

22. The Gospel of John—3:1-7

“You Must Be Born Again” Pt.1

(3/11/18)

If I were to ask you to choose a chapter in the New Testament that you thought was one of the most important—I think a good number of you would choose John 3.

And the reason you’d pick this chapter is because in John 3 the Lord Jesus Christ answers the question ‘how a person gets to heaven’—which for an evangelical Christian is the most important question a person can grapple with.

The question was posed by a very religious man, a Jew named Nicodemus.

Last week we said that John 2:23-25 really serves as a segue into chapter 3.

As we studied those verses we said that many people ‘followed’ Jesus because of the miracles He did and yet refused to make a commitment to Him—in essence they were ‘thrill-seekers’ not genuine disciples.

Whereas in chapter 3, we’re introduced to a man who allowed the miracles that Jesus did to create a hunger in him to know more about this Man and the doctrines that He taught—which forms the basis for the first 21 verses of this incredible chapter.

I’d like to divide the first 21 verses of John 3 this way—I. The Confused Seeker—v.1-12; II. The Condescending Savior—v.13-16; and III. The Condemned Sinner—v.17-21

I. The Confused Seeker—v.1-12

A. The context—v.1-2

John 3:1 (NKJV)

¹ There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

And so right off the bat, the chapter begins with a man who wanted to speak with Jesus privately, so he comes to Him by night—the man’s name was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a ruler in Israel, which meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council—it also tells us that he was a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were ultra-orthodox members of Judaism that lived by the strictest possible religious standards.

They numbered about 6,000 and committed themselves to keeping the whole law of God down to the smallest detail—because, in their minds, that’s how they earned their salvation.

Now even though the term ‘Pharisee’ has become synonymous with *hypocrisy*—not all of the Pharisees were hypocrites.

Some of them, like Nicodemus and Saul of Tarsus, were very sincere in their desire to obey God and live a life of separation from the pollution of the world—in fact the word ‘*Pharisee*’ means ‘*to separate*.’

And so, there’s no need for us to assume any ulterior motive on the part of Nicodemus (no ‘funny business’ in his heart) when he came to Jesus—I believe he was absolutely sincere in his quest for truth.

John 3:2 (NKJV)

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."

So Nic came to Jesus by night ('Nick at night') probably to keep his interest in Jesus a secret from the other Pharisees who hated Him.

The fact that Nicodemus used the plural pronoun "*we*," (v.2) and Jesus responded with the plural "*you*" (v.7) indicates that Nicodemus was representing a group of Pharisees who were all open to Jesus and His message.

"Signs" is the same word used for miracles in the NT.

I believe Nicodemus was saying that he and some of the other Pharisees had come to believe, based on the miracles Jesus had done, that He could be the Messiah—and that meant the Kingdom of God was near. (Explain)

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't even respond to the praise or flattery of Nicodemus, but simply says to him—"*Most assuredly, I say to you...*"

(The 'most assuredly' is meant to emphasize the importance of what Jesus is about to say)

B. The confusion—v.3-12

John 3:3 (NKJV)

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."

This really took Nicodemus back—

John 3:4 (NKJV)

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 don't think Nicodemus was being flippant or sarcastic here—I believe he sincerely wanted to grasp what Jesus was saying, but was genuinely confused.

1 Corinthians 2:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.

Seeing that Nicodemus was confused, Jesus patiently tries to explain to him that He is talking about another kind of birth—

John 3:5 (NKJV)

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.

Now, there is a fair amount of controversy concerning this statement by Jesus with regard to what exactly He meant when He said, "...*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

There are 3 main interpretations for the term '*born of water*'.

Water Baptism

There are those who interpret '*born of water*' to be a reference to **water baptism** which they believe Jesus is saying here is essential for salvation—however, such a teaching is contrary to the rest of the Bible.

Throughout the New Testament, we read that salvation is by *faith* alone in Christ alone—and not thru any ceremony, ritual (like water baptism) or religious works no matter how pious and well intentioned they might be.

And then once a person has received Christ as their Lord and Savior (by faith)—they are baptized in water as a sign of the New Covenant they have just entered into (like a wedding ring is a sign of the marriage covenant).

Water baptism is intended for those who have *already been saved*—never as a means of attaining salvation.

The Water of the Word

Many others believe that when Jesus speaks of being '*born of water*' that He is referring to the **Word of God**.

In Ephesians 5:26 the Word of God is likened to water that cleanses us.

Also, in 1 Peter 1:23 and James 1:18, the new birth is said to take place through the Word of God. (Explain)

This second interpretation is the favored one among Protestants—but let's let the passage speak for itself.

Remember verses 5-7 are a response by Jesus to Nicodemus's question in v.4.

And Nicodemus's question in v.4 was in response to what Jesus said was necessary for a person to enter the Kingdom of God in v.3—

John 3:3-4 (NKJV)

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?"

You see at this point Nicodemus really thinks Jesus is saying that to be a member of the Kingdom of God a person needs to be born twice *physically*—no wonder he's confused.

And in response to Nicodemus's question Jesus says in v.5—

John 3:5 (NKJV)

⁵ ... "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now I believe that what's in view here are the two births necessary for salvation—one physical and the other spiritual.

