

John, Part 8: "You Must Be Born Again"

John 2:23 ESV Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. **24** But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people **25** and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

John 3:1 ESV Now 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 him, "Truly, truly, 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, "Truly, truly, 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 its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." **9** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

- I. As we continue our study of the Gospel of John, we find a passage at the end of chapter 2 which constitutes the conclusion of the story we looked into last week. Jesus has cleared the Temple of the money-changers, and is confronted by the Pharisees. They are demanding to know what authorized him to do what he's done.
 - A. Christ responds by tying his very identity to God's holy temple in Jerusalem, saying, "Destroy this temple, and I'll raise it up in 3 days." He was of course speaking about his own body, not of a building in Jerusalem. His point was that he was God's true dwelling place of choice.
 - B. We read this morning that after this kind of teaching from Jesus, as well his miraculous signs, many in Jerusalem believed in him.
 1. This is a good thing, right? Mission accomplished! Wasn't this the goal? That many would believe in him? It would certainly be reasonable to think so!
 2. Here at City View, the desire for people to believe in Jesus motivates everything we do.
 - a) We pray every Sunday that people would hear such wonderful things about Jesus, and experience his miraculous intervention to such a degree, that they would believe in his name.
 - b) We believe that is a good thing; a great reason for us to gather together!

3. So wouldn't you think the fact that people had come to believe in Jesus would be John's culminating "punchline" in John 2? But it's not! He goes on to say...
 - C. **John 2:24 ESV** But Jesus on his part **did not entrust himself to them**, because he knew all people **25** and needed no one to bear witness about man, for **he himself knew what was in man**.
 1. Though many professed to belief, this did not satisfy Jesus. Many may have been clamoring to join his parade, but Jesus did not seem to get too excited.
 - a) In fact, the text says he "did not entrust himself to them". The KJV says "he did not **commit** himself to them".
 - b) The Greek word for commit or entrust is "**pisteuo**". It is often translated "believe". It is used 248 times in the Greek New Testament. It means to place **all** your confidence, and your **full trust** in something.
 - c) It is the same word that is used in Romans 4:3 when Paul says that Abraham **believed** God and it was counted as righteousness. Abraham placed all his confidence, trust and reliance in God's promise alone.
 2. So what is the message here? Jesus spoke with authority, and performed miracles, and in response, many believed in him; but that belief failed to move Jesus. In short, they may have believed in Jesus, but that didn't necessarily mean that Jesus believed in them! Why?
 - a) John says that Jesus needed no testimony about man. The verdict was in. Nothing could pull humanity out of its nosedive now. Mankind was entirely guilty, hopelessly lost, and desperately in need of redemption.
 - b) John emphasizes this, saying that Christ "knew what was in man". He knew that the resistance to God's way was deeply entrenched in man. Now something radical must happen for there to be hope. No one could just "will" or self-discipline themselves out of this predicament. None could morally assert themselves enough to get better.
- II. With that in mind, it is interesting to me that the next thing we read in chapter 3 is a case study of one such "believer" (who had an entirely insufficient brand of belief); a leader of the Jews named Nicodemus. What would Jesus say to his kind of "belief"?
 - A. The Bible says that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night so as not to be detected. His colleagues on the Jewish ruling council (known as the "Sanhedrin") were no fans of Jesus! In fact, they wanted him dead and gone!
 - B. Like many professed believers are prone to do, Nicodemus tried to walk the tightrope between being just a "fan" of Jesus, while also maintaining a well-groomed reputation, and place in respectable society. "I want to be connected to Jesus, but not so much I rock the boat!"
 1. So he starts his talk by making a grand statement to Jesus about how **he gets it!** Jesus is the real deal, of heavenly origin, and it's obvious that God has his back! "**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.**"
 2. How do you think Jesus responded to his compliment? Do he say, "Aw, shucks!" and maybe blush a little? Did he pat little Nicky on the head and tell him what a good boy he was? Did he him a gold star and a lollipop?
 - C. Not quite! He doesn't even acknowledge what Nicodemus said! Instead, he cuts right to the heart of the matter, making everything crystal clear! "**You believe in**

me? Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.**"

