October 12/13, 2019

Born Again

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 3:1-21

Pastor Bryan Clark

A lot of people have a lot of opinions about what it takes to enter the kingdom of God. But it seems to me it might be a good thing to ask ourselves what Jesus had to say about that. Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 3.

Our story ended in chapter two last week with the reminder that Jesus was doing miracles—what John calls *signs*—and the people were believing in Him. But Jesus was not believing in *them*, essentially saying what they were believing is that they were seeing miracles, and they believed that, but they did not really yet understand that He had come to be the Savior of the world. So, chapter two ends… *"for He Himself knew what was in man."* If you get rid of the chapter division, it just rolls right into this story… "*for He Himself knew what was in man"*...**Now there was a man.**" So essentially he's saying, "Let me illustrate what I just said with this story."

> **Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."** (*NASB, John 3:1-3)

So Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee, which would have been a significant religious group. The Pharisees were very religious; they were very conservative. They were very strict and were zealous for the keeping of both the oral law and the written law. Contrary to them would have been another group called The Sadducees. They were far more political, far more liberal, and far more socially connected. And then these groups sat on a ruling board called the Sanhedrin. When Nicodemus is identified as **a ruler of the Jews,** that's what it's saying. He sat on the ruling, governing board of the Jews.

He came to Jesus by night. There's a lot of discussion around the meaning of *coming at night*. Some think it was because it was quieter at night. The crowds would have gone home, so they could have more of a conversation. That's entirely possible. Also, because he was a ruling Jew, perhaps he didn't want others to see him visiting Jesus. That also is entirely possible. But I also think John has this way throughout his Gospel of creating these images or metaphors, and one of them is this idea of darkness or night. The idea that, even though Nicodemus was highly religious, he was still in the dark. He still was not able to see, and there's kind of this metaphor in the idea that he's visiting Jesus at night.

He acknowledges that there's something about Jesus that goes beyond just an ordinary human. In other words, he's seen the miracles, and he realizes there's something more than ordinary about Jesus. Now again, remembering in the Old Testament prophets did miracles, so he isn't necessarily identifying Jesus as the Messiah. He just realizes there's something more to Him than just an ordinary person.

Nicodemus is up to his eyebrows in religion, but he knows there's something missing. He knows there's still something that he hasn't understood that will satisfy this searching in his soul. So, he's coming to Jesus to try to figure this out. Jesus, in verse three, then responds to him, **"…unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."** Now it's worth noting, this is the only time in John's Gospel he refers to **the kingdom of God**. I think the way John uses the terminology, it's pretty equivalent to *eternal life*. This is something you enter into that starts now and reaches its fulfillment in the world to come. But what's interesting is what he says to Nicodemus, again who is highly religious. *"Nicodemus, until you are born again, you cannot even see the kingdom of God."* In other words, you're so full of religion, you can't even see the kingdom of God until something dramatically changes.

Now the terminology **born again** could also be translated *born from above*, and a lot of scholars think it's both. You have to be born again, and that birth comes from above—it's a supernatural birth. Verse 4:

> **Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"**

Nicodemus is not trying to be belligerent. He's not there to argue, but he's really confused. You can feel the frustration in his voice. He's supposed to be a religious expert. He knows something's missing. Now Jesus tells him he has to be *born again*. He's like, "I don't even know what that means. How is it possible to be born again?"

> **Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."** (Vs. 5-8)

So Jesus responds and says, **"…unless one is born of the water and the Spirit."** There's widespread agreement, the Spirit is the Spirit of God. It's a supernatural rebirth. But there's a lot of conversation around what is meant by **the water**. So again, there are a lot of really good biblical scholars that disagree on what that means. Some think it's a reference to *physical birth*. The problem with that is there's virtually no evidence that anyone in the first century would have understood it that way. Some people think it's a reference to *Christian baptism*. The problem with that is Christian baptism is a reenactment of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. So, it didn't even enter into the conversation until *after* the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. So at this point in the story, that would have made no sense.

There are some Old Testament passages such as Ezekiel chapter 36 that talk about the coming in of the new covenant, and the cleansing that's going to be like a cleansing with water that will be from the regeneration, the new birth of the Holy Spirit. Some people think it's a reference to that, and there's a lot of merit to that view. The biggest problem with that view, in my opinion, is it's saying that water is the Holy Spirit that would cleanse them. So it doesn't really fit with the language of John 3. It would be saying *the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit*, which doesn't really make any sense.

