

# Born Again? - What Do You Mean?

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*Primary Scriptures from John 3:1-15*

- I. Nicodemus
  - a. Who is he?
    - i. A Pharisee, a Jewish sect concerned for purity of life and belief according to the Law of God
    - ii. A ruler of the Jews, so a member of the Sanhedrin, the internal governing body of the Jewish people, particularly in Judea
  - b. When did he come to see Jesus?
    - i. He came by night
    - ii. Already his colleagues had a growing dislike of Jesus
    - iii. Possibly he wanted to talk to Jesus when fewer people were around Him
    - iv. More likely, however, Nicodemus wanted to avoid being seen by other Pharisees while talking to Jesus
    - v. Apparently, he wanted to have a frank, honest conversation with Jesus without being swayed by present pressure of his fellow Jewish leaders
    - vi. Application – We need to have frank, honest conversations at times, so find those times you can do so without other people or circumstances keeping you from doing so.
  - c. What has he understood about Jesus?
    - i. He understands Jesus must be from God because no one could do the signs He has done without God.
    - ii. The purpose of signs is to point to a reality beyond the sign.
    - iii. The scope and scale of the miracles done by Jesus were a series of signposts that pointed clearly to His coming from God. And the manner in which He spoke of them indicates that He is in fact God.

- iv. Ironically, this correct understanding by Nicodemus the Pharisee, is ignored by other Pharisees in an episode later in the gospel of John.
  - 1. In John chapter 9, Jesus has healed a man who was blind from birth.
  - 2. The Pharisees are arguing with this man about who Jesus is.
  - 3. The formerly blind man points out the miracle.
  - 4. John 9:32-34.
  - 5. The Pharisees refuse to see the sign and resort to an attack on the man's character, called an ad hominem attack. Such an attack often happens when one side has lost the logical argument and will not humble themselves to admit their wrong.
- v. But Nicodemus humbly and rightly discerned the signs, contrary to his peer group.
- vi. Nicodemus calls Jesus a teacher from God, which is essentially stating that he, Nicodemus, is ready to learn from Jesus.

## II. The Lesson and the Response

- a. Jesus' lesson, then, to Nicodemus is, "...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- b. Nicodemus cannot see this kingdom truth.
  - i. It is obscure to him.
  - ii. He is only thinking in physical terms, which was the problem of many Pharisees as well as many in our day.
    - 1. Such people think that any relationship with God must be obtained and kept through things that we do, such as keeping laws.
    - 2. 1 Corinthians 2:14 (a natural man does not accept...)
- c. It is no trifle that Jesus uses this expression of being born again. I do not want to take the analogy too far, but looking at it in depth is helpful.

- i. When you are born biologically, your life is forever and radically changed.
- ii. Spiritually, when you are born again, your life is forever and radically changed.
  - 1. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (Such were some of you)
  - 2. Nicodemus is a man who, being a Jew, has much understanding about God, professes to belong to God, and he has a sense that Jesus holds the key, but he has not been born again.
  - 3. When someone simply professes faith in Jesus Christ, he may or may not be born again, but someone who is born again most certainly professes faith in Jesus Christ.
  - 4. One who appears to be a Christian, thinks he is a Christian, and then walks away and denies the faith, was never born again.
- iii. The baby does not choose consciously to be born.
- iv. Likewise, you do not choose to be born again.
  - 1. John 1:12-13 (Born not of the will of man)
  - 2. Peter picks up on this as well in 1 Peter 1:3 (Caused us to be born again)
- v. Before the baby is born, he cannot see anything of the world outside. He can hear something and perhaps feel something, but these are indistinct perceptions. He cannot see anything until he is born.
- vi. Even so spiritually, until one is born again, he has only vague perceptions of the kingdom of God. He may perceive that there is something else out there, but he can in no way see or grasp it.
- vii. When a baby is born, he begins to see, but not clearly, and there is so much he does not understand. But he has started.
- viii. In the same manner, when one is born again, he begins to understand the things of God in a true way. There is so much he does not understand, but he has started.

- ix. As a person, you cannot go back to that old life in the womb. It makes no sense and is completely unhelpful.
- x. And when you are born again, you cannot return to not being born again. It would make no sense and would be completely unhelpful.
- xi. When a baby is born, his initial focus is to feed and to interact with the world and learn about it.
- xii. When one is born again, his initial focus is to feed on God's word and interact with God and those also in the kingdom and learn about it.
- xiii. When a baby is born, he is not born partly, as if to say that new world is a part of his life.
- xiv. Likewise, when one is born again, it is improper to say, "Jesus is a part of my life."
  - 1. It is absurd to think you can live part of your life for Jesus and the other part for someone or something else.
  - 2. Jesus is your life, all of your life.
- xv. When a baby is born, he is the child of his parents.
- xvi. When one is born again, he is a child of God, always.
- xvii. As children grow, they rest in dependence upon their parents and go wherever their parents bring them.
  - 1. When I was a young child, my parents brought my brother and me to a tiny little cottage at the beach. It had hardly any room, and there were much larger houses in the area. However, I enjoyed where we were because that is where my parents were. I would have had no joy being in a large beach house if my parents were not with me.
- xviii. In a similar manner, as those who are born of God, we rest in dependence upon Him.
  - 1. Those born of God go wherever our Father brings us, and we stay wherever our Father provides, and that gladly.

2. That is Jesus' point in His exchange with a man in Luke 9:57-58. Are you willing to go wherever Jesus leads you, and stay wherever He provides for you to stay, and be glad simply because He is there with you?
3. Would you rather be in a place of your choosing, even if it meant that God was not there with you? Not, ultimately, if you are born again.

### III. Further Explanation

- a. As Nicodemus is stuck thinking in the physical realm and looking for that which he must do, he protests.
- b. Jesus then gives further explanation of what He means by being born again.
  - i. Jesus states unequivocally that unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.
  - ii. Now being born again is not simply about seeing the kingdom of God, but entering in.
  - iii. There is, admittedly, wide disagreement over what is meant by being born of water.
    1. Some believe it to be speaking of water baptism, which has the imagery of new birth. However, if water baptism were a requirement for entering the kingdom of God, then the thief on the cross would not have made it, though promised by Jesus. I rather see baptism as an external re-enactment of what has taken place internally.
    2. Another possibility is that water is a symbol of cleansing and is at times spoken of in connection with the work of the Spirit as done in Ezekiel 36:25-27. Jesus may have chosen this connection to awaken Nicodemus to the prophetic, which he should have known well.
    3. One more possibility is that water is a passing reference to natural birth, but the emphasis is on being born of the Spirit.

- a. It is as if to say, that being born physically, even as a Jew, is not enough, no matter how well you keep the Law or perform other acts.
  - b. That is to say, being born once is not enough, you need to be born again.
  - c. You are born first by water, but to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born of the Spirit, that is, born again.
  - d. So He is saying “born,” “born again.”
  - e. This view would have to assume the message would be for those who hear it without reference to whether or not someone who dies in the womb can be “born again.”
  - f. This view would then be seen as paralleling the following verse where He states, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”
- iv. The implication here is that which is born of the flesh, merely, cannot enter the kingdom of God. One must be born of the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom.
- v. Consequently, Jesus exhorts Nicodemus not to marvel or wonder at His statement that he must be born again.
  - 1. It is clear that he needs to be alive in the Spirit and cannot gain heaven through the works of the flesh.
  - 2. We are told in Romans 3:20, “...because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight...”
- c. Jesus then makes a statement which, at first, sounds somewhat disconnected, but in truth strongly emphasizes His previous points.
  - i. John 3:8 (the wind blows where it wishes)
  - ii. If being born of the Spirit were a mere act of a person’s will, then naturally those who gravitate towards the things of God would be born of the Spirit, and those who are antagonistic would not.

- iii. In fact, in order to emphasize His point that being born again is utterly different than living in the flesh, Jesus points out that such transformation is not predictable.
- iv. We do not know how all of the various thoughts, experiences, and relationships have their culmination in a person being born again.
- v. We can look at the natural trajectory of someone making a hash of his life, or for that matter someone living a nice life, and think we know what will happen.
- vi. Yet God, by His Spirit, can take that person through various turns of life to bring him to be born again.
  - 1. We might exclaim, “How on earth did that person ever come to be born again?”
  - 2. That is what is meant by we do not know where he comes from.
  - 3. One example is the author C.S. Lewis who called himself, “The most reluctant convert” as he was born again after being a staunch atheist.
  - 4. Another is John Newton, who was captain of a slave ship before being born again and eventually becoming a minister.
  - 5. A present day example is Rosaria Butterfield whom God called from being a radical lesbian professor antagonistic to God, to being born again. She is even now a humble witness to many of the power of God to change a life.
- vii. Further, once a person has been born again, we cannot predict the path on which God will take him, for God has taken many of His people and used them in ways no one ever would have guessed earlier in life.
- viii. It is not a straight line, from man’s perspective, to get the sinner to salvation and then through the rest of his life.
  - 1. Yet it is a straight line to God who has ordered his path in such a way to:

- a. Bring him into the kingdom.
  - b. Prepare him to be useful in particular ways that he would not otherwise be.
  - c. And sanctify his soul, readying him for heaven.
- 2. If you have ever looked at trans-oceanic airplane routes in an airplane magazine, it appears they travel this long arcing path that is longer than going straight there.
- 3. However, when those routes are placed on an actual globe, we see how in fact they are the most direct route to their destination.
- 4. What we thought would have been shorter, would actually be longer.
- 5. And so we learn again and again that God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

#### IV. The Insufficiency of Man

- a. Nicodemus, at this point, is floored. He cannot understand how these things can be as Jesus has stated.
  - i. He cannot understand how life with God is more than the natural efforts of following the Law of God and performing religious duty.
- b. Jesus then puts His finger on the reason why so many in Israel have a faulty understanding, and why He had to come teaching the truth.
  - i. If Nicodemus is the teacher of Israel, and he does not understand this fundamental doctrine, how will he ever teach it to anyone else.
  - ii. Remember that Nicodemus identified Jesus as a teacher come from God, and now Jesus is pointing out that He is indeed the true teacher with the right understanding.
- c. Jesus follows up by telling Nicodemus that what He has spoken comes not from interpretation, speculation, or debate, but from what He knows and has seen.
  - i. His witness is true and authoritative.



- ii. However, Nicodemus and the other Pharisees do not receive this witness.
- d. Jesus makes clear that if Nicodemus does not believe the more elementary teaching, teaching of that which happens on earth in the heart of man, he will not believe those things which are centered on heaven.
- e. Jesus then moves to the heavenly, giving a greater understanding of who He is in verse 13. It has been understood variously, but here is how I take it.
  - i. Because Enoch and Elijah had previously ascended into heaven in a manner, Jesus must mean something different than what happened with those two.
  - ii. We see Him call Himself the Son of Man here, which is a reference to the scene in Daniel 7.
  - iii. There the scene is in heaven and One like a Son of Man came and was presented before the Ancient of Days.
  - iv. The Ancient of Days then gave Him dominion, glory, and a kingdom.
  - v. No one has thus approached the Ancient of Days or received such a kingdom as the Son of Man has.
  - vi. It is this Son of Man that has descended from heaven and now stands before Nicodemus telling him about entry into the kingdom of God, which is His kingdom.
- f. But then Jesus reveals why this Son of Man who was standing before the Ancient of Days has descended from heaven.
  - i. He points to a prophetic sign, which occurred in the wilderness when Moses was leading the people out of Egypt and to the promised land.
  - ii. There in the wilderness, because of the complaining of the people, God sent poisonous serpents among them.
  - iii. However, God told Moses to craft a bronze serpent and raise it up on a standard, which was a pole visible to all and representing the group

- iv. Whoever was bitten would surely die, unless he looked at the bronze serpent, and then he would live.
- v. He would not live because of any medicine or magic, but because he believed that God would do as He said.
- vi. Jesus states that just as that serpent was lifted up, to give life to those who looked and thus believed, He Himself would be lifted up to give life to those who believe.
- vii. He is, of course, referring to Himself being lifted up on the cross.
- viii. The implication here is that all of us will surely die unless we look to Jesus on the cross and believe.
- ix. Then believing, we will have not simply a few more years here, but will have life eternal with God and all who are His.
- x. Believe what? Believe that Jesus is the One come from heaven, as the Son of Man, that He was lifted up (crucified) for our snake bite (sins).
- xi. But He says eternal life in Him, which implies that He must live eternally as well, and thus rise from the dead.
- xii. Yes, all who look to Jesus and believe have eternal life; they have been born again, and their lives will never be the same for all eternity.