

3. You Must Be Born Again!

John 3:1-12
I'm New to This

Many of us are familiar with this saying: "You must be born again!" It is a well-known verse of Scripture that has been the clarion call for specific sectors of the Christian community, especially in the Western world. Therefore, it is easy to associate the term "born again" with a particular sector of Christianity. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that it was Jesus who made this intriguing statement, and more importantly, the term "you must be born again" was an answer that Jesus gave to the most vital question that one could have. The question, in a nutshell, is this: "How do I gain eternal life?" Within this question and its answer, we find the crux of the Gospel message.

Many of the ordinary people sought Jesus' company. It was safe for them to follow closely, for they had little to lose. Others, who were part of the religious order of the day, regarded Jesus with caution. Perhaps, they were intrigued by His message but kept their distance because of their station in life. They knew that following Jesus or approving of His teaching would mean that they would risk their reputation. They could be known as someone who consorted with a heretic, a conjuror, or even a religious fanatic, for that is how some in the established religious order of His day viewed Christ. He was a controversial figure and still is. In chapter three of John's Gospel, we read of a person that visited Jesus from a high order in the religious society of his day, a man by the name of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus the Pharisee:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He 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." ³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, **no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.**" 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!" ⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, **'You must be born again.'** ⁸The 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.**" ⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I 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. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:1-12).

The Apostle John has given us many words of introduction to the person of Christ, e.g., His being at the beginning with God, His baptism by John the Baptist, and His calling people into a relationship to Himself. As we begin the third chapter, John now introduces us to the first and most profound discourse of teaching by the Lord Jesus, i.e., the necessity of being born-again.

From the beginning of His teaching, the Lord is clear that we can never enter into eternity with God by our works. This is the reason why Christ uses the analogy of being born-again. It is not something we can accomplish by our own strength or abilities. How many of us had anything to do with being born physically into the world? We had no part to play in the matter. Each of us came about as a result of others and God. God Himself has initiated this rebirth by making a way for us to return to Him through His plan of redemption. What we cannot do, He has accomplished through His Son, Jesus.

This one-on-one meeting with Nicodemus happened in Jerusalem, for we are told in the previous passage that Jesus was attending the Passover Feast, and many saw the miraculous signs He was doing and put their trust in Him (John 2:23). The Lord stated that He often taught in the Temple Courts of Jerusalem (John 18:20), so it is also logical to assume that Nicodemus had been watching the same signs and miracles mentioned.

There are three things we learn about Nicodemus in this passage of Scripture.

1) He was a Pharisee, i.e., a word meaning "separated one" (v. 1). The Pharisees were a deeply religious group of never more than 6,000 individuals who were committed to observing every detail of the law as interpreted by the Scribes and teachers of the Law of Israel. To the Pharisees, it was not sufficient to keep the commandments as laid down by Moses in the first five books of the Bible. They wanted each commandment specifically defined and made into a rule.

2) Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, but also he was one of the seventy members that made up the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of the Jews, having jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.

3) He was Israel's teacher (v. 10). Jesus knew who he was, as would every practicing Jewish person. This Scripture referring to Nicodemus as Israel's teacher has a definite article in the Greek language indicating that Nicodemus was the highest-ranked teacher in the nation. More than likely, he had many Scribes that looked to him for answers to many of the little rules that one had to keep being considered righteous as a Pharisee.

Question 1) Why would Nicodemus come to Jesus *at night*? (v. 2). Even though Nicodemus was a scholar, he was seeking answers from Jesus. What do you think brought about this spiritual search?

Why did he come at night? Perhaps it was because he saw how crowds clamored around Jesus during the day and how attentive the Lord was to the needs of those who daily came to him. He may have been merely trying to acquire some quality time with Jesus when He was not distracted by other things. It is also possible that a man such as Nicodemus had many responsibilities during the day and had little time to search for personal answers to the questions of his soul, so he sought out Jesus when his workday was done. The third possibility is that Nicodemus did not want opposition and ridicule from the other ruling elders of the Jews. He came at night so that others would not see him in his religious order, watching Jesus' every move during the day as He taught in the temple courts.

Nicodemus knew of the jealousy and hatred of the High Priest and others in the Sanhedrin toward Jesus. Later on, when Nicodemus found himself with other Pharisees trying to arrest Jesus, he tried to defend Jesus before the council of the Jews. Still, the others in the assembly who scorned Jesus shouted him down.

⁵⁰Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked,
⁵¹"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"
⁵²They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (John 7:50-52).