I think what makes the most sense is a simple reference to the baptism of John the Baptist. We already know from the Gospel of John, the religious leaders knew about the baptism of John the Baptist. They knew what it was about. It was a baptism of repentance. Even John himself, earlier in the Gospel

[John the Baptist said]"I baptize you with water," which he understood to be a ceremonial cleansing, "but the One who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," …with the power to rebirth you, to regenerate you. So the idea that John's was a baptism of repentance is saying to Nicodemus, who's up to his eyebrows in religion, "Nicodemus, until you understand that no amount of religion, no amount of good works, no amount of you trying to make yourself self-righteous, will ever get you into the kingdom of God, you can't even *see* the kingdom of God as long as you keep thinking that way."

So, the first step: Repentance is a change of mind. You have to change your mind and realize the only possibility is this birth is from above—a *new birth* that is only possible through the Spirit of God. It is a supernatural event that will make you a new person in Christ. He says, "…**that which is flesh is flesh**." In other words, all the religion, all the religious activity, all the good works, all it does is improve your flesh a little bit. But it will take a supernatural act by the Spirit of God to create *spiritual rebirth*. So He says to Nicodemus, "Don't be amazed by this." What He's saying is that this is a miracle!

See, this is the problem. *Religion* is very clear and concrete. Here are the rules. Here are the practices. Here are the hoops you jump through, and whoever does the best job of following the rules, the best job of jumping through the hoops, the best job of doing all these activities, that person will be right in the eyes of God. It's very clear in black and white.

But what Jesus is saying is, "No, actually this requires a supernatural, mysterious rebirth that only comes from God." He says, "Think about it this way." Perhaps it was a windy evening and the wind just made a simple illustration. In the Greek language—and this is equally true in the Hebrew language—the word for *breath*, the word for *wind*, and the word for *spirit* is the same word, and so essentially what He's saying is, "*You know, the wind is mysterious. The wind blows; you can hear it; you can feel it; you can see its effects, but it just comes out of nowhere, and it seems to go nowhere. There's just a mystery to it."* And what He was saying is, "In the same way, there is a mystery to this reality that the Spirit of God can re-create, can rebirth us into this new life in Christ." Verse 9:

> **Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"**

Again, you hear the frustration in his voice. "How is this possible? I don't even know what you're talking about."

> **Jesus says, "Are you the teacher of Israel [**not *a* teacher, *the* teacher; you're *the* teacher in Israel], **and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man."** (Vs. 10-13)

So Jesus responds, "Nicodemus, you are *the* teacher in Israel, and you don't get it?" The **we** in verse 11, either Jesus is referring to Jesus and His disciples were sharing some of these things, or could be a reference to Jesus as the Trinity, as we saw in chapter one, verses one through three. Either way, what Jesus is saying is, "You know, we've tried to explain this with earthly signs and miracles, with earthly images like birth and the wind. But if you can't even understand that, how is it possible you're going to understand more wonderful, mysterious heavenly truths?"

He says, "No one from earth has ascended into heaven, found out the truth and has come back. What has happened is the One who forever has lived in heaven, took on human flesh to come to earth, to explain it to you." So that's what he means. Nobody's gone to heaven to figure it out, but the One who lived in heaven has come to earth—has descended to earth—and is trying to explain it to them, but they just won't listen.

You can't miss the fact that Nicodemus was so immersed in his religion and his way of making himself righteous, he just couldn't understand what Jesus was saying. How frustrating would it be to know you've spent your whole life following the rules, your whole life doing what you're supposed to be doing, your whole life trying to be a good person, and now Jesus comes along and says, "By the way, that won't get you into the kingdom of God, but, rather, it has to be this mysterious rebirth that comes from the Spirit of God." Verse 14:

> **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."**

This would have been a story that Nicodemus would have been very familiar with. It came from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, Chapter 21. The people were grumbling and sinning against God, so God sends poisonous snakes as a judgment. They're biting the people; some of the people are dying. Moses intercedes for them. God tells him, "Take a bronze snake, put it on a stick, and lift it up, and those who look up on the bronze snake on this stick will be saved."

So that was an image, a foreshadowing, that one day God Himself would become human and allow Himself to be put on a stick and raised up—referring to the crucifixion—in order that those who look upon Him to believe, will be saved. So what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is, "You should have known this. These images, these pictures, these shadows, are all over the Old Testament. Verse 15: "**…so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."**

It's not religious activity. It's not good works. It's belief! You look to the One who's hanging on the cross as the One who's making payment for sin. If you believe, you receive eternal life. For John, eternal life is not merely a *duration* of life—it's a *quality* of life! It's the life every soul longs for. Every single one of us, deep in our soul, longs for this life. People try to fill it with all kinds of things, but ultimately, the only thing that will satisfy is a relationship with Jesus that comes through believing! That leads to arguably the most famous verse in all of the Bible: Verse 16:

> **"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."**

The Jews did not believe that God loved the world. The Jews believed God loved the Jews. This was fairly radical, and oh, by the way, God loved **the world**. So He sent **His only begotten.** We had that word in chapter one. *Mano genus* is one-of-a-kind Son. "**For God so loved the world He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life**."