When it comes to physical birth we know that before a child is born he or she lives in their mother's womb in a "bag of waters" which is the amniotic fluid that surrounds and protects the baby in utero.

When the time is right the bag of waters breaks and the baby is born—this I believe is what Jesus meant when He talked about being '*born of water*'—**physical birth**.

That interpretation is bolstered by how Jesus qualifies verse 5 with verse 6—

John 3:6 (NKJV)

**⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
[physical and spiritual birth]**

But what exactly does it mean to be “*born of the Spirit*”?

Well, it’s a concept that traces its roots back to the Book of Genesis when God made the first man on the earth.

God originally made man (Mr. and Mrs. ‘Man’) in His image as three-fold beings (body, soul and spirit).

We know from Scripture that God is a three-fold Being made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Bible tells us that God made man for fellowship and that God and man came together “Spirit” to “spirit” in mutual fellowship and communion with one another.

When God put Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden, He told them they could eat of all of the trees—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that they ate the fruit of that tree—they would surely die.

And yet, when they disobeyed God and ate from that tree they didn’t die *physically*—but they did die *spiritually*.

Their spirit died and when that happened their communion (connection) with God was broken.

Since God is the source of life, when they were disconnected from God they began to grow old and would *eventually* die.

Before the fall of man there was no sickness and no death—both sickness and death entered the world at the time of the fall through man’s sin.

Sin set in motion entropy—and in particular the second law of thermodynamics which says that everything is moving from order to disorder, from integration to disintegration—from life to death. (Explain)

In fact, when God warned Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would surely die—the Hebrew is, “*dying you will surely die.*”

In other words, they would no longer live forever as God had originally intended, but now would slowly age until they died.

But listen, Adam’s sin didn’t just bring death into *his* life, it impacted all of his descendants as well—Paul the apostle stated in 1Corinthians 15:22,—“*Adam’s sin caused all of his descendants to die.*”

Every person born into this world is a descendant of Adam and as such they are subject not only to *physical* death—but also to *spiritual/eternal* death which the Bible calls the ‘second death’ in the Book of Revelation.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God their fellowship with Him was broken, their connection to Him as the source of everlasting life was severed because sin had entered into them (they were now ‘fallen’ sinners)—and as such they were cursed to spend eternity apart from God since He can have no fellowship with sinners.

The second death is a reference to an unbeliever (child of Adam) being cast into the lake of fire (hell)—

Revelation 21:8 (NKJV)

⁸ But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Revelation 2:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ He...who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

John the apostle, in his first epistle tells us that an ‘overcomer’ is a person that has come to believe in Jesus as the Son of God and to receive Him into their life as their Savior.

1 Corinthians 15:22 (NKJV)

²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Being born of the Spirit means to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior at which time you instantly undergo a new birth where you are taken from the cursed family of Adam—the family upon which the wrath of God (judgment) abides (John 3:36).

And you are born into the family of God where there is no longer a curse upon you (leading to hell), but now the blessings of God abide on you as a child of God (leading to heaven).

This is the ONLY way for a person to escape hell and go to heaven—which is why Jesus emphasized it in verse 7—

John 3:7 (NKJV)

⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Now, let me stop and say that John chapter 3 contains some of the most well-known and best loved verses in the Bible among Christians.

And I’m thinking primarily about the first 16 verses which basically revolve around two great ‘*must*’ statements given by Jesus that climax in one great message of salvation.

These ‘*must*’ statements are found in verses 7 and 14 where Jesus said—*"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'" (v.7); and "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (v.14)*

And together they lead up to and climax in the single greatest *message* of love and hope ever given to mankind—

John 3:16 (NKJV)

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.

Now listen—no one, no matter how religious they are or how good they think they are will enter into heaven apart from believing in Jesus Christ and being born of the Spirit.

Notice how definitively and emphatically Jesus speaks here about this—

John 3:3 (NKJV)

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."

John 3:5 (NKJV)

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."

John 3:7 (NKJV)

⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Maybe you've heard someone say—"I'm a Christian just not one of those 'born-again' Christians."

And while I understand where they're coming from—there is only one kind of Christian and that is a born-again Christian. (Explain)

Let me close by saying, when God first created everything, He stepped back and pronounced it all "*very good*". (Gen. 1:31)

But then sin entered the universe, and everything got corrupted that God had made—creation (original creation) went from “very good” to “very bad”.

However, sin didn’t only set in motion entropy (decay) in nature—it corrupted all relationships God had made for fellowship (“*It is not good that man should be alone*”—Gen. 2:18).

This would include marriages, families, friendships—all relationships including and especially our relationship with God Himself.

This had a profound effect on all of us in that being disconnected from God the source of life (spiritual) meant that His life wouldn’t flow thru us and produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit. (Explain)

This meant that people, although alive physically, were dead spiritually (“dead in trespasses and sins”) and as such wouldn’t know the joyful, abundant life that can only come to a person who is connected to God.

The only way for you to once again be what God desired and designed you to be is to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior which connects you to God and instantly makes you a new creation (in Christ)—

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.