher of Israel”** (3:10). He must have been a recognized religious authority.

Verse 2 tells us, **“This man came to Jesus by night.”** Perhaps Nicodemus did not want to be seen talking with Jesus and was afraid of what the other members of the council would think of him. John may also be hinting at Nicodemus’ spiritual condition. Although he was a religious leader, he was in spiritual darkness. John will pick up that theme just a few verses later in 3:19-21,

19 And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Still, Nicodemus seems to have been impressed by Jesus and the signs which He was doing. In verse 2 Nicodemus calls Jesus **“Rabbi.”** No doubt this is the same title many used to address Jesus, for he taught God’s word. But it was a term of respect. For a member of the Sanhedrin to address an uncredentialed Galilean as Rabbi was no small matter. He further refers to Jesus as **“a teacher come from God,”** and gives the evidence of the signs that Jesus has been doing. But in spite of his complimentary greetings, Nicodemus’ view of Jesus fell far short of acknowledging Him as the Christ, the Son of God, which is necessary to receive eternal life (20:31).

The basic error of the Pharisees was to externalize religion. They added all sorts of manmade regulations to the Law of Moses and took pride in keeping them. Later in the Gospels Jesus blasts the Pharisees for their external religion saying, (Matt. 23:27-28)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead [men's] bones and all uncleanness. Even so

you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Those who are into religion deceive themselves by thinking that their outward rituals and rules will impress God, while at the same time they dodge dealing with the sin that is in their hearts. But, of course, God sees right through it all.

So verse 3 tells us, **“Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.””**

Notice Jesus answers although Nicodemus has not asked a question out loud. Jesus knows Nicodemus’ heart and is answering the question of his heart.

In one sentence He sweeps away all that Nicodemus stood for, and demands that he be re-made by the power of God. All of Nicodemus’ religion, all of his amazing Pharisaic study and discipline and law-keeping, cannot replace the need for the new birth.

The point that Jesus wanted to hammer home to Nicodemus is, “You don’t need further instruction in religion. You need to be born again! You need to see yourself as a sinner who needs more than moral or religious improvement. You need nothing less than new life from God!”

What Nicodemus needs, and what you and I need, is not religion but life. New birth means new life. When Jesus says, “born again,” the word translated “again” may have two meanings. It can mean “anew” or “over again” and it can also mean “from above.” In the rest of the Gospel of John it is always used in the second sense, “from above.” You can see it in verse 31 of this chapter where John writes, **“He who comes *from above* is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.”** Both are true and it is a new birth that is from above.

Jesus says (3:3) that one must be born again to **“see the kingdom of God.”** The kingdom is the sphere or realm of God’s authority and blessing which is now invisible but will be manifested on earth (Matt. 6:10). To a Jew with the background and convictions of Nicodemus, ‘to see the kingdom of God’ was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life. And Jesus says to Nicodemus, “you don’t have it.”

All the religion in the world cannot resolve our basic problem of being alienated from God, because religion is based on human works that stem from the flesh and feed our pride. To be subject to the King, we need the new birth that gives us a new nature that delights in obedience to God from the heart (Rom. 6:17-18). We need a radical transformation, not just some behavior modification. We need something that the natural man cannot produce. We need nothing less than to be reborn from above.

Nicodemus did not need religion; he needed life — spiritual life. What happens in the new birth is that life comes into being that was not there before. New life happens at new birth. This is not religious activity or discipline or decision. This is the coming into being of life, spiritual life. That’s the first way of describing what happens in the new birth.

The second thing we learn is that the new birth is:

2. Experiencing a miracle, not just seeing one.

In verse 2, Nicodemus said, **“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”** Nicodemus sees in Jesus a genuine divine activity. He admits that Jesus is from God and does the works of God. And how does Jesus respond? By saying, “I wish everyone in Palestine could see the truth that you see about me.”? No, instead, he says, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

Seeing signs and wonders, and being amazed at them, and believing that Jesus is from God, saves nobody. This is one of the great dangers of signs and wonders: You don’t need a new heart to be amazed at them. The old, fallen human nature is all that’s needed to be amazed at signs and wonders. Even the demons know that Jesus is the Son of God and works miracles (Mark 1:24). That will not get you into the kingdom of God. You must be born again.

Nicodemus was amazed (3:7) at Jesus’ radical statement that he needed to be born again. He replies (3:4), **“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”** Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was talking about at all. His question reflects incredulosity. Maybe with a bit of scorn Nicodemus takes a crassly literalistic interpretation of what Jesus said about being born again.

But Jesus is trying to lead Nicodemus away from dependence on his natural birth and fleshly understanding. Nicodemus believed in Jesus’ signs, his works, but he did not yet believe that a work of God needed to happen in his life. Being born again is not just seeing the work of God, but being a new work of God.

As John Piper explains, “what matters is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself,” ([What Happens at the New Birth](#)). The new birth is a miracle. It is a work of God. It is supernatural, not natural. Verse 6 contrasts the physical birth with the spiritual birth: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”** The flesh is what we are naturally. The Spirit of God is the supernatural Person who brings about the new birth. Jesus says in John 6:63, **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life.”**

In verse 5 Jesus explains this further, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”** What does it mean to be “born of water and the Spirit” and how does that help us understand what happens in the new birth?

There is so much in that verse that we are going to save that for next time. But today I want to close by making a crucial connection between being born again by the Spirit and having eternal life through faith in Jesus.

In the rest of chapter 3, John will spend many verses showing that the Kingdom of God, that is, eternal life, is received by those who believe in Jesus Christ. John 3:16 says, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”** And John sums it all up in verse 36, **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”**

As we have seen, the new birth is a work of God. It is not something we do, but what God does in us. John 1:13 emphasizes this. It refers to the children of God as those who **“who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”** Peter stresses the same thing: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”** (1 Peter 1:3).

We do not cause the new birth. God causes the new birth. From our perspective, we receive Jesus Christ. We believe in His name. John 1:12 says it, **“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”** So there is no spiritual life — no eternal life — apart from connection with Jesus and belief in Jesus. We should never separate the new birth from faith in Jesus. From God’s side, we are united to Christ in the new birth. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. From our side, we experience this union by faith in Jesus.

Never separate these two sayings of Jesus in John 3. **“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (verse 3) and **“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life”** (verse 36). They are both describing the salvation we receive by grace through faith in Jesus. No one is ever born again who does not believe, nor can anyone believe who is not born again.

Have you been born again?

Years ago, Bishop John Taylor Smith, a former chaplain general of the British army, was preaching in a large cathedral on the text, “You must be born again.” He said, “My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church ... but church membership is not new birth, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” The rector was sitting on his left. Pointing to him he said, “You may be a clergyman like my friend the rector here and not be born again, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” On his right sat the archdeacon. Pointing at him, he continued, “You might even be an archdeacon like my friend here and still not be born again, but ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” You might even be a bishop like myself and not be born again, but ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Several days later he received a letter from the archdeacon which read, in part, “My dear Bishop: You have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over 30 years, but I have never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. I

never could understand it.... But when you pointed at me and said that a person could be an archdeacon and not be born again, I understood what the trouble was. Would you please come and talk with me?" Of course, Bishop Smith did talk with him and the archdeacon responded to Christ's call to salvation (H. A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Biblical Truth* [Moody Press], pp. 49-50).

What about you? Like Nicodemus, you may be religious, but religion can't save you. You must be born again.