You can't miss the message in John 3:16 that clearly says, "If you do not believe, you do perish. It makes no sense to send a savior unless there's something that we need saved from. If you do not believe, you will perish!" Notice what he goes on to say. Verse 17:

> **"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not**

> **believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."** (Vs. 17-18)

So here's what that just said: Jesus did not come into the world **to judge** [or to condemn], but rather **to save**. He would do the work, and whoever believes in Him would not experience condemnation or judgment, but will be saved!

The reason is that He goes on to say, "*because those who don't believe are judged already.*" This is really important to understand. *Those who do not believe*—it's not that someday they will be judged—they've already been judged. We've all been judged. We're all condemned. We're all sinners. We're all going to perish. That's why He didn't come to judge. That was already settled. He came to save—to make payment for sin—that **those who believe will not perish, but have everlasting life!**

It does raise an interesting question. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, no matter what your story, we're all sinners in need of a savior. You don't have to go out and get religious. You don't have to go out and follow a bunch of rules. You don't have to go out and get good. God offers you salvation freely as a gift, if you choose to believe. So, if that's true, why would anyone not believe? Well, he explains that. Verse 19:

> **"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light,** [Why?] **for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."** (Vs. 19-21)

Jesus came as **the Light**. We had this in chapter one… "*and the Light did not comprehend it*." When the Light is come, why do people reject the Light? Why do people despise the Light? Why do people want to extinguish the Light? Why are people opposed to the gospel? Why do people not want the gospel story told? The answer is because **their deeds are evil,** and they want to hide in the darkness. This is the challenge of the gospel. The gospel shines the Light of Jesus into our lives, and it exposes our rats. It exposes our evil; it exposes our sin. People don't like that. They want to stay in darkness because their deeds are evil, and they want to keep them hidden. Why would anyone not want the gospel told? Answer: because their deeds are evil, and they want to hide in the dark. This is the core of the gospel.

When we come to Jesus, we step into the Light, and our sins are exposed—our rats are exposed—in order to experience Jesus as Savior. There has to be a realization that I'm a sinner in need of a savior. Here are my sins. I lay it all out, naked before God, realizing that God then takes them, on the basis of His shed blood, and forgives my sins. He makes me clean and holy. He takes my guilt. He takes my shame. He makes me right before a holy God. So now I stand in the Light! But I stand in the Light *in the righteousness of Christ*. So what flows out of me now is new life in Christ. The life that's now in me—in the Light—is new life that flows out of me in Christ.

What God offers is re-creation, re-birth, supernatural birth from above, that we might stand clean and right and forgiven in the presence of a holy God. You'll never get there through religion. You'll never get there through good works. You'll never get there through any effort of your own. Jesus did the work for you and offers you the gift of salvation, freely as a gift, if you're willing to admit you're a sinner that needs a savior. What He offers you is supernatural rebirth!

Our Father we're thankful when we were lost in our sin, You sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. God, we know there's no end to people that despise the gospel. They don't want to hear it because their deeds are evil, and they want to hide in the darkness. But God, for those of us willing to admit our sin and our need for a savior, You promise to forgive our sin and to write for us a new story that will start now and go on forever. Lord, we celebrate the salvation that You freely offer this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2019 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

October 12/13, 2019

Born Again

That You May Believe

John 3:1-21

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Why did Jesus not entrust Himself to the people in John 2:23-25? What might this look like today?

2. What is the difference between believing in Jesus and "receiving him" as John called in in John 1:12? Maybe we could say the difference between believing things about Jesus and truly believing in Jesus as your Savior. What's the difference?

Bible Study

1. Read John 3:1-15. Notice how verse 1 picks right up with what was said in 2:25. Nicodemus is the example of what John was talking about in 2:23-25.

2. Do you think Nicodemus was genuinely searching for truth? Why or why not?

3. Nicodemus is a highly religious teacher, an expert in the Scriptures yet he did not understand the most basic teaching regarding salvation. Why do you think that was? What was he missing in his understanding according to Jesus?

4. Read Numbers 21 to get background to what Jesus says in 3:14. How was Jesus the fulfillment of that shadow from Numbers 21?

5. What is the basis of salvation according to 3:15?

6. Read John 3:16-21. What all do you learn from John 3:16?

7. Is the unbeliever awaiting judgement or condemnation one day or already judged and condemned today? What must that person do to be saved?

8. According to John/Jesus why do people prefer darkness to light? How do you see that in the people around you at work, school, etc…?

Application

1. Are you really clear on what is necessary to be saved?

2. What is the challenge in reaching highly religious people with the Gospel and what are some things you can do help religious people see their need for Jesus?

Copyright 2019 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.