

The New Birth and the Love of God

John 3:1-21

KV 3 “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”

How many times have you heard the phrase “born again” or “born again Christian?” In 1976, there was a book written by Chuck Colson entitled “Born Again.” Many famous musicians and actors have spoken out and stated that they too were born again Christians. Because it has been used so much, the term has lost much of its meaning, people seem to hear the phrase, but not really understand what it means. Being born again, however, is one of the most important Christian truths we should know, and it is foundational to our faith. Psalm 51:10 says, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” 2 Cor 5:17 says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Through this passage we will see the importance of being born again, we will see how God in his love provided a way for us to receive a new birth, and we will also look into how we can examine ourselves, to see whether we are truly born again or not.

Look at v.1-2 “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.’” The Pharisees were part of the ruling class of the Jewish nation of Israel, along with the Sadducees, and as we can see here, Nicodemus is a member of the ruling council. He was a man of influence and power. The Pharisees and Sadducees were both opposed to Jesus. They were the authority and power in Israel – but last week, we saw the superior authority of Jesus, as he cleared the temple of money changers and merchants. Nicodemus came at night to see Jesus, possibly to avoid being caught meeting Jesus by the other Pharisees. Notice though that Nicodemus says, “Rabbi,” which means teacher. He humbled himself to Jesus, though he himself was considered a great man.

He comes to Jesus at night, humbles himself and calls Jesus “Rabbi,” and says, “We know you are a teacher.” Who is we? John 12:42 says, “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.” The we could include other Jewish leaders or Pharisees. Jesus performed these miracles openly, where everyone could see. These miracles themselves were evidence that there is a God who can control the forces of nature – and the fact that Jesus could perform these miracles was proof that he was the Son of God. Nicodemus said, “For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Nicodemus was looking for God, perhaps the kingdom of God, and so he came to Jesus to learn.

So what was the first thing Jesus taught? At least, according to John? Let’s all read v.3, “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’” When Jesus says, “I tell you the truth,” it means to listen very carefully. “I tell you the truth,” means, this is very important. “I tell you the truth,” means, just that – Jesus is telling us the truth, so listen: he says, “no one,” that means nobody, “can see the kingdom of God unless,” that means only if, “he is born again.” “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Everyone is first born blind to the kingdom of God. In order to see the kingdom of

God, you have to be born again. Nicodemus may have gone to Jesus thinking, “Ok Jesus, I saw you perform those miracles, you must have come from God, so tell me about his kingdom...” The Jews may have been looking for that promise – the promise of David’s everlasting kingdom. So here, Nicodemus found the right guy to talk to. He’s ready, and he says, “Ok, show me the kingdom of God.” Then Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Imagine Nicodemus’ thoughts ... “what? That’s not what I came to hear, it doesn’t make sense...”

So Nicodemus, like a good student, responds in the only way he understands: (v.4) “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Unless the Spirit of God reveals spiritual truth to us – we can only understand things in a carnal, physical way. 1 Cor 2:14 says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” The Beatitudes are a good example of this. Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Most people will think the opposite – the strong inherit the earth, but the person with the spirit will understand that humility, love, obedience, and reverent submission in Christ are nobler traits.

Jesus teaches the truth again with more detail, let’s please read v.5, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” Again, Nicodemus is told to listen carefully, but this time, Jesus says, “enter the kingdom of God.” You need to be born again to both see and to enter the kingdom of God – so how can we be born again? Jesus explains this time that we must be born of water and the Spirit. Now what does this mean? There are 2 possible explanations for being born of water – and both seem credible. It’s funny, even some Bible study materials I’ve seen say – don’t argue on this point. The first possible explanation is that water means to have a natural birth. It seems to fit with v.6, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” Taken together, it’s as if v.6 explains v.5. Also, right before a child is ready to be born, the woman usually says, “my water broke.”

The second explanation is that the water symbolizes repentance, or baptism. Nicodemus would have been familiar with the concept of baptism, which a Jewish purification ritual or an initiation for converts to Judaism. At that time also John the Baptist was popular, and he preached the message, “Repent and be baptized!” The Baptism of John symbolized the washing away of past sins, and a turning back to God. It symbolized a death to self, and a rising again to live for God. In either explanation we see that we are not born again of the flesh. We do not enter our mother’s womb to be born again. Instead, it is the Spirit (and notice the capital S), it is God who gives us rebirth. The new birth is not physical, but it is spiritual.

