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"Have You Been Born Again?"

John 3:1-21

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In John 3, Jesus had an encounter with an influential, religious elite named Nicodemus. This Nicodemus represents many of us today: religious, influential, educated, and yet not right with God and unable to see the kingdom of God. Jesus is clear that to be with Him, we must be born again. But what does that mean? In this study, we will learn the definition and effects of spiritual birth.

1. **John 3:1-21** – “[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? [11] Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. [12] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? [13] No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. [14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. [16] 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. [17] For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. [18] He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. [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.’”

2. Nicodemus

- a. Nicodemus was a Jew with a Greek name.
 - i. **Nikos** means “victory.”
 - ii. **Dêmos** means “the people.”
 - iii. His name means “victory of the people.”
- b. Nicodemus was a man of status and influence.
 - i. He was a Pharisee (verse 1).
 - 1. Pharisees were the pinnacle of legalistic Judaism.
 - ii. He was a ruler of the Jews (verse 1).
 - 1. Nicodemus was part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council that operated like the Supreme Court over Jewish matters.
 - iii. He was “*the*” teacher of Israel (verse 10).
- c. Nicodemus tried to protect his reputation with his religious circle.
 - i. He “*came to Jesus by night*” (verse 2).
- d. Nicodemus viewed Jesus with reverence.
 - i. Nicodemus called Jesus, “*Rabbi*” (verse 2), a respectful title meaning “teacher.”
 - ii. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus came from God (verse 2).
 - 1. He recognized that Jesus was not an ordinary man.
 - iii. Nicodemus saw Jesus as a Miracle Worker (verse 2).
 - 1. He referred to the signs which Jesus performed.
 - iv. **DISCUSS**: Do you know about Christ, or do you know Christ? What is the difference?
- e. But Nicodemus had to realize that his status, education, influence, religiosity, and respect for Jesus were not enough to save him.
 - i. We do not enter heaven because of who we are or what we know, but by being “*born again*” (verse 3).
 - ii. **DISCUSS**: What are you trusting in to allow you entry into heaven?

3. What it means to be born again

- a. Jesus explained to Nicodemus what being born again means using three symbols:
 - i. The womb
 - ii. The wind
 - iii. The wilderness

4. The womb

- a. **John 3:3-4** – “[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?’”

- i. When Jesus spoke of being born again, He was talking about a spiritual birth.
 1. *“Again”* is **anōthen** in the Greek, meaning simply “again” or “from above.”
- ii. But Nicodemus thought Jesus was speaking of a second physical birth.
- iii. To explain, Jesus contrasted the two births:
 1. A natural, physical birth
 2. A supernatural, spiritual birth
- b. **John 3:5** – *“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’”*
 - i. Some use this verse to teach that baptism is necessary for salvation.
 - ii. But Jesus clarified in verse 6 that He was speaking of a physical and a spiritual birth.
 1. **John 3:6** – *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*
 2. Those *“born of water”* are born of the flesh, because the *“water”* Jesus referred to is the amniotic fluid that babies inhabit during their time in the womb.
 3. Those *“born of the Spirit”* are those who are born again.
 4. **DISCUSS:** What does it mean to read a verse or passage in context? How does this practice help us correctly divide the Word of God?
 5. **DISCUSS:** How does verse 6 provide context for verse 5, and what is the larger context of this passage?
- c. The necessity of these two births to enter heaven went against Nicodemus’ traditional Jewish view.
 - i. Jews thought they were automatically saved on account of being the seed of Abraham.
 1. You had no say in your physical birth, but you can choose your spiritual birth.
 - ii. Paul also had to put aside his trust in his religious pedigree to trust in Christ for salvation.
 1. **Philippians 3:7–8** – Paul said, *“[7] What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. [8] Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”*
 2. Some put their trust in their parents’ faith, infant baptism, good works, or church attendance. But that is not what saves us.
 3. Putting our trust in Jesus is what saves us.

