

**The Gospel of John (14);
“Jesus, Nicodemus, and the New Birth” (part 1) (3:1-21)**

Introduction:

We arrive today to a very important passage respecting the manner in which God brings salvation to sinners. Here we read of the Lord Jesus instructing perhaps the foremost teacher of Israel in matters that he should not only have understood when Jesus taught him, but he should have known these things from his own study of the Hebrew Scriptures. Here we read of the necessity and manner of the new birth, that is, the regeneration of the sinner, which begins God’s work of salvation and results in the sinner placing faith in Jesus Christ. A proper understanding of our passage will underscore the Reformed teaching of God’s distinguishing sovereign grace in salvation, the need for every sinner to experience regeneration by God, and the need that we have as Christians to pray and seek the grace of God to reach the lost for Jesus Christ.

J. C. Ryle emphasized the importance of this passage:

The conversation between Christ and Nicodemus, which begins in these verses, is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible. Nowhere else do we find stronger statements about those two mighty subjects, the new birth, and salvation by faith in the Son of God. The servant of Christ will do well to make himself thoroughly acquainted with this chapter. A man may be ignorant of many things in religion, and yet be saved. But to be ignorant of the matters handled in this chapter, is to be in the broad way that leads to destruction.¹

Although we will only address today the first three verses of this passage, here is the entire passage to give us context. This is **John 3:1-21**:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.”

³Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴Nicodemus 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?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man, who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 120.

perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Before we examine the details of our passage, we might consider a few matters with respect to the text itself. What we read is the New King James Version of the Bible. This passage is set forth in 7 paragraphs. For the past several centuries, paragraph divisions were commonly made whenever there was a change in the person speaking. But that practice has changed in very recent years. For example, the English Standard Version (ESV), which is in many respects a very good English translation, will place the entire dialogue of two characters into a single paragraph. Here, the ESV has translated John 3:1-21 into three paragraphs (3:1-8, 9-15, 16-21). This is a feature of the ESV that I dislike, but perhaps it is just because I am an old fogey.

There are several textual variants in our passage. A textual variant is when there is a word or words that read differently in ancient Greek (NT) or Hebrew (OT) manuscripts. **First**, there is a variant in **verse 5**, in which the New King James Version reads, “Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom *of God*.’” The variant reads instead “kingdom of God”, kingdom *of heaven*.” It should read “kingdom of God.” The variant was probably introduced by an early NT scribe who sought to avoid out of reverence using the term, “God”, choosing rather to write “of heaven” to identify God, but by identifying his abode rather than Him directly.²

A **second** verse that contains variant readings is **verse 13**. The NKJV reads, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man *who is in heaven*.” The variant readings include additional wording after “the Son of Man.” Our NKJV translates one of these variant readings as “who is in heaven.” What this is saying is that when Jesus was on earth in both His divine and human natures, where as in His human nature He was in one place on earth, nevertheless His divine nature was omnipresent, even in heaven. Now this is a true understanding of the person of Christ, but the Apostle John probably did not write “*who is in heaven*.” Interestingly, there are two other minor variants. One may be translated, “Son of Man who *was in* heaven” and the other, “the Son of man who *was from* heaven.” The editors of the modern New Testament Greek text (UBS) did not include the expression, “who is in heaven”, as did the translators of the NKJV. However, they rated their decision only as a “C.” In other words they think they have the right reading, but they could be mistaken. “Who is in heaven” might have been original with John, but it probably was not.

The **third** variant reading is in **verse 15**. The NKJV reads, “that whoever believes *in Him* should not perish but have eternal life.” The editors of the modern Greek text agree that the right reading should be “in Him”, rather than the variant readings which may be translated “into Him” or “upon Him.” The UBS editors gave the reading “in Him” a “B” rating. They were fairly confident that John had originally written this phrase. The difference of meanings between these variants are not significant.

The **fourth** variant reading is in **verse 20**. The NKJV reads, “For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds (works) should be exposed.” The variant includes the words that may be translated, ““For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest the deeds (works), *that are evil*, should be exposed.” The editors of the UBS left off this variant, rating their decision as a “C” reading, which indicates they think they probably got it right.