Satan, the enemy of our souls, seeks to intimidate us from speaking boldly about our belief in the Lord. The spirit at work in this world tries to diminish the influence of those who believe in Christ (Ephesians 2:2). Sadly, a poverty of soul comes upon us when we hide our belief in Christ. The Bible says that the righteous are as bold as lions (Proverbs 28:1). Be bold when it comes to standing up for Christ among unbelievers.

Whatever reason it was that Nicodemus came at night, it is evident that something was stirring in his heart. Jesus had something that he did not have. Nicodemus didn't get to say what it was that brought him; all he had a chance to say was that he saw that God was with Jesus and that Jesus was sent by God (v. 2). Even then, he did not own it himself, for he said, "We know you are a teacher who has come from God" (v. 2) as if it were others who were saying this.

There was an intuitive knowledge, an inner witness, or a growing awareness Nicodemus had about Christ and his own spiritual bankruptcy. He was at the beginning steps of taking an interest in the person of Christ but not yet owning Christ for himself. Who Jesus was would surely have been the topic of heated discussion among those in his closest social circle, especially after Christ had come into the temple and threw out the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals mentioned in the previous passage. Indeed, the miracles Nicodemus witnessed helped him see that there was more to Christ than first met the eye. For all his accomplishments up to this time, Nicodemus did not have an inner witness that he was right with God. He came to Christ to find out what he was missing. Writing to the church at Rome, Paul the Apostle tells us that everyone who is a Christian has an inner witness within his life letting him know he belongs to Christ:

but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.* ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Romans 8:15-17. Emphasis mine).

Question 2) What do you think it means to have the Holy Spirit testifying with our Spirit?

Salvation Impossible for Man

As a ruler, a teacher, and Pharisee, this man had the kind of righteousness the whole nation envied, but something was missing. He was not good enough! Nicodemus needed something more than keeping a system of good works:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law [of which Nicodemus was both], you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

The Lord knew the question on the mind of Nicodemus. He said to him, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). The Greek word translated with the word born “again” is the word *anōthen*, which can mean two different things. It can mean *again* as in a second time, or it can mean *from above* as in the sense that God has to do a work in our soul before we can perceive the Kingdom of God. Both terms are correct. Jesus’ words came as a shock to Nicodemus, for religious Jews thought that because they were children of Abraham and kept the law, they would all enter the kingdom of God. They dressed up the outside, but inside they were full of hypocrisy:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean (Matthew 23:27).

There has to be imputed righteousness (ascribed righteousness to one’s spiritual account) on the inside of every man. Without an inner change, our lives remain the same. Change needs to come from the inside, and we cannot bring about this change by ourselves. We need to connect to the power source! The inner man, his heart has to be renewed. We have a theological term for this; it is called *regeneration*: “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Becoming a Christian is not making a new start in life; it is receiving a new life with which to start. The writer, J. Sidlow Baxter, said, “Regeneration is the fountain; sanctification is the river.”

Jesus’ statement was challenging for Nicodemus. The Jewish people had a belief that if one was rich, it was a good sign that he was well on his way to enter the kingdom of heaven. In another passage of teaching, Jesus told the disciples that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. They were shocked by Christ’s statement.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:23-26. Emphasis mine).

Some people teach the eye of a needle refers to a gate into a city so small that, to get in with your camel loaded with “stuff,” a person would have to unload before they can enter through the gate. I think, though, that we should interpret this passage literally. I believe Jesus is saying that just as it is impossible to thread a camel through a sewing needle, in the same way, it is impossible for anyone, whether you are rich or poor, to enter into the kingdom of God without being born-again or born from above. Without the regeneration work of God taking place at the center of one’s

life, it is impossible to enter the kingdom of God. It is so critical for us to recognize this truth that three times in this passage alone, Christ states, “I tell you the truth” (vs. 3, 5, and 11), a statement designed to show the importance of His words.

It is hard for a man who has always looked at life from an outward point of view to think of the need for spiritual birth. Nicodemus responded in the same way most of us would when hearing such a statement for the first time. He thinks only in natural terms. There was no logical way to understand this statement, and it puzzled him. If taken at face value, this meant that he would have to enter into his mother's womb to be born again. He was thinking in literal terms and wondered how this could be so.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God could not be perceived without an impartation of spiritual life from God. The Lord is so emphatic about this that He spelled it out clearly to Nicodemus and us for our benefit. He said, “I tell you the truth, **no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.** **‘Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit’** (Verses 5-6). That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but to enter a spiritual kingdom requires that your dead spirit receive the gift of the life of God. He doesn’t say that some people can’t enter unless they are born again, but He uses strong words, saying **no one can enter** unless two things happen in a person’s life. You cannot become a Christian by trying to live a Christian life. Just like your birth into this world, you cannot do anything to contribute to your spiritual birth. Salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). What is needed, Jesus said, is two things: to be born of water and the Spirit.

