

EXPOSITION OF JOHN

Message #15

John 3:3-12

Years ago, I was working for Kregel Publications and a famous preacher came to the bookstore to buy books. He did not know me at all. He walked straight up to me and said - young man if you died right now would you go to heaven or hell. I was somewhat taken back by his approach, but I proceeded to tell him that I would go to heaven because on June 10, 1976, I trusted Jesus Christ as Savior. Now I have witnessed to many people in my life, but I have to admit, my approach is not usually so direct. But sometimes this is the best approach. When we come to this part of John 3 - it is the approach Jesus Christ used when he confronts Nicodemus.

Now Nicodemus was a very religious man. In fact, he was a great teacher of Israel. He was a man who thought kingdom. He came to talk with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ did not waste any time, He got right to the heart of the real issue which was this:

NO MATTER HOW RELIGIOUS OR SCHOLARLY ONE MAY BE, UNLESS A PERSON IS BORN AGAIN, HE WILL NOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

When Nicodemus came to Christ, he was very kind and in many ways very flattering. But Christ did not flatter Nicodemus. Even though he was a high ranking religious figure, he was not right with God. Jesus Christ knew what was in the heart of every single person (2:24-25). He knew exactly what Nicodemus needed - a new birth. He knew that Nicodemus was thinking about the kingdom politically so Christ forces him to think about it spiritually.

In this discussion that Christ has with Nicodemus, He basically develops two lines of thought:

(Line of Thought #1) - One must have a new birth in order to enter the kingdom of God. 3:3-12
(Line of Thought #2) - One must believe in Jesus Christ to experience a new birth. 3:13-21

A person may be a respected leader in a church or community, or a teacher or a highly respected member, but the truth is **unless that person has a new birth he will not ever see the kingdom of God.** As this chapter points out, unless one has a new birth, he is headed to eternal condemnation and to experiencing the wrath of God (v. 36).

Now we may look at these verses in a series of five responses in this dialogue that takes place between Jesus and Nicodemus.

RESPONSE #1 – The response of Jesus to Nicodemus. 3:3

Jesus gets right to the heart of the issue. He looked straight into Nicodemus' heart. He saw the need and He addressed it. It gets away from religious small talk and what He says to Nicodemus is, "Unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus needed more than a Teacher, he needed a Savior. Many people would respond - "Why do I need to be born again? What is wrong with the way I am? I'm a good person; I do the best I can. What is wrong with me?" What is wrong is that you are a sinner and you need to be born again. Now there are five grammatical items I want to draw to your attention from this one verse - John 3:3:

- (Item #1)** - The repetition of “truly, truly” (v. 5, 11) indicates that the stress here is that this is the absolute truth. This is not hypothetical theory - it is the absolute, dogmatic truth. Unbelievers do not like the piercing dogmatism of “truly, truly.” It is not tolerant or flexible. It is dogmatic certainty. Believe in Christ and have everlasting life. Believe in yourself and have everlasting condemnation.
- (Item #2)** - Christ emphasizes that He is the One saying this to Nicodemus. Nicodemus knows that Jesus is “from” God (John 3:2). In other words, this is God talking to Nicodemus. What He says, Nicodemus had better take seriously. This is God speaking and He is speaking about eternal things. Keep in mind who is saying this. Not me, not John, this is Jesus Christ saying that your eternity hinges on being born again.
- (Item #3)** - Without any exceptions, one “ must be born again” to even hope to see the kingdom of God. The words “born again” have two possible meanings, both of which are correct and both of which are derived from the adverb “again” (ανωθεν). The adverb “again” means to be born of a second birth as opposed to the first or beginning birth. It also means to be born from above (G. Abbott-Smith, p. 43). **A proper understanding then is unless a person has a second birth, different from the first birth, a birth from above, he will not see the kingdom of God.** The words “born again” are used for many things such as “turn over a new leaf” or “live a new kind of life in some moral reform” or “give it a new effort.” But that is not what Jesus meant. He meant another real birth. Not repentance, but rebirth.
- (Item #4)** - The words “cannot see” are words that literally mean no power to even be able to see the kingdom of God, let alone enter the kingdom of God. The capability to see God's kingdom lies in being born again. Remember, Jesus is talking to a very religious man. A Pharisee, a ruler, a great religious teacher. But if he is not born again, he will not ever see the kingdom of God.
- (Item #5)** - The “kingdom of God” to Nicodemus would be the predicted kingdom in the O.T. in which God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, reigns on earth which features Israel in her land. Jesus Christ is telling a high ranking Jew that unless he is born again, he will not ever see the kingdom of God.