Jesus continues in v.7, “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’” Here Jesus just says plainly that Nicodemus should not be surprised that we need to be born again. He was a leader, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jewish people. He knew the rituals and the law, and had many traditions – he would know first-hand how difficult it is to be enter the kingdom of God. Likewise, we shouldn’t be surprised that it is impossible, the way we are now, to get to heaven. Verse 8 describes the Spirit’s work: “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 Spirit.” Ecc 11:5 says, “As you do not know the path of the wind, or how

the body is formed in the mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God." 1 Cor 2:11 says, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." We cannot control how, when or where the Spirit will act – we need God's mercy and his grace: we are beginning to see that being born again is not the work of man, but all of the work of God.

After Jesus said these things, Nicodemus said, "How can this be (v.9)?" He still could not understand these things – and Jesus will tell him why. Look at v.10-11 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, 'and you do not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.'" Nicodemus was Israel's teacher, a ruler of the chosen people of God. He is supposed to lead them to God, but instead the Pharisees only did things which would earn themselves more money and honor. It seems here that Jesus is pointing out his weakness so he can correct his ways. Jesus says again, "I tell you the truth," so listen carefully, he says, "We speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen." The we here is Jesus and the God the Father. John 7:16 says, "Jesus answered, 'My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me.'" The problem is, the Pharisees did not accept Jesus' testimony. Isaiah 65:2 says, "I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts (NASB)." The Pharisees followed their own thoughts, they did whatever they thought was right, but it was not God's way – so God hides his truth from them (Matt 11:25).

Jesus says in v.12, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" The earthly things Jesus spoke of were water and the wind – and these were things done on the earth. The Holy Spirit moves on the earth to give us new birth. Though the new birth is spiritual, it happens here. Now Jesus is preparing to speak of heavenly things. Verse 13 says, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man." Here Jesus gives his authority and credentials to speak these truths. Jesus is the Son of Man who had come from heaven, he knows of the heavenly things, and he can speak about them with certainty. Are you ready for heavenly truths?

Look at v.14-15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." This reference comes from the story of the Israelite's journey to the promised land in Numbers 21. As Moses leads his people to the promised land, they become impatient and speak against Moses and God. God then sends snakes to bite the people – some die and others confess that they have sinned against God and Moses. God then tells Moses to make a snake out of bronze and lift it up on a pole, and to declare to all the people that whoever will look at the bronze snake will be healed. This is a shadow, or a preview of the true Healer to come. God sent those snakes to alert people of their sin. They had grown impatient and rebellious, and if God did not intervene they may have never made it to the promised land and enter into the promised rest. But to be healed, they had to exercise faith. All they had to do was look at the bronze snake, just look. They didn't have to bring money, or pass a test, they just had to look. Those who doubted or tried to go their own way would eventually die – but those that trusted in the healing which God provided were healed.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin – but God sends the Holy Spirit, just as God sent the snakes. If God did not convict us of sin, we will inevitably get ourselves lost or into worse trouble – we will never enter the land God has promised for us. If you have been bitten by the snake, thank God – but can you feel its sting, can you feel its pain, its poison? There is hope for you – just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man was lifted up. The snake was a representation of what was killing the people – it was a representation of their sin. Likewise, Jesus became a representation of our sin – the punishment, the shame, the humiliation on the cross – that was ours for our rebellion against God. But God put his Son there instead – and all we need to do is look at Jesus – it doesn't take brains, or muscles, or money, but it takes faith to believe in him – and we will be healed. We will have eternal life. You will enter the kingdom of God. To be born again, we need repentance and faith in Jesus – and the Holy Spirit will make us new.

Let's all read, perhaps even recite v.16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This is probably one of the most well-known verses in the Bible, and probably one of the first people are asked to memorize. This verse is the message of the gospel, the good news. The first part of this verse says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." Not just loved, but God so loved the world. Rom 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Christ did not die for his friends, He died for a people who rebelled against him, who betrayed him – Christ died for a people who would sell him out for 30 silver coins. He died for his enemies – but why? Because God loved them, and instead of punishing them for their crimes against him, he punished his Son to the uttermost. For what purpose? That his ultimate justice would be satisfied, so that He may then come down and heal us, and give us new birth. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things (Rom 8:32 NASB)?" We love, because he first loved us. As verse 13 says, "The Son of Man came from heaven."

Some people have doubts, "Does God really love us?" And they may ask, "Why does God let bad things happen to good people?" But I heard one preacher say, the real question is, "Why does God let good things happen to bad people, such as myself?" God has given us life, beautiful things to enjoy, relationships, and blessings – though we are an unbelieving people. He is patient with us. But some people also like to pass the blame for their sin on others, for example, if Adam, our earthly father sinned, why do we all have to suffer? Isn't it his fault? Yet God gave us his Son, that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. Some people might say, "that's unfair – how come for one man's sin everyone needs to pay?" But the way to freedom and healing is right in front of us. It is our responsibility to look and to believe. Just as in one man, all sinned, so also in one man, all were offered grace and salvation. This was done in order that God's mercy and kindness may be shown to all. God is patient, and desires that none should die, but that all who are his would believe in the name of his one and only Son.