² The editors of the modern Greek New Testament rate variants with the letters A, B, C, and D, according to the confidence of the editors that they have determined the original reading. They rate the reading “of God” as an “A”; in other words they are very certain this is what the Apostle John had originally written. See Kurt Aland et. al. eds., *The Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 3rd ed., 1966, 1968, 1975), pp. 328f.

I have addressed these variants as examples for us to see that although there may be variants due to different readings in ancient manuscripts, most of them are quite insignificant in that they do not change the basic meaning of the text.

We have in this passage an interchange between Jesus and perhaps the foremost teacher in Israel, Nicodemus, who was a member of the leading Jewish body, the Sanhedrin. The teacher of Israel came to Jesus by night, and on this occasion he became the student in spiritual matters even as Jesus became his teacher. Here we learn that regardless of who a person may be, even if he has had the greatest of privilege, stature, and education, even if he has led what many may regard as a very devout life, he is in need of the sovereign grace of God in order for him to be born again and hereby be saved from death unto eternal life.

This was one commentator's description of our passage: "In this pericope, Jesus speaks as the true teacher, guiding even the religious elite to grasp the significance of his authoritative person and gracious work."³ He went on to set forth the main idea being conveyed:

Jesus is the representative of God who challenges and shames the darkness of the world with its system of religion. Yet Jesus is also the manifestation of the love of God that meets the very challenge he initiated and receives upon himself the shame that belonged to the world.⁴

There is a narrative "connection" and "movement" as this Gospel story unfolds. The Evangelist moved from the *general* in chapter 2 to the *specific* in Chapter 3. Where the Lord Jesus addressed "the Jews" in chapter 2, He addressed an individual "Jew" here in chapter 3. And, where Jesus addressed mankind generally in chapter 2 (2:25), He addressed an individual in chapter 3. But although Nicodemus came to Jesus as an individual, in a sense he was a representative Jew, actually, the ideal Jew, and yet he is shown to be unable and unqualified to enter the kingdom of God, unless God caused him to be born again.

We may begin to consider our passage with the following outline, although we will only be able to consider the first three verses on this occasion:

- I. Nicodemus comes to Jesus (3:1)
- II. The dialogue of Nicodemus and Jesus (3:2-10)
- III. The dialogue becomes a discourse by Jesus to Nicodemus (3:11-21)

I. Nicodemus comes to Jesus (3:1)

We read in **verse 1**, "*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*" Here we read that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling Jewish Sanhedrin. The Pharisees were many in number, perhaps tens of thousands, who were scattered throughout the Empire. Wherever there was a sizeable population of practicing Jews, there would be Pharisees. These were very devout and zealous men and were highly regarded by the Jewish people. But generally they were very flawed in their understanding of the grace of God and they were ignorant of the sole authority and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures. Here is one description of them:

Although the Pharisees were right in many points of doctrine – the divine decree, man's moral accountability and immortality, the resurrection of the body, the existence of spirits, rewards and punishments in the future life – and produced men of high renown – Gamaliel, Paul, Josephus --, they made one basic and very tragic error: *they externalized religion*. Outward conformity to the law was far too often considered by them to be *the* goal of one's existence. In actual practice (though not in theory)

³ Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 188.

⁴ Ibid.

the oral law, which via the men of the great synagogue, the prophets, the elders, and Joshua, was traced back to Moses and thus to God himself, was often honored even more highly than the written. The Lord renounced them again and again for their exhibitionism and holier-than-thou attitude.⁵

That Nicodemus was a Pharisee makes his coming to Jesus quite remarkable, for the Pharisees were vehemently opposed to Jesus throughout His ministry. This what **John Gill** (1697-1771) wrote of Nicodemus:

This man was not a common and ordinary man, but a man of note and eminence, of dignity and figure; and who was of the sect of the Pharisees, which was the strictest sect for religion and holiness, among the Jews; and which, as corrupt as it was, was also the soundest; as having not only a regard to a Messiah, and to all the writings of the Old Testament, but also believed the doctrines of angels and spirits, and the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees denied; but yet they were implacable enemies of Christ; and therefore it is the more to be wondered at, that such an one should come to him, and desire a conversation with him.⁶

But not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, he was also “a ruler of the Jews.” This would mean that he was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. This was a body of 70 men, along with the high priest, who ruled over the religious and social life of the Jews. The Sanhedrin was dominated by men who were members of the Sadducees. The Sadducees numbered perhaps only a few thousand, and lived in Jerusalem, for the most part. The Sadducees dominated the Jewish priesthood. Their religious beliefs were quite different to that of the Pharisees. “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (Acts 23:8). There were some Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, but not many. Nicodemus was one. There would be tension between these two groups of men while they both served on the same council (Cf. Acts 23:6-10).