4. **DISCUSS:** What have you counted as loss for Christ? How does your love for the things of this world diminish as you grow in your love for the Lord?
- d. Today, people still try to put their trust in themselves for salvation, but only Jesus can save us.
 - i. The bad news is that we are all sinners.
 1. **Romans 3:23** – *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*
 2. **Romans 6:23a** – *“The wages of sin is death.”*
 3. Death is the wage (or payment) we have all earned with our sin.
 4. **DISCUSS:** What are some ways you’ve seen sin and death woven together in our world? How does that testify of another world?
 - ii. The good news is that you can be made right with God through Jesus.
 1. **Romans 6:23b** – *“But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*
 2. Our good works do not make us righteous—only Christ’s good work on the cross can do that.

5. The wind

- a. While physical birth is visible, Nicodemus was confused about how he could know he had experienced spiritual birth.
- b. Jesus answered by comparing a spiritual birth with the wind.
 - i. **John 3:8** – *“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.”*
 - ii. Our lives after Christ should be different from our lives before Christ.
 1. Our spiritual birth may not change us physically, but it changes us from the inside out.
 2. **DISCUSS:** How has being born of the Spirit affected you? How is your spiritual birth visible in how you live?

6. The wilderness

- a. Nicodemus still did not understand the concept of being born again.
- b. Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for not understanding spiritual birth (verses 9–10) because it is not a uniquely New Testament concept.
 - i. The New Testament is not in competition with the Old Testament, but a continuation of the same story.
 1. **DISCUSS:** How has reading the Old Testament informed your understanding of the New Testament, and vice versa?
 - ii. God predicted the outpouring of the Spirit in the Old Testament (**Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36**).

1. Israel was living in a cycle of sin. The Jews could not stay loyal and obey God in their own strength.
 2. But Ezekiel foresaw a day when God would give them a new heart, transforming them with His Spirit so they could obey by the strength of the Spirit within them.
 3. **Ezekiel 36:26** – God said, *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”*
- iii. **John 3:14–15** – “[14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
1. Jesus referred to Himself as the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness in **Numbers 21**.
 2. After Moses had freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, they went into the wilderness.
 3. But because the Israelites continually complained against Moses and God, what should have been an 11-day journey from Egypt to the Promised Land became a 40-year trip.
 4. Amid this wilderness wandering, the people’s complaining led God to send snakes into their camp (**Numbers 21**).
 5. When the people repented and came to Moses, he cried out to God.
 6. The Lord commanded Moses to fashion a bronze snake and lift it up on a staff, so that all who looked at it would be healed.
 7. In the Old Testament, bronze was a symbol of judgment.
 8. Jesus was like that bronze snake, bearing our sins on the cross and taking on God’s judgment to bring us healing.
 9. **DISCUSS:** Do you live like Jesus bore your sin and judgment on the cross, or do you try to carry and pay for the load yourself? Why?
- c. In the face of death, there are only two categories that matter: lost or saved.
- i. **John 3:16–17** – “[16] 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. [17] For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”
 1. Nicodemus was confronted with the fact that God is willing to accept *“whoever believes in Him”* and not just those who followed his religious tradition.
 2. The word *“believes”* comes from the Greek **pisteuō**, which refers to more than intellectual knowledge—it is about trust and submission.

3. **DISCUSS:** How is intellectual knowledge of Jesus different from an understanding that leads to trust in and surrender to Christ?
 4. Jesus opened the invitation wide, to *“as many as received Him”* (**John 1:12**).
 5. **2 Peter 3:9b** – God is *“not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”*
 6. To repent is to turn around, to change your thinking and your way of life.
- ii. The Titanic
1. When boarding the Titanic, there were three categories: first class, second class, and third class.
 2. But when escaping the Titanic, there were only two categories that mattered: lost and saved.
 3. As we leave this life, what matters is whether we are lost, or found in Christ.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)