The second part of the verse says, "that whoever believes in him." What does it mean to believe? Hebrews 11:6 can help: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." To believe involves some repentance – which is changing your whole mind and attitude

about most things. It means that you believe in heaven, and you believe there is a God in heaven who created everything. It means that you believe that God's Son Jesus came down from heaven, and literally walked, talked and ate among us – and that he was here for a purpose: to die for my sins. It means that you hate your sin and desire to live right before God. It is also to believe he rose from the dead, and is living to pray for us even now. And it is belief which leads you to obey what is written in his word. There may be other things – but I hope you get the idea that belief is more than with the lips – but with the mind, heart and body.

The third part says, “shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is our great hope. Isaiah gives us a picture of this in 11:6-9, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them...the infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” This is in line with John 17:3 “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Do you know what eternal life will be like? You will be in perfect union with the One who created you, the one who saved you, the one who came down and loved you. You will be in perfect union and at perfect peace with the Almighty God. That's why regeneration is so important. That's why being born again is so important – because the way we are now is corrupted – but when God gives us a new heart and a new Spirit, our desire is to please Him.

Verse 17-18a says “For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.” Jesus came to save us – but from what? From judgment. The wages of sin is death, and all have sinned, therefore all will die. Jesus saved us from judgment by becoming the propitiation for sins for us – he was the atoning sacrifice to take away the sin of the world. This sin of the world is not just rebellion against God, but disbelief – and you and I know people who do not believe. Those who do not believe stand condemned already because they do not believe in the name of God's one and only son.

So what is their guilt? What is their judgment? Look at v. 19 “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” Men loved darkness because their deeds were evil. Men loved darkness even before the Light came – but now that the Light came, their love for evil is exposed, because here they have a chance to do right, but continue to do wrong. And here is where we can examine ourselves to see whether we are truly born again or not. If the Light comes into our lives, what should we do? We should live according to it. Do you still live like the world, going to drinking parties, or talking about someone behind their back? Do you still live selfishly, or commit secret sins when nobody is around? Do you neglect to do the word of God?

James 1:22-25 says, “Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.” It is not that we do these things to receive salvation, rather, when we receive salvation

good deeds are the fruit that follow. Examine yourselves to see whether you are walking in the flesh or in the Spirit. If you are not born again, you will not see the kingdom of God, and you will not have eternal life. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed (v.20).

But how about this: let's all read v.21: "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." The behavior of one who lives in the light is the opposite of the one who does evil. The one who does evil does not want to step into the light – but the one who lives by the truth actually wants to be judged. It's like a child who gets straight A's will run and show everyone, while a child who has some F's will try to hide their report card. How can you examine yourself that you are bearing good fruit? You can judge by the fruits of the spirit in Gal 5:22-23, or follow this path of living in 2 Pet 1:5-8: "...make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." That is eternal life – to know God and his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he sent. We cannot live by the truth with our first birth from the flesh, but we can live by the truth when we are born again by the Spirit of God. You will be made like Christ. The apostle Paul said in Gal 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who gave himself for me."

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." In our body of flesh we cannot produce good fruit – we can only live to please God if his Holy Spirit lives in us, and gives us a new birth. But this new birth we cannot achieve on our own, we need God's grace. We need His Holy Spirit to convict us of our sins, and we must repent and look to Jesus who is our atoning sacrifice. Only then, will we be justified by God, and he will give us a new birth, a new spirit, and come and dwell in our hearts. Only then, will our eyes be opened to see the kingdom of God. In all of these things, it should be seen plainly that these things have all been done through God, for his glory.

Today is the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks – in Sept. 11, 2001 nearly 3000 people were killed at the World Trade Center site, in Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon. This was the largest loss of life resulting from a foreign attack on America, and the largest single loss of rescue personnel as well. Though I may not know anyone personally – each life is precious to God and known very personally. Everyone is somebody's son, daughter, father, mother, brother, sister or friend, and the loss of even 1 life is deeply tragic. If you are here looking for support, we want to share your grief and pray with you, please stay and speak with us. At this time, let us take a moment of silence to pray for the victims and their families, and for this country that God may protect us, and give us His love, grace, peace, strength and hope.