Now we opened beginning with verse 1 of this third chapter, but there are some who connect the last few verses of John 2 with the Nicodemus account in chapter 3. To see this gives us a bit more information about Nicodemus. **John 2:23-25** read,

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

G. R. Beasley-Murray wrote of this connection:

Just as 2:1 harks back to the events of chapter 1 yet commences a new division of the Gospel, so 2:23-25 is linked with the setting of the previous episode yet it belongs essentially with chapter 3, since it provides a context for the Nicodemus narrative and an important clue to its understanding.⁷

Again, John 3:1 opens, “There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews...” Actually there is a conjunction in the Greek text that is commonly translated in English versions as “Now.”⁸ It is the word *de* (δέ), which is most often translated simply as “and”, but may also be translated as “but.” If it were translated as “but”, the connection of verse 1 would be more directly connected with the last verses of chapter 2. The idea, then, would be like this:

⁵ William Hendriksen, *John*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 131.

⁶ John Gill, *Commentary of John*, PDF version, p. 81.

⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Thomas Nelson, 1999), pp. 45f.

⁸ However, often times this conjunction not translated into English in John’s Gospel.

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴***But Jesus did not commit Himself to them***, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man. ***But there was a man*** of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night...

In other words, even though Jesus did not generally commit himself, or open Himself before the Jews, there was this exception, even Nicodemus. And it would seem that our Lord did speak on a level with Nicodemus that was quite unique and special. **F. F. Bruce** wrote,

Nicodemus, like the others, had been impressed by the signs which he saw without realizing their deeper significance, but there was in him a sincere willingness to learn more to which Jesus responded by ‘entrusting Himself’ to him more than He did to many others.

Since John 3:1 can be connected with 2:23-25, we may conclude that the Evangelist intended to set forth Nicodemus as one of the many Jews who had “believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did” (2:23). We read that Nicodemus had a form or measure of faith. He said, “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.” Nicodemus had a kind of faith, we might say a measure of, faith, but it was not saving faith. Nicodemus needed to be born again.

From this we may also conclude that there is a faith in Jesus that does not save. Those who “believe” on Jesus because they believe they have seen miracles, like so many claim throughout the world, who would assert all day that they “believe” on Jesus, because they have “seen” what He has done, may actually not have saving faith. They, too, like Nicodemus and “many” in Jerusalem, need to be born again.

Of course we do read later in this Gospel that Nicodemus was concerned about Jesus and of what the leading Jews were plotting against Him. But even when Nicodemus spoke up in defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, he seemed to be rather timid and less than forthright. We read in John 7:50f, “Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?’” And we read later still that Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the body of Jesus in order to give Him a dignified burial (John 19:38-40). **Leon Morris** spoke favorably of Nicodemus, even though Nicodemus was not portrayed by the Evangelist to be a dynamic, and courageous follower of Jesus:

We hear of Nicodemus only in this Gospel. He comes before us again raising a hesitant (and apparently ineffectual) voice on behalf of Jesus when He was being discussed by the authorities after the abortive attempt to arrest Him during the Feast of the Tabernacles (7:50-52). He is not recorded as saying anything at the trial of Jesus, but he assisted Joseph of Arimathea at the burial (19:39). We may, I think, fairly infer that he had a love for the truth, but that he was a rather timid soul. In the end he came right out for Jesus, and that at a time when all the disciples forsook Him. Which is saying a lot for a timid man.⁹

I suspect that Nicodemus had become somewhat of a “secret” disciple, as was his friend, Joseph of Arimathea (Cf. John 19:38).

II. The dialogue of Nicodemus and Jesus (3:2-10)

After the introduction of Nicodemus, we read in **verse 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.’”***

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 210.

Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus “by night”? There are those who say that he must have been characterized by the fear of man, and so he did not want others to see or know that he came to talk with Jesus. There may be truth in this assessment. Others say that Nicodemus wanted to be sure that he could discuss these matters with Jesus and that would not have been possible during the day because of the crowds that would always be present around Jesus. That is possible also, I suppose. **John Gill** wrote this of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night:

Through fear of the Jews, of being reproached or turned out of his place by them; or through shame, that such a doctor as he was, should be known to go to Jesus of Nazareth, to be instructed by him; or lest he should offend any of his brethren of the Sanhedrim: though some things may be said in favour of this conduct of Nicodemus; for since Christ would not trust himself with those that believed in him upon seeing his miracles (John 2:23, 24), among whom Nicodemus seems to be; or would not admit them into his company, and enter into a free conversation with him; it was necessary, that if he would have any discourse with him, that he should take this method; and if it was the same night, in which he had seen his miracles in the day, as is probable, he took the first opportunity he could, and which shows great readiness and respect; add to which, that it was very common with the Jewish doctors, to meet and converse together, and study the law in the night.¹⁰

It is likely that the Evangelist included this detail that he came to Jesus at night to suggest that although Nicodemus was greatly privileged and a highly placed Jewish man, he was nevertheless “in darkness” with respect to the truth. This understanding would be due to interpreting the detail, “in the night” as metaphorical, but John’s Gospel uses much metaphorical language.

Perhaps most scholars today think that the words should be taken symbolically. Jesus is the Light of the world, and it was out of darkness in which his life had been lived that Nicodemus came to that light. It would be quite in this manner for John to have more than one of these meanings in mind.¹¹

This was the understanding of **Augustine** (A. D. 354-430): “Because he came by night, he still speaks from the darkness of his own flesh.”¹²

D. A. Carson wrote that we should consider other uses of the word “night” by the Gospel writer in order to assess its meaning.

The best clue lies in John’s usage of ‘night’ elsewhere: in each instance (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30) the word is either used metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness, or, if it refers to the night-time hours, it bears the same moral and spiritual symbolism. Doubtless Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but his own ‘night’ was blacker than he knew.¹³

But perhaps **William Hendriksen** was safe when he said of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, “We just do not know why he came by night.”¹⁴

¹⁰ John Gill, **Commentary of John**, PDF version, p. 81.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 211.

¹² Leon Morris, **John**, p. 211.

¹³ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 186.

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 132. Some, however, do not think it worthwhile to inquire what he came at night. F. F. Bruce wrote, “It is best to take the statement that Nicodemus’ visit was paid at night as a simple factual reminiscence, without giving it an allegorical interpretation, as though the darkness without reflected the darkness of Nicodemus’ understanding, which required to be illuminated. Nor need we inquire why he chose to come at night -- whether he did not wish his colleagues and others to know of his errand, or choose a time when Jesus was likely to be undisturbed, so that there would be leisure for a long conversation.” F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 81.

Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus to have been a rabbi, a “teacher from God.” Nicodemus, and apparently some others of his persuasion, knew that Jesus spoke and taught the Word of God. What convinced them were the “signs” which He had done. Here we see that the miracles our Lord wrought brought a measure of recognition and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of His preaching and teaching ministry. They had a “high” regard for Jesus, but it was far lower than the regard they should have had for Him who was God incarnate. Some evangelicals today claim that if we are to impact the world for Christ, we must pray and seek for the Lord to do mighty works of miracles so that people will believe.¹⁵ This is terrible thinking. Seeing miracles will result in nominal believers; the new birth wrought by the sovereign grace alone will produce true “believers, that is, committed disciples of Jesus Christ. And the Lord causes the new birth to take place through the faithful preaching of the Holy Scriptures. As Peter wrote,

²²Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, ²⁴because

“All flesh *is* as grass,
And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.
The grass withers,
And its flower falls away,
²⁵But the word of the LORD endures forever.”

Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Pet. 1:22-25)

If we had the ability to raise a physically dead person to life every week, I suspect that we would fill this place in a few weeks, and they all would be “believers” through what they saw, but perhaps none of them would have salvation, but many of them would think they had. People must be born again spiritually in order to be saved. Seeing miracles does not produce saving faith. Do you remember what our Lord taught in his account of Lazarus who was in Abraham’s bosom (i.e. paradise) and the rich man who was in hell? The rich man wanted Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead in order to warn his five brothers lest they too come to this place of torment. Here is the interchange:

²⁷“Then he (the rich man) said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, ²⁸for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’
²⁹Abraham said to him, ‘***They have Moses and the prophets***; let them hear them.’
³⁰And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’
³¹But he said to him, ‘***If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.***’ (Luke 16:27-31)

In this account the Lord Jesus was asserting the sole authority and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures alone to bring salvation. Seeing Jesus perform miracles does not produce true Christians, true disciples. It can only produce for a while fascinated “followers.”