Born of Water and the Spirit

Until we come to Christ and receive the gift of eternal life, death is still operative in our lives. When Adam disobeyed God’s warning, i.e., on the day he ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, the Lord said that he would surely die (Genesis 2:17), Adam did not physically die until he was 930 years old (Genesis 5:5). Death began its work in him the day he sinned, but what was also affected was his ability to connect and commune with God, evidenced by his hiding from God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Without our connection to God, we are without hope (Ephesians 2:12), a condition that God calls being dead. Jesus came to restore that connection. He said, “I have come that they may have life [*zoe*] and have it to the full” (John 10:10). If Jesus came to give us this new life, then that which we have before we receive His life is inadequate.

Paul the Apostle writes similar thoughts in his letter to the church at Ephesus: “As for you, **you were dead** in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1 and 5). When people come to Christ, repent of sin, and receive Christ into their lives, they are born-again: “**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God**” (John 1:12). New life is imparted to the spirit of new Christians. The veil is taken away in the temple of their hearts, and fellowship with God is restored. The sin issue that separates us from God is taken away when we trust Christ.

Question 3) What could Jesus mean when He refers to being “born of water” (John 3:5)?

There are four possible interpretations:

- 1) Water is a reference to physical birth. In the first nine months of our lives, we live in a fluid in an amniotic sack in our mother's womb. Those who hold to this line of thinking believe that Jesus is saying that a person needs a physical birth and a spiritual birth. This is a literal interpretation, and few scholars hold this view.
- 2) The second is that water is a symbol of the Word of God. We are told in the Scriptures that Christ cleanses the Church **"to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word..."** (Ephesians 5:26). In another place, Jesus put it like this: **"you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you"** (John 15:5). In this interpretation, Jesus is saying that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God as the means to convict one of sin and explain what God has done to cleanse us from all sin. In this particular interpretation, water is symbolic of the cleansing power of the Word of God to purify our way—by living according to the Word of God (Psalm 119:9).
- 3) Another interpretation is that water is symbolic of the cleansing and regeneration work of the Spirit in a person's life when they turn to Christ: **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ^she saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit"** (Titus 3:4-5).
- 4) The fourth interpretation is that water is typical of repentance. Some believe that being baptized was what Jesus meant, but baptism is an outward expression of an inward change of heart. It is what happens on the inside that makes all the difference. At the time of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, John the Baptist was still preaching a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4; Acts 19:4). Being dipped under the water was a way of saying to the world that one had repented (repentance means to change one's mind) and died to one's past life and was waiting for the coming of the Spirit with Messiah's (Christ's) arrival. Repentance is no longer a popular word in our day. Some teach that one only has to believe in Christ, but the message of Christ was that, unless people repent *and* believe, they will perish (Luke 13:3-5).

I believe all four interpretations are valid, so we should not be dogmatic about any of them. It is common to find layers of truth in God's Word when looking at a statement like this. The important thing is to examine your heart and consider whether you have practiced true biblical repentance from sin. Have you asked for the Holy Spirit to cleanse you and renew you? Do you genuinely want to be free from habits that mar your character and soul and cause pain in your life and the lives of others around you? If we have truly repented of all known sin, the Spirit of God will illuminate the things we need to let go of, the things that we need to give up or to change. However, that is not all! The Holy Spirit is faithful to reveal the truth and lead us into truth. God supplies the roadmap to redemption and the vehicle to get us to our destination. What is needed is spiritual awakening or birth, which comes about because of an impartation of life from God through His Word and His Spirit and not through our works of righteousness. In this passage of Scripture, we see a man waking up to his own need and seeking a spiritual rebirth.

Question 4) How do people know if they have been born of water and the Spirit? What do you think? What evidence should we see in a person who has received the gift of salvation and been born again (or born from above)?

Several years ago, a young girl came to a church's elders wanting to become a part of the church. First, she was asked, "Did you ever find out that you were a sinner?" "Yes," she said without hesitation, "I did indeed." The second question put to her was, "Do you think, my girl, that you have undergone a change?" "I know I have," was the immediate reply. "Well," the question came, "and what change has come over you?" "Well," she said, "it's like this. Before I was converted, I was running after sin. Now, I am running away from it." This change of character is evidence of a born-again experience; it's both a change of attitude and a change of direction.¹ Let's take some time to go over some evidence of a person being born-again, but beware that these things are not seen as checkmarks of things you can do. They are the fruit of an inner change wrought by the Spirit and not by our flesh.

- 1) Do you honestly believe the Gospel? We are not talking about a mental acknowledgment of the message's truth, but a heart belief that lives out godly values in your daily life. Your life will show if you believe it or not. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16). There should be growing evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life (Galatians 5:16-25).
- 2) Is there a thankful and loving heart of appreciation toward the Lord Jesus for dying on the cross for you?
- 3) Do you have a hunger to know God's Word? "But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him" (1 John 2:5).
- 4) Is there anticipation in your heart for the return of Christ? ²"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3 Emphasis mine).
- 5) Are you upset and disappointed with yourself when you sin? If you have invited Christ to sit on the throne of your life and have given Him control, the Spirit will convict you when you sin.
- 6) Do you love others that love God? Do you enjoy being around other Christians? ¹⁴"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14).
- 7) Do you have a conscious awareness of the Spirit at work in your life? If so, then this also is evidence of the life of God at work in you: "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13).

My Own Spiritual Dissatisfaction

After a long search over five years, I found Christ visiting five different continents and many different countries. I had a near-death experience that made me aware that death was not the end of life but just the beginning doorway. I actually left my body and saw myself from the ceiling. As I hovered between death and life, I cried out to a God I did not know. I thought that, when a person died, that was it! I said to a God I didn't know, "I will give you my life and do whatever You want if You spare my life and let me live." God heard my prayer, and I immediately found myself back in my body. From that point on, I felt like an invisible someone led me—but I didn't

¹ A. Naismith, *1200 Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes*, Printed in England by Marshall Pickering, 1963, Page 41

know who God was! Nobody had ever told me the Gospel of Christ, so I tried religion in the form of Hinduism and Buddhism. That did not satisfy my inward thirst for God, so I went on to study philosophy and some other weird stuff that bordered on occultism.

When I had exhausted my search and found that they were all fruitless, I came across a book by Hal Lindsey on prophecy being fulfilled in our day; the book was called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Reading that book opened my eyes to the fact that God was at work in the world and had not left us to our own devices. I learned of His love for me, and just a few weeks later, I boarded a plane to search westward in America to find out more about the return of Christ. The Lord made sure I sat alongside a believer on the aircraft. He invited me to ride in his rental car to a Christian summer camp in the state of Virginia to study Bible prophecy with him. Somehow, we got separated going through Immigration. I was detained when the officers took a look at my passport and the many countries I had visited. I took a Greyhound bus when I finally got through Immigration, convinced that this was the leading of this God that was pursuing me, and I arrived in Richmond, Virginia.

Two days later, I went to the bus station and bought a ticket to a campground, about twenty miles from Richmond. The only American I knew in the whole country was in the bus queue, viz., the man I had met on the plane. He had chosen that day and that same time to take his car to the nearest city so that he was no longer paying rental fees. He caught the same bus as I, and he brought me to the camp where I heard the Gospel for the first time. I received Christ at that summer camp miles from anywhere, along with a powerful touch of God's Spirit.

I experienced a heavy weight being lifted off me as I received Christ into my life and was born-again. My heart was like jelly for many days. At the slightest mention of Jesus, I wept. I found it hard to believe that someone loved me as I was, i.e., a tired, wounded sinner longing to be loved. For me, it was an experience I will never forget. I knew I was different! I was so happy! I felt loved by God and received love for others, which I had not experienced before. At the time, there came in my heart a passion for the Word of God, a love for other Christians, and a desire to let those who are yet without Him know how much they, too, are loved. My soul was and is satisfied.

Everyone's journey is unique. My life took a radical turn because I was so desperate, living a life so far from God. It does not matter what leads us to the point of searching; we are all brought at some point to a crossroads. It is a place where we examine our lives and wonder what life's meaning is. You may have thoughts like, "Is this all there is?" "What is this life about?" If you find yourself having thoughts like this, you are at a crossroads! Find Christ there. He will be waiting.

Nicodemus became a believer due to his meeting with Christ. Two years later, at the crucifixion, we find him together with Joseph of Arimathea at the tomb of Christ, **"He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs"** (John 19:39-40).

How about you? Do you have complete assurance in your heart, i.e., that inner witness of the Spirit, that you are born-again and a child of God? Is it possible that, like Nicodemus, you feel you are missing something? To be born-again of God's Spirit and enjoy peace with God, you need to repent of sin and ask Christ to come into your life and have control from this time onward. Here's a prayer you could pray:

Prayer: Father, I come to You now, believing that You love me and have a plan for my life. Thank You that You so loved me that You sent your Son into the world to pay the penalty for my sin, which has kept me so long from enjoying Your presence. I repent and turn away from sin and ask Christ to come and live in me as I give Him control of my life. Thank You, Father, for the gift of eternal life. Amen!

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