1. Jesus is saying that he isn't running a pyramid scheme where he wins by getting as many people as he can to sign up to sell soap. His goal isn't big numbers, but fundamentally transforming those few who answer his call!
 2. Jesus was notorious for discouraging mere "followership"!
 - a) **Matthew 22:14 ESV** For many are called, but **few are chosen.**
 - b) **Matthew 7:14 ESV** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and **those who find it are few.**
 - c) **Luke 9:57 ESV** As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." **58** And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." **59** To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." **60** And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." **61** Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." **62** Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."
 - d) Jesus wasn't interested in being Robin Hood, collecting a band of merry men! His desire was to revolutionize lives by his direct intervention, so that his followers couldn't live apart from him. His intention was literally to become the point of origin for a whole new kind of life for his disciples.
- D. Jesus described this reorientation of our lives as being "born again".
1. He's wants Nicodemus to be concerned about more than becoming a fan, or a partisan; or to just adopt a new set of behaviors, rules, disciplines, interests or values. And what Jesus describes has nothing to do with religion!
 2. Jesus is saying that to be born again is to be brought into an entirely brand new kind of life. And this new kind of life is not optional. If there is no new birth, Jesus says, access to the kingdom of God is absolutely impossible.
- E. Nicodemus is incredulous. Is Jesus speaking in riddles? **"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"**
1. He probably knew that Jesus was not speaking in physical terms, but what Christ was saying was just seemingly as far-fetched as being literally reborn.
 2. How could a man like him, who had invested himself so much in the religion of his fore-fathers, climbing a ladder that few had been able to navigate, now retrace his steps and start all over?
- F. Let that soak in. What do you think that Jesus meant when he said "You must be born again"? For years, "Born Again" has been a designation in our culture that simply means "evangelical Christian". But is that what Jesus had in mind?
1. The problem deepens when those who are evangelical play by the same rules as those in the world. This makes a mockery of the term "born again"! Something that is born to a different kind of life should look different! A butterfly looks nothing like a caterpillar, or a bullfrog like a tadpole!
 2. We've heard the term, "born again" so often that we've become desensitized to it; making it synonymous with our personal favorite version of Christianity.

- a) If you believe that that being good is what makes you a Christian, than by your standard, a moral man is, by virtue of his morality, “born again”.
 - b) If you believe that hardship and suffering indicate a rigorous Christian experience, than a miserable man, by virtue of his misery, is “born again.”
 - c) If you’re convinced that health and wealth define God’s saving favor, than a rich man, by virtue of his prosperity, is “born again”.
3. But hard as it is, try and look at John 3 with new eyes? Forget what you’ve assumed and hear what Christ says. **Assumptions based on traditions are usually the enemies of truth.** So what does it really mean to be born again?
- III. **John 3:5 ESV** Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, 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.’
- A. There is a lot of debate concerning the words “born of water and the Spirit” What does “born of water” mean? Two possibilities are often put forward...
 1. Some say this is a reference to water baptism. But there are problems with this conclusion. There was no “Christian baptism” as we know it before the Day of Pentecost. There was John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance, but that is never put forward in scripture as a saving act.
 - a) Since Nicodemus had no concept of Christian Baptism, and John’s baptism didn’t save anyone, how could Jesus say that, “unless one is born of water **and** the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”?
 - b) Thus, it is unlikely that “water” in John 3:5 is a reference to baptism.
 2. Others have suggested that water here refers to amniotic fluid from the womb in natural birth. Therefore, they assume, to say “born of water” simply indicates natural birth. Yet there are also a couple of problems with this.
 - a) First, there is no evidence that jews ever described birth this way.
 - b) Secondly, look at Jesus’ two statements together.
 - (1) “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
 - (2) “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”
 3. It looks like “born of water and the Spirit” and “born again” are the same thing, rather than two (natural birth and spiritual birth).
 - a) Also they both are prerequisites to enter the Kingdom of God.
 - b) But since the Bible says we are all sinful from birth, how can natural birth be understood as necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?
 - B. Look at a third option, however. Could Jesus be making a reference to a passage from Ezekiel pointing to his saving work? Let’s look at it together...
 - C. **Ezekiel 36:24 ESV** I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. **25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26** And I will give you a **new** heart, and a **new** spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **27** And **I will put my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

- D. You see in this passage a promise that God will wash us clean of our sin (born of water), and that his own Spirit will reside in us, living through us (born of Spirit). The result of these two things is a brand new kind of human being! Born Again!
- IV. Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus that this new birth is entirely an activity of God's Spirit. You can't earn it or orchestrate God's salvation.
- A. **John 3:8 ESV** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The only thing you contribute is the sin that makes salvation necessary!
- B. Think about the analogy of birth here! No one remembers the day of their birth, and no one had any say in the fact of our conception! You were not consulted at all! Other people, regardless of what you thought, in an act of love, gave you life! Is it possible the new birth works the same way? Let see what scripture says...
1. **Jeremiah 1:5 ESV** "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and **before you were born I consecrated you**; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah had no say in the matter! God consecrated and appointed him.
 2. **Psalms 139:16 ESV** Your eyes saw my unformed substance; **in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.** God has mapped out our days before they existed!
 3. **Ephesians 1:4b** ...he **chose us in him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5 he predestined us for adoption to himself** as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will. It was his will, his purpose; not yours or mine!
- C. Any credit you or I give ourselves for the new birth is beyond ludicrous! We were born by an act of love that originated with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- V. **John 3:9 ESV** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"
- A. This "believer" is astounded! He just wanted to join the team and be a part of the movement. But Jesus shakes him to the core, telling him how the Spirit works.
- B. Have you ever been so blown away by some revelation from God that you came away you knew nothing before he revealed it? Maybe you weren't even saved!
1. "Nicodemus, you should know these things! You are a teacher of Israel! You are the custodian and teacher of the scriptures! How have you missed this!"
 2. Last week we talked about how we can never understand the Bible until Jesus makes it clear. Nicodemus has now learned this first hand.
- C. **John 3:11 ESV** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
1. Why does Jesus say "**we** speak of what we know" and "you do not receive **our** testimony"? It is because he is joining himself to the OT prophets (like we saw in Ezekiel), and their testimony, since he is the quintessential prophet!

2. He is aligned with those who have been pointing to the coming of the things which have now arrived! "Open your eyes, Nicodemus! I'm here!"
- D. **John 3:12 ESV** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
1. But now Jesus switches back from "we" to "I". He is saying that while is in alignment with the prophets, he is superior to them. What they gave by revelation, he gives by origination.
 2. He was there in the the presence of the Father and the Holy Angels in the instant God's plan salvation was unveiled. Therefore he can be entrusted like no other with heavenly truths!
- E. Finally Jesus reaches back to a chapter in Israel's history, 1500 years past. The people were traveling around the desert, and the journey was hard. As they so often did, they began to grumble and complain, saying, "You brought us out here to die! There's no water or food (except this lousy manna)! We're doomed!"
1. And the God who had carried them on eagle's wings, protecting and providing for them on their entire long journey, brings judgement and wrath upon them in the form of fiery serpents that began to bite them so that many of them died.
 2. The people, realizing that they have signed their own death warrant, cry out in repentance in hopes of relief. In response to their prayers, God instructs Moses to construct a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. If the people will merely look at it when bitten, they will be instantly healed and will live. Now look at what Christ says to Nicodemus...
- F. **John 3:14 ESV** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
1. I used to find it odd that Christ compared himself to a symbolic serpent! When I thought of serpents in the Bible, I thought of the devil in Genesis 3! But now Jesus is saying "I am Moses' serpent!" Why would he do that?
 2. Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, "If you want to have a new kind of life, my kind of life, you have to come to me with all your lethal snake bites, and no first aid kits! Bring the bites you brought on yourself, and look to me alone. Not to the law, or morality, religion, or doing your own thing. Only trust me"
 3. "I will become for you the symbol of your old kind of life; marked and polluted by by sin and the serpent for you, raised high on a cross of shame."
 4. "And as you come and look to me, I will make you to experience total healing; but more than that. My kind of heavenly life will literally be born in you. Look to me and live."
- G. It is this determination to look to Jesus and live that is the first indication that new life has been conceived. But if you are still trying hard to behave born again, to fit the profile, still trying to figure out how, in your own strength, to re-enter your mothers womb, then there is no new life and you are still dead in your old one.
- H. Isn't it time to do something different? Today is the day. look to Jesus and live.