But let us not take away from Nicodemus his due. He knew Jesus was a teacher with the calling and blessing of God upon Him. And although Nicodemus was himself a great teacher, it would seem that he was desirous and willing to be taught by Jesus. At this point in his commentary, **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) gave this word of application: “Personal converse with skillful faithful ministers about the affairs of our souls would be of great use to us.”¹⁶

¹⁵ See Michael Horton, *Power Religion, the Selling out of the Evangelical Church* (Moody Press, 1992), 353 pp.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 881.

Before we move on to the substance of our Lord's instruction to Nicodemus, let us draw a principle in our own dealings with people who need to be born again. Let us be as our Lord in the tender and concerned, and yet faithful manner that he dealt with this man.

The history of Nicodemus is meant to teach us that we should never "despise the day of small things" in religion (Zech. 4:10). We must not set down a man as having no grace, because his first steps toward God are timid and wavering, and the first movements of his soul are uncertain, hesitating, and stamped with such imperfection. We must remember our Lord's reception of Nicodemus. He did not "break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax," which He saw before Him (Matt. 12:20). Like Him, let us take inquirers by the hand, and deal with them gently and lovingly. In everything there must be a beginning. It is not those who make the most flaming profession of religion at first, who endure the longest and prove the most steadfast. Judas Iscariot was an apostle when Nicodemus was just groping his way slowly into full light. Yet afterwards, when Nicodemus was boldly helping to bury the crucified Saviour, Judas Iscariot had betrayed Him, and hanged himself! This is a fact which ought not to be forgotten.¹⁷

We now arrive to **verse 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.'*" We do not read that Nicodemus had asked a question of Jesus, but we do read that "Jesus *answered* and said unto him." It seems that the Lord saw into Nicodemus' heart and answered the question that was really on his mind. If we were to guess at verbalizing that question from Jesus' answer to him, we might say that Nicodemus desired to know what works he would need to do in order to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was "from God" due to the signs He had done, what would he need to do to also be found on God's favor? If this were the case, then Nicodemus might be cast as *a rich old ruler* just as on another occasion *a rich young ruler* asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16).¹⁸ The "answer" of Jesus was that no good deed can be performed to enable or qualify a person to enter the kingdom of God. Entrance is due to God's grace, not man's work. "In its own way this chapter does away with the works of the law every bit as thoroughly as anything in Paul."¹⁹

The New King James Version records the opening words of Jesus to Nicodemus, "*Most assuredly, I say to you...*" We occasionally will criticize other English translations when we think that they could have rendered a matter better, and we do so with the NKJV as well. Here is the second occasion in John's Gospel when in the Greek text Jesus repeats the word, Ἀμήν ἀμήν (*amen, amen*). The NKJV translates these two words as "Most assuredly." Now that is what Jesus was intending to say, but there is an emphasis that is conveyed by the repetition of this word, ἀμήν (*amen*), that has a narrative force that should be preserved in the English translation, in my opinion. The KJV rendered it, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee..." The NASV reads, "Truly, truly, I say to you... And the ESV also translates our words, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." I prefer any of these translations on this verse to the NKJV. By the way, this is the second of twenty-five occasions in this Gospel that Jesus doubles this word for emphasis.

Jesus called Nicodemus to pay the closest attention to what He was about to tell him. He said, "*Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*"

Perhaps it would do us well first to speak to the phrase, "*the kingdom of God.*" When the Lord Jesus confronted Nicodemus regarding the eternal well-being of His soul, even his eternal salvation, He spoke of the need for Nicodemus to "see", and later in verse 5, to "enter" the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God is a term that is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) many times.²⁰ In the Gospel of John, however, it is used only here in John 3:3 and 5, however, Jesus does refer to "My kingdom" in John 18:36, when Jesus said to Pontius Pilate:

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *John*, vol. 1 pp. 121.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, p. 132.

¹⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 209.

²⁰ My rough count has the word "kingdom" used 18 times in Mark, 41 times in Luke, and 51 occasions in Matthew.

