

“You Must Be Born Again”

April 7, 2013

Text: John 3:1-8

Pastors/elders have a special responsibility/accountability

before God for their ministries to God’s people.

Heb 13 says that we are to keep watch over your souls as those who must give an account to God (13:17).

In heaven, I never want Jesus to present me w/ a list of people in my congregation who will spend eternity in hell because I failed to warn them sufficiently/strongly enough.

When I was young, our church used to sing the old hymn,

When We All Get to Heaven.

But 1 day it struck me that we prob. won’t all get to heaven, & I knew I didn’t want it to be the cause of that, due to my own half-hearted negligence as a pastor.

Your most urgent spiritual need is to become born again, & I must press that truth home to you again/again.

I’d like to be confident that each one of us is truly born again.

That not a single one is a hearer only, and not a doer of the Word, because I have failed to preach the gospel urgently enough as a matter of life/death, or to warn you w/ enough fervency that you *must* be born again.

**That is the message Jesus Himself will give to a Pharisee
named Nicodemus, in today's text.**

It will take place in a nighttime conversation between the two men.

That conversation can be summarized with five words that all begin w/ "A"—amenity/axiom/appeal/answer/awareness.

- * Nicodemus begins this conversation with some pleasant/polite **amenities**.
- * Jesus abruptly changes the subject, & talks about the real issue on Nicodemus' mind, stating an **axiomatic** truth the Pharisee finds shocking=> That he must be born again.
- * Nicodemus **appeals** to Jesus, inviting Him to explain Himself—or better yet, to soften His dogmatic language and become more realistic.
- * Instead of softening/withdrawing what He has said, Jesus **answers** by reinforcing/illustrating it.
- * This leads to a new **awareness**—a fundamental truth about the cause/nature of regeneration itself.

*** The Amenities**

[John 3:1]=> “Now [remember this word] there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and that's important here.

Pharisees believed that to be acceptable to God, a person 1st had to be Jewish, & 2nd that He had to obey the Mosaic Law.

Jesus is going to tell Nicodemus that those things have nothing at all to do w/ acceptability to God.

They are both irrelevant to gaining entrance into God's Kingdom.

The religious party called the Pharisees had existed for almost 200 years, and had begun as a reaction against Gk culture, which had infiltrated/undermined/corrupted Jewish religion. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees took their religion seriously & taught people to obey the Mosaic Law.

In fact, they added to it the oral law written by rabbis, thinking that if people obeyed the stricter/more-specific rules of the oral law, they'd never even get close to disobeying Moses' Law.

E.g., God's Mosaic Law said=> "*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. / Six days you shall labor & do all your work, / but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work*" (Ex 20:9-11).

To keep anyone from breaking the Sabbath Law, the oral law had added some more specific provisions=>

* E.g. a woman was not to look in a mirror on the Sabbath because, if she spotted a grey hair, she might be tempted to pull it out, & that would be work.

* If a man gargled vinegar as a remedy for a sore throat, he had to swallow it, because gargling was considered work, but swallowing wasn't.

* A person could eat an egg laid on the Sabbath as long as he killed the hen that laid it, because she had broken the Sabbath Law w/ her indiscriminate egg-laying.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed in all these legalistic rules/regulations, thinking they made him a good Jew and a good man, deserving of entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Like most Pharisees, he prob. felt very self-righteous because of his obedience to the Law, & superior to the common masses of Jews who didn't obey it as scrupulously as he did. But this also made him a hypocrite, because nobody was capable of obeying the whole Law of God perfectly.

The Pharisees' hypocrisy/self-righteousness were 2 failings which Jesus would constantly attack. Because the H.S. had never transformed their hearts, they were unable to keep the Law either in-letter/in-spirit. But they tried to cover up their failure by performing religious rituals and becoming even more legalistic.

John says Nicodemus was a “ruler of the Jews,” meaning he held some position of authority/honor w/i Judaism.

He may even have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council among the Jews.

In verse 10 of this chapter, Jesus will describe him as “*the teacher of Israel,*” giving him extraordinary status even among Jewish religious leaders/teachers/rabbis.

Therefore, he was even more invested/caught-up in this futile religious system than most of them.

When Jesus Himself began to gain notoriety as a Jewish teacher, Nicodemus paid Him a visit to assess His qualifications.

This would have been esp. important, given the fact that X had not attended any of the established rabbinical schools, and He was from Galilee—not an area known for producing Jewish prophets or scholars.

Nonetheless, Nicodemus spoke to Jesus courteously, addressing Him as “*rabbi*,” a title of honor among Jewish teachers.

[Verse 2]=> “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.’”

These were the amenities I mentioned, w/ which Nicodemus plied Jesus.

I told you to remember the word “Now” at the beginning of verse 1, & this 2nd verse explains why.

It connects it all back to the last chapter (John 2).

In 2:23, John had said=> “*Many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. / But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men,*”

Nicodemus was one of those people who were drawn to Jesus because of the miraculous signs he had observed X doing.

He says so here in verse 2=> “*No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.*”

But instead of convincing Nicodemus that X's signs meant He was Messiah, they just convinced him Jesus was an excellent teacher sent by God—prob. like himself (from Nicodemus' p.o.v.).

These were the amenities w/ which Nicodemus began the conversation, referring to our Lord as his equal, even a fellow-rabbi.

Nicodemus was very respectful, acknowledging that God was w/ Jesus as a teacher, even as He had been w/ Moses/Jeremiah.

* **The Axiomatic Truth**

Now Jesus is going to stun Nicodemus by stating an axiomatic or self-evident truth, that is totally foreign to his thinking as a legalistic rabbi who teaches salvation by Jewish heritage and by good deeds.

[Verse 3]=> “*Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly [this is a solemn/essential truth], I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’*”

Our initial reaction is, “Where did that come from?”

Nicodemus hadn't asked how to get into God's Kingdom.

Again, this relates back to the previous chapter, where John wrote that Jesus “*knew all men*” (2:24) and “*knew what was in man*” (2:25)—this is what was in Nicodemus' mind. I.e., John illustrates Jesus' omniscience, by showing us that He knew what Nicodemus was thinking.

Someone: If this is what was in Nicodemus' mind, why didn't he just come out and ask Jesus how to get into God's Kingdom?

Because his pride wouldn't let him ask such a basic religious question of an uneducated man like Jesus, being as he himself was, "*the teacher of Israel.*"

Besides, he didn't want anybody to know he even had doubts about his own views of how a person gets into the Kingdom.

Jesus' answer to Nicodemus' unasked question was that one gets into the Kingdom, by becoming born again.

That same word can be translated "born from above"
(i.e., born from heaven or from God Himself).

It is a passive voice verb, which means he must be given birth by someone else, not that he must gain spiritual birth by/for himself.

Commentator Richard Lenski puts it like this=>

"Spiritual birth is something one undergoes, not something one produces. As our efforts had nothing to do with our natural conception and birth, so in an analogous way but on a higher plane, regeneration is not a work of ours. What a blow for Nicodemus! His being a Jew gave him no part in the kingdom."

This is the axiomatic truth Nicodemus had to understand=>
He must receive birth—again.

And this is a profound truth that we too must understand.

In order to see/experience the Kingdom of God, where God's will and His grace prevail, we must receive new birth & therefore new life (eternal life) from the H.S.

X is not talking about living by some religious belief system or by some moral code, but a miraculous re-creation of one's nature.

This transformation goes by other names in other Scriptures=>

- * Acts 3—repentance and conversion (3:19)
- * Rom 6—being made alive from the dead, spiritually (6:13)
- * 2 Cor 5—becoming a new creature in X (5:17)
- * Eph 2—receiving life when you're dead in your sins (2:5)
- * Col 3—laying aside an old self, putting on a new 1 (3:19f)
- * Tit 3—the washing of regeneration & the renewing of the Spirit (3:5)
- * 1 P. 2—being called out of darkness into God's light (2:9)
- * 1 Jn 3—passing out of death into life (3:14)

Becoming born again is unlike any other human experience.

It is not a reformation of the present life, improving/elevating it.

- * It is not a renovation of one's present nature, nor simply an alteration of one's thinking/opinions/philosophy.
- * It is not undergoing ceremonies—even baptism—or being welcomed into a church.
- * It's not being taught morality by godly parents/grandparents.
- * It is not feeling impressed/touched by a sermon, & therefore making a profession of one's faith in Jesus.
In fact, it's not basically a feeling at all.

It is receiving new life & a new nature from above—

the spiritual equivalent of rebirth (being born a second time, born again).

It is experiencing the Divine miracle of creation w/i oneself (just as God created life in Adam, blowing the breath of God into him).

It requires the same power that resurrected X from the dead physically.

It is experiencing newness, in that everything becomes
new=>

New life/joy/hope in a new world that is no longer
what it was before our regeneration.

Things we once loved we now consider contemptible.

Things we once despised we now love/treasure.

It is talking w/ God & enjoying it, talking w/ Jesus (who
was once a stranger to us), crucifying our flesh w/ X,
& sensing the H.S.'s power working in our
hearts/lives.

It is nothing short of a supernatural work of God w/i us.

Friends, this is the experience of one who is born again, & w/o
this experience we'll each each (w/o exception) die in our
sins.

That is the axiomatic truth w/ which Jesus confronted
Nicodemus.

* The Appeal

What X had said was so opposite to everything Nicodemus had ever believed/thought/taught, his mind couldn't accept/process it.

He appealed to Jesus to modify His words, making them less offensive/shocking, more understandable/acceptable to Nicodemus' preconceived ideas and way of thinking.

He tried to show Jesus that what He had said was ridiculous/absurd, throwing it back at Him in crassly literal terms, that expressed his own disdain for such a concept.

[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 couldn't believe that spiritual rebirth was actually required for entrance into God's Kingdom.

In his mind, there had to be an easier way, a less radical, less traumatic, less invasive/demanding way.

It put salvation beyond human reach, placing a person's eternal destiny completely outside his own control.

Not only did this contradict everything Nicodemus had ever learned, it offended his humanistic-pride and self-reliance.

Jesus was saying that a person's own will has no more to do with his being born again, than it had to do with his being born, in the first place.

And lest one think that's not what Scripture teaches, or that this misinterprets Jesus' words, remember that when His disciples asked, "*Who can be saved?*" He answered=> "*With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*" (Mt 19:25-26).

Simply put, Jesus was saying that salvation requires a divine miracle.

Maybe you're thinking, "I can see Nicodemus' point, and frankly, I find this a bit discouraging myself."

"*I prefer to hear, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'*" (Acts 16:31).

Paul's words there are true, but so are X's words in our text.

To build your faith on a proper foundation, you must take both into account, not trying to play one off against the other.

A man who builds his house on a faulty foundation should be told the truth, so his house won't come tumbling down on top of him someday.

If you ask, w/ the Philippian jailor "*What must I do to be saved?*" the right answer is=> "You can do nothing to be saved, and the sooner you rid yourself of that notion, the better off you'll be.

"But you can/should look away from yourself to X—His death—and to the H.S. who can give you new life, so that you can believe in the Lord Jesus, and become born again.

“Don’t you see, that for the spiritually dead, it all must begin with Him?”

*** Jesus’ Answer**

[Verse 5]=> “*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.’”*

Is Jesus teaching that the new birth has 2 causes (water/Spirit) or just 1—the water/Spirit being somehow combined?

The answer is 1 (water/Spirit combined) as we will see shortly.

Churches which teach baptismal regeneration say He’s teaching 2;
That God saves, gives eternal life, & brings a person into His kingdom, through the H.S., & thru water baptism, both of which are necessary.

I.e., that the act of baptism has saving merit/power in itself, even in the case of a baby.

This is indeed a part of Catholic doctrine, a/w/a that of some Protestant churches which baptize infants.

But baptism as a necessity for salvation has some major

problems=>

1st, the thief on the cross never had a chance to be baptized, & yet X promised he would be w/ Him in paradise.
So baptism isn’t an absolute necessity for salvation, after all.

2nd, Eph 2:8-9 says=> “*By grace you have been saved through faith; & that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works [including baptism], that no one should boast.*”

3rd, if baptism is a necessity for salvation, why didn’t Jesus say more about it, why don’t 13 of the NT epistles even mention it, and why would Paul actually write?=>

“*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius*” (I Cor 1:14).

There are other reasons as well, but let that suffice for now. On the other hand, when water is used figuratively in the Bible, it refers to spiritual cleansing/renewal through the Spirit. And this is how water/the-Spirit are combined=>’

The Spirit cleanses our souls as if He had washed
them in water.

In the OT, this is most clearly seen in Ezek 36 where God says=>

“*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. / Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. / I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances*” (36:25-27).

God cleanses believers of their sins just as water
cleanses our bodies of physical uncleanness.

He also places His H.S. in us, who then creates a new heart/spirit w/i us, causing us to obey His Law.

The NT passage which best states this same truth is Titus 3:

*“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the **washing** of **regeneration** and **renewing** by the **Holy Spirit**, / whom He **poured out** upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (3:5-6).*

This is the spiritual miracle of regeneration that takes place w/i a person when he is born again, thru faith in Jesus.

Now Jesus further supports/illustrates this truth.

[Verse 6]=> *“That which is born of the flesh [human nature] is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

I.e., man (w/i the limitations of his own human nature) cannot bring about regeneration.

Nicodemus must have thought his question about a man entering his mother's womb again was an insurmountable argument that X could never answer.

But Jesus answered in essence, Even if man could re-enter his mother's womb, it wouldn't help, because flesh can only produce more flesh and fleshly nature, which has no capacity for anything spiritual, and always postures itself as God's enemy.

Ever since Adam/Eve's fall into sin, man's fleshly/human nature has been in rebellion against God.

Rom 8=> *“The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is*

not even able to do so” (8:7).

Although John’s use of “flesh” refers to the limitations of man’s human nature, while Paul’s refers to fallen man’s bent to sinfulness, the 2 are inevitably interlinked.

Only the H.S. can give birth to a new spirit w/i man, which can then relate itself to the realm of God Himself and do God’s will.

So John says in his 1st epistle, that a twice-born individual=>

- * Practices righteousness (2:29)
- * Does not continually practice sin (3:9)
- * Loves the brethren (3:14)
- * Overcomes Satan’s evil world system (5:4)
- * Keeps himself from the wicked one (5:18)

Regeneration is a transformation by the HS of a person’s very nature, which brings about observable changes in his life.

Now Jesus refers to Nicodemus’ reaction, in view of all this=>

He was nonplused/amazed.

[Verse 7]=> “*Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’* ”

Nicodemus should not have been amazed, given (as we have just seen) that Ezekiel (a/w/a other OT writers) had written about it, & Nicodemus was an expert on the OT.

He should have known this.

But he’d become accustomed to thinking that acceptance w/ God was gained through man’s own efforts to obey God’s Law.

Like almost everyone else on this earth, he overestimated man's ability to achieve righteousness, and he underestimated God's standard for such righteous obedience to His Law=> His own glory.

Rom 3=> "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom 3:23).

God's own glory is His standard for human righteousness.

He does not accept anything less, and He does not grade men on the curve.

Many people are amazed that spiritual rebirth is necessary before man can become acceptable to God, or even believe in Jesus for salvation.

But that's exactly what the Bible says=>
His regeneration must precede our believing.

* A New Awareness

Nicodemus found Jesus' answer to his question amazing.

Now X would go on to make him aware of a basic/foundational truth that also illustrates what He had said.

[Verse 8]=> "*The wind [pneuma] 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 [pneuma].*"

Jesus uses a play on words here, since both the word “wind” & the word “Spirit” are translations of the Gk word pneuma.

Jesus is saying that, like the wind, the H.S. is absolutely unpredictable/uncontrollable.

In practical terms of our salvation, Jesus is describing the sovereign character of our regeneration.

Just as no one can direct the wind, the H.S.'s activity in giving new birth and new life to souls, is a totally sovereign & incomprehensible activity, which man can neither control/influence.

So in any debate about election, when someone argues that God chooses those whom He foresees are going to someday choose Him, his argument is based on either ignorance/rejection of this verse.

He gives far too much credit to men who were born spiritually dead in their sins.

The Spirit blows His saving breath over any dead soul God has chosen, and no one can either direct/control/influence Him or His activity.

But just as you know the wind is blowing when you see the leaves rustling, you know the Spirit has done His work in a man, when his life begins to manifest the character of God.

You may not understand why he's different, but you'll see/hear it in his life.

He has experienced the miracle of regeneration, because God's unpredictable wind has blown on him.

In Ezekiel 37, God brings Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones.

Verse 9=> “*Then He [God] said to me [Ezekiel], ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.’’’ / So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*”

What “breath” is this?

The breath of God’s Spirit, which gave Adam life in the beginning.

Today God’s Spirit is coming from the four winds and breathing spiritual life into people who are as spiritually dead and helpless, just as those skeletons in the valley were physically dead, but were given the breath of life.

And He does it all according to His own will.

May His breath blow over your soul.

Someone: What can I do to be saved, if I have no control over the Spirit’s life-breathing/saving work?

In Acts 2, Peter confronted the Jews in the Temple w/ their sin just 6 weeks after they had crucified/killed their own Messiah.

Verse 37=> “*Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ / Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’*” (37f).

What pierced them to the heart?

Peter's words, which were driven home to their hearts by the H.S., preparing them for new life.

If you aren't sure you're born again, ask the H.S. to make your sin clear to you, as He did to them—to blow in your direction.

If He does, repent of your sin as those Jews did, and ask Jesus to forgive you, cleanse you, & renew your spirit.

He promises=> "*Ask, & it will be given to you; seek, & you will find; knock, & it will be opened to you*" (Mt 7:7). If you ask sincerely, because the H.S. has regenerated and

enabled you to do so, Jesus will save your soul.

“You Must Be Born Again”

April 7, 2013

Text: John 3:1-8

1. “You *must* be born again” is the message Jesus will give to a Pharisee named [20 Nicodemus] in today’s text.

Heb 13:17

That conversation can be summarized with five words beginning in “A”— amenity, axiom, appeal, answer, and awareness...

*** The Amenities**

[John 3:1]

2. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; Pharisees believed that to be acceptable to God a person first had to be Jewish, and second that he had to obey the Mosaic [8 Law].

Ex 20:9-11

3. The Pharisees’ hypocrisy and self-righteousness were two failings which [12 Jesus] would constantly attack.

[Verse 2]

Jn 2:23

4. Nicodemus was one of those people who were drawn to Jesus because of the miraculous [12 signs] he had observed.

*** The Axiomatic Truth**

[Verse 3]

Jn 2:24, 25

5. Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus’ unasked question was that one gets into the Kingdom by becoming [10 born] again.

Acts 3:19; Rom 6:13; II Cor 5:17; Eph 2:5; Col 3:19-20; Titus 3:5; I Pet 2:9; I Jn 3:14

6. Becoming born again is not a reformation of the present life; it is receiving new life and a new [14 nature] from above.

*** The Appeal**

[Verse 4]

7. Jesus was saying that a person's own will has no more to do with his being born again than it had to do with his being [10 born].

Mt 19:25-26; Acts 16:31

* **Jesus' Answer**

[Verse 5]

8. Churches which teach baptismal regeneration say that God saves, gives eternal life, and brings a person into His kingdom through the Holy Spirit and through [12 water] baptism.

Eph 2:8-9; I Cor 14

9. When water is used figuratively in the Bible, it refers to spiritual cleansing and renewal through the [14 Spirit].

Ezek 36:25-27; Titus 3:5-6

[Verse 6]

Rom 8:7i

10. Only the Holy Spirit can give birth to a new spirit within man, which can then [14 relate] itself to the realm of God Himself.

I Jn 2:29; 3:9; 3:14; 5:4; 5:18

[Verse 7]

Rom 3:23

11. Many people are amazed that spiritual rebirth is necessary before man can become acceptable to God or even [16 believe] in Jesus.

* **A New Awareness**

[Verse 8]

12. Just as no one can direct the wind, the Holy Spirit's activity in giving new birth and new life to souls is a totally sovereign and incomprehensible activity which man can neither [16 control] or influence.

13. Just as you know the wind is blowing when you see the leaves rustling, you know the Spirit has done His work in a man when his life begins to manifest the [20 character] of God.

Ezek 37:9-10; Acts 2:37-38

14. If you are not sure you are born again, ask the Holy Spirit to make your sin clear to you; if He does, repent of your sin and [8 ask] Jesus to forgive you, cleanse you, and renew your spirit.

Matt 7:7