This is one heavy verse of Scripture. Jesus is certainly not speaking lightly to Nicodemus; he is getting at the center of true theology. There are many people who believe people can be educated into Christianity. Put a curriculum of religious education or Christian education and that will make you a Christian. To be a Christian, you must be born again. You must have a new birth.

RESPONSE #2 – The response of Nicodemus to Jesus. 3:4

Obviously Nicodemus had not been born again. In fact, he didn't even know what the term meant. However, **ignorance of theology will not keep one out of hell.** At this point in time, the only birth Nicodemus was aware of was a physical birth.

Nicodemus wanted to know how a person could be born again. He knew he could not enter his mother's womb a second time. Nicodemus knew that physical rebirth was an impossibility, which of course, was also something Jesus knew. Christ was anticipating this response from him because He was taking him into new areas of doctrine that he knew nothing about.

Most people wish they could turn back the clock and start over and do things differently. You cannot start over. You cannot erase the past. You and I have blown it and that is a fact. That is precisely why all need to be born again. We need a new birth that cleans the slate. We need to be born again.

The subject of being born again is a subject of deep doctrine. So how does one go about being born again?

RESPONSE #3 – The response of Jesus to Nicodemus. 3:5-8

Now in these verses Jesus Christ reveals three very important facts to Nicodemus:

(Fact #1) - Being born again is not a physical birth, it is a spiritual birth. 3:5-6

Now the noun “water” has caused quite a stir among interpreters. Some suggest the “water” refers to: 1) Water baptism; 2) Repentance signified by John’s baptism; 3) Word of God that washes one clean (Psalm 119:9; John 15:3; Ephesians 5:25-26; I Peter 1:23); 4) Symbolic reference to the Holy Spirit; 5) Natural amniotic fluid that accompanies the physical birth of a physical baby.

We would certainly agree that no one is born again apart from contact with the Word of God. However, as I understand it, the “water” refers to the breaking of water that leads to the physical birth of a baby. It does not refer to water baptism, or John's baptism, it refers to the natural birth process.

When a baby is born in the flesh, within a womb, a woman's water breaks thus releasing amniotic fluid, which eventually leads to the birth of a baby. If you take what Nicodemus is thinking about and what Christ is comparing contextually, what Christ is saying in order to be born again, one cannot just have a physical birth, but one must have a Spirit birth. There are two families you may be born into - obviously there is the earthly family by virtue of physical birth and there is the heavenly family by virtue of a spiritual birth.

(Fact #2) - Being born again is absolutely necessary to enter the Kingdom of God. 3:5

The verb “cannot” (ου δυναται) means no human has the strength, ability, power or might to accomplish this. No one can ever be strong enough on his own to go to heaven. If a person is not born again, he will not enter the kingdom of God. In other words, being born again is a mandatory prerequisite for getting into God's eternity. It is the only door that God has appointed that will get a sinner into heaven.

One may be religious, and nice, and moral and a good citizen and a good upstanding member of their church, but if one is not born again, he will not enter the kingdom of God.

(Fact #3) - Being born again is totally the work of the Holy Spirit . 3:6, 8

Being born again by the Holy Spirit is like the wind. The wind blows any direction it pleases. The air currents are things man cannot control. We cannot detain or stop or control the wind - it does whatever God wants it to do. You and I hear the sound of it, and at times we see the results of it, but we don't know much about its activity. Can any person here answer the question why God allows the wind to blow in this area one day with great intensity and another day without it? Can anyone here actually define "wind"? We may say it is a large body of air that is in motion, but beyond that, what can we actually say? Truth is the wind, does what God wants it to do and all we see are the results.

The wind is irresponsible concerning any human - it does what it wants, what God wants.
The wind is irresistible - for no human can stop it.
The wind is irregular - barely blowing one moment and gushing at gale force the next.
The wind is invisible - one of the few things you know is there but cannot see.
The wind is inscrutable - many things about it no man can explain or know.
The wind is indispensable - without it all vegetation would die.
The wind is invigorating - it refreshes, it has a life force that even doctors recognize when they advise people to move to the coastal sea areas.

That is the way the Holy Spirit works. He grabs people as God desires and we see the results. We watch as the Holy Spirit grabs hold of a vain, gossipy, loudmouthed, worldly woman and she becomes a quiet, godly woman of prayer. We watch as the Holy Spirit grabs hold of an arrogant, lying, wicked, lustful man and he becomes a dignified man of God who loves the Word. As I preach this, I have no idea what the Holy Spirit is doing. But here is what I know - the Holy Spirit will move in His direction and He will cause people to be born again.

There are many results of things we see but don't know much about. For example, electricity, radio waves, or satellite systems. That is the way it is with the Spirit's work, we see the results.
The best argument for Christianity is the transformed Christian life by power of God's Spirit.
You cannot ever disregard the power of God to literally make bad people good.

RESPONSE #4 – The response of Nicodemus to Jesus. 3:9

Nicodemus responded - how can these things be? How is this spiritual transformation possible? What causes this "born again" experience to take place? What must one do to have the Holy Spirit cause the "born again" spiritual birth to take place? If you do not wish to be born again - you will say, "No thank you, I'm quite satisfied with myself, I don't need any change." But if you are like Nicodemus, you will want to know how being born again is possible.

RESPONSE #5 – The response of Jesus to Nicodemus. 3:10-12

Christ is going to carefully lay out what one must do to be born again, but before He does, He shoots straight at Nicodemus. He does not pat him on the back and say, isn't it good we can discuss these things. Jesus drives home three thoughts:

(Thought #1) - A teacher of Israel should know about the necessity of being spiritually right with God. 3:10

For a teacher of Israel not to know about needing a spiritual birth was absurd. Jesus said why is this discussion so foreign to you? Why don't you understand what I am saying? You are a great teacher of the Bible, but you don't seem to have a clue what I am talking about. There were many predictions in the O.T. of the Holy Spirit bringing about a kingdom transformation (Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29).

(Thought #2) - You have not received the testimony of those who truly know what they are talking about. 3:11

The pronoun “you” in you do not receive is plural. Jesus had more than just Nicodemus in view, he had all of Israel in view, especially the leadership. Christ said I have come and so have the prophets to instruct you concerning the truth of God. But you do not receive our witness. In other words, Israel, as religious as she was, would not receive truth.

(Thought #3) - You do not believe earthly analogies, why would you believe heavenly realities. 3:12

Now carefully observe that the issue of salvation comes down to faith - what you believe. If Nicodemus could not grasp the importance of a new spiritual birth, how could he grasp the deeper things of God concerning Him being God in the flesh and His work on Calvary? As we shall see next week, Christ is on His way to the cross so people could be born again. Nicodemus had not even come to terms with the need to be born again. He didn't even know what Christ was talking about, so how would he grasp the essence of the cross.

In order for a person to grasp heavenly realities, he must be born again. One may be an intellectual, an important person, a huge success, but in order to understand the Word of God, one must be born again.

We may be absolutely certain of this one thing today - unless one is born again he will not only not enter God's eternity, he will not even see it. It doesn't matter how good you've been or how bad you've been. If one is not born again, he will not see the kingdom of God. But if one will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, he/she shall be saved.

Look again carefully at verse 7. **“You must be born again.”** This matter is an eternal matter of necessity. This is not a suggestion or a good thought, this is the only way to heaven - you must be born again.