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

The Kingdom of God was the major theme of the teaching of the Lord Jesus. It has been said, “Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus.”²¹ And yet, I would argue, it is one of the most neglected and misunderstood teachings in today’s evangelicalism. This may be attributed to several reasons. First, among Protestants there is an emphasis on the Protestant Reformation recovery of the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith and the later recovery by the Puritans of the doctrine of sanctification. But because of this history, perhaps the gospel is reduced to the message of justification alone. But more significant, I believe, is the influence of classical dispensationalism that dominated evangelical belief in the 20th century, which taught that an understanding of the kingdom of God that is wholly unbiblical. Until the 1980’s most evangelicals believed that although Jesus had offered the promised kingdom to the Jews during His earthly ministry, because the Jews failed to embrace Jesus as the promised Messiah, God withdrew the offer of the kingdom. The dispensationalists taught that promised kingdom was postponed until the second coming of Christ, when He will establish the promised kingdom, which is believed to be a 1,000 year Jewish millennium on earth. Because evangelicals were taught that the kingdom was postponed, it became absent from evangelical teaching and preaching of the gospel. Salvation has been presented as the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life, but those salvation blessings are viewed as distinct and disconnected from the kingdom of God.

This is not how the Bible sets forth the kingdom of God. For here in John 3:3 and 5, and in many other places in the Gospels, the Lord Jesus is equating salvation, including the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, with entering the kingdom of God. This is consistent with the repeated depiction of *the* gospel in the Gospels, as “*the gospel of the kingdom*.” When the Gospel writers wrote of the kingdom of God, they were speaking of salvation through Jesus Christ. To strip the language and message of the kingdom from the gospel, is to impoverish the gospel itself of great richness and vitally important content. Now, if we had the time, and you had the patience, both of which we are probably short, we would stand back and rehearse the Bible’s teaching and emphasis on the Kingdom of God in the unfolding story of the Bible. But we have done that before, in fact, we did so not that long ago, in March of this year. And so, rather than repeating what we addressed, I have included notes from that message at the end of these sermon’s notes (pp. 13-18).

What is most important for us to understand is that here, in John 3:3 and 5, when Jesus spoke of entering the kingdom of God, He was speaking of Nicodemus experiencing salvation from sin, receiving the gift of eternal life, which was life in the kingdom promised throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, especially in the Prophets.²² Here is how others have stated this fact: **Leon Morris** wrote of this passage:

This passage incidentally is the only one in this Gospel which mentions the kingdom of God (though Jesus speaks of “my kingdom” in 18:36). But John frequently speaks of eternal life, and for him the possession of eternal life appears to mean the very much the same thing as entering the kingdom of God as the Synoptists picture it.²³

Donald Carson expressed it this way:

To a Jew with the background and convictions of Nicodemus, ‘to see the kingdom of God’ was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal, resurrection life. The same equivalence is found in the Synoptics (*cf.* Mark 9:43, 35 ‘to enter life’, parallel to 9:47 ‘to enter the kingdom of God’); it is particularly strong in the fourth Gospel, where ‘kingdom’ language crops up only here (3:3, 5) and at Jesus’ trial (18:36), while ‘life’ language predominates. One of the most startling

²¹ George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 57.

²² If you would like a very thorough treatment of the pervasive theme of the kingdom of God in history, read the excellent book by Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty; A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Baker Academic, 2013).

²³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 214.

features of the kingdom announced in the Synoptics is that it is not exclusively future. The kingdom, God's saving and transforming reign, has in certain respects already been inaugurated in the person, works and message of Jesus. John stresses this 'inaugurated' or 'realized' component of the long-awaited salvation even more. True, he can refer to the resurrection (5:28-29) and speak unambiguously of what takes place at the last day (e.g. John 6:40), but it is far more characteristic of him to stress entry into life and participation in the eternal life *now* (e.g. John 3:16).²⁴

We will cite one more, that being **F. F. Bruce**:

To 'see the kingdom of God' meant to witness (and have a share in) the final consummation of God's kingly rule, when it would be accepted and obeyed universally. This future aspect of the divine kingdom is also set forth in the OT, notably in the book of Daniel (cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 27). To a Jew with Nicodemus's upbringing, seeing the kingdom of God would mean participation in the age to come, the resurrection life. In this Gospel as in the others 'the kingdom of God' in this sense is interchangeable with 'eternal life' (compare to 'eternal life' in Mark 9:43, 45, with 'to enter the kingdom of God' in verse 47). The 'regeneration' in Matthew 19:28 (RSV 'the new world') is another synonym. But Jesus speaks of a regeneration to be experienced here and now. To be born 'from above' or 'anew (Gk, *anōthen*) in the sense which his words have here is to be 'born from God' in the sense of John 1:13, to enter immediately into the life of that coming age. We who have read the prologue to the Gospel know that those who are thus born into the divine family, becoming children of God, are those who have received the incarnate Word, believing in his name. But Nicodemus knew nothing of this; hence is bewildered reply.²⁵

The point is this, to enter and dwell in the kingdom of God is to enjoy the gift and quality of eternal life, which is an enjoyable existence with God, living before God in accordance with the Law of God, under the kingship of God, which is through His Son Jesus Christ. But this cannot be experienced and enjoyed by anyone, even as one like Nicodemus, as devout and regimented as he lived his life unless, he is born again. One must be born again in order to enter and enjoy the kingdom of God with His blessing. And so, there are two and only two kinds of people in this world, those who have been born again, and those who have not. **Stephen Charnock** (1628-1680) once drew the distinction between the two:

There are but two states, one saving, the other damning; a state of sin, and a state of righteousness. All men are divided into two ranks. In regard of their principle, some are in the flesh, some in the spirit. In regard to their obedience, some walk after the flesh, some after the spirit. Some are slaves to the flesh, others are led by the Spirit; some live only to self, some live to God. In regard to the exercise of their minds, their nobler faculty; some mind the things of the flesh, others the things of the Spirit. Some indulge themselves in sin, others place the delights of their spirits upon better and higher objects.

The Scripture mentions no other. A state of enmity, wherein men have their inclinations contrary to God. A state of friendship and fellowship, wherein men walk before God unto all well-pleasing, and would not willingly have an inward motion swerve from his will. One is called light, the other darkness; you were sometimes darkness, but now you are light: one, the children of wrath, the other, the children of God. There is no medium between them: every man is in one or the other of these states. All believers, from the bruised reed, to the tallest cedar; from the smoking flax on earth to the flaming lamp in heaven; from Thomas, that would not believe without seeing, to Abraham, who would believe without staggering, all are in a state of life. And all from the most beautiful moralist, to the most venomous toad in nature's field; from the young man in the gospel, who was not far from the kingdom of heaven, to Judas, who was in the very bottom of hell; all are in a state of death. Mere nature, though never so curiously garnished, can place a man no higher. Faith, though with many infirmities, puts us in a state of

²⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 188.

²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 83.

amity (friendly relationship); unbelief, though with many moralities, continues us in a state of enmity. These two very opposite conditions mentioned, include all the human race.²⁶

Let us now address the phrase at the beginning of John 3:5, “*Unless one is born again*, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” To be born again certainly speaks of a transformative experience through which a person becomes what he was not before. It is as though he experienced a whole new life. This new life that results from this new birth is characterized as one who lives in a relationship with God, who loves God and lives in joyful and willing compliance to the will of God, or as it is often set forth in Scripture, according to the law of God. It is clear from the word of Jesus that a naturally born man, is not capable or qualified to live that kind of existence. Paul described this need by contrasting those who are in the flesh--those would be all naturally born people-- and those who are in the Spirit – those who have been born again. We read in **Romans 8:5-8**,

⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. ⁷Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Because of sin, the natural man is not capable nor does he desire to live in obedience to the law of God. It is impossible to make him do so, because sin has rendered him both unwilling and unable to do so.

This was played out in the life of Israel in the Old Testament. God established the kingdom of Israel, over which He Himself was their King (Cf. 1 Sam. 8:7). Even though God set His people free from Egypt, gave them His laws at Mount Sinai, and enabled them to occupy a land where they would be free to live before Him, because of sin they failed, even refused to do so. Of course God knew this, and declared this to be the case even when He gave them His laws. We read of this in Deuteronomy 5 when Moses rehearsed before the people what God had said to him after they agreed to keep God’s commandments. Moses said,

²⁸“Then the LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me: ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. ²⁹*Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!* ³⁰Go and say to them, “Return to your tents.” ³¹But as for you, stand here by Me, and I will speak to you all the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I am giving them to possess.’

³²“Therefore you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. ³³You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess.” (Deut. 5:28-33)

But it was after Israel’s tragic failure and subsequent judgment that God began to promise Israel that He would establish a new covenant with them, in which He would give them new hearts, which would enable them to love God and keep His commandments. For example, we read the promise of **Ezekiel 36:24ff**,

²⁴For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶*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. ²⁷I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

²⁶ Stephen Charnock, *The Doctrine of Regeneration* (Evangelical Press, 1980, first published in 1840), p. 6.

When the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus, “Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”, the Lord was telling Nicodemus that unless and until God did this work of transforming his heart, giving him new life by the Holy Spirit, he would never see or enter the kingdom of God.

Let me say a few words of importance, and then we will close. But we will need to address this matter much more than what we have done today.

(1) Let us underscore at the outset of our study of this important matter, that becoming born again is the result of the sovereign grace of God.

(2) There is no instruction in John 3 or anywhere in the Bible directing sinners that if they take certain steps the result will be that they will become born again. The Lord Jesus very strongly declared to Nicodemus that he must be born again. But Jesus never gave him instructions on how to be born again.

(3) God does, however, use the instrument of His Word, particularly the gospel, to create this new life, to cause the new birth, to take place in the soul of sinners. “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:18). And Paul wrote, “for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). And we have already considered John 1:12f, which reads, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

(4) The Lord Jesus was making it clear to Nicodemus that he was wholly dependent on the mercy and grace of God to enable him to be born again.

(5) The doctrine of the new birth, or regeneration, gives glory to God alone for the salvation of sinners. God never made a plan of salvation whereby sinners can save themselves. “Salvation is of the Lord.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom. 15:13)

Excursus

The Kingdom of God in the Unfolding Story of the Bible

by

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I. The Old Testament promise of the kingdom of God

It is important that we establish in our thinking a historical, theological context. The Bible is an unfolding story through history of what God has purposed to accomplish through Jesus Christ. We should understand the beginning of the story, if we are to recognize and understand clearly the climax and finale of that story.

God had originally created this world and particularly human beings as a kingdom over which He ruled as its King. In the beginning God created all things good and all things were in compliant submission to its Creator-King. God created man to be His co-regent, to rule over His creation on His behalf within His kingdom. But when Adam and Eve sinned, the human race lost its lofty position and place in God's kingdom. Mankind through Adam became a race of rebels. Before the fall of man into sin, all people and things were in lovingly subjection to God as King. After the fall no one and nothing was in subjection to God the Creator, its rightful King. The human race was lost to the kingdom of God, excluded from the paradise of God in which they had lived a blessed existence in fellowship with their God. Through Adam's sin, all people became the citizens of another kingdom, which is the kingdom of satan, a kingdom of darkness, over which the devil reigns.

Through Adam's sin the human race became subject to the devil. Since Adam's fall into sin, the devil has ruled over the fallen world in which mankind lives. The devil has ruled over all human beings as subjects of his kingdom. He influences them to do evil by coercing them, enticing and tempting them, and controlling them as his subjects who do his bidding. In this kingdom fallen people serve the devil by purposing to live for themselves rather than for and before God who made them. Satan is the "ruler of this age" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He is the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). He rules over the fallen kings of the earth through history. He has his fallen angels influencing and controlling his subjects through deception and subterfuge, through manipulation and false reasoning that is contrary to the will of God.

The devil is said to have great authority and influence in the fallen world through "principalities and powers" (Cf. Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). These should be understood as a hierarchy of fallen angels, or demons, through which he influences and directs fallen human authorities who are in positions of influence and power.

It is the purpose of God to glorify Himself in history through the recovery and restoration from sin of a people, to reestablish a kingdom in which His people would love Him, trust, Him, obey Him, and rule over His creation on His behalf. The whole story of Scripture is that of God redeeming and restoring His fallen creation unto Himself, establishing a mediatorial kingdom, and thereby bringing all of creation into willing submission to its true God. By mediatorial kingdom, we are saying that God will restore the creation to Himself through an intermediary, or mediator, who would affect the restoration of all things into a right and holy relationship to God. As one once wrote,

Man was excluded from the kingdom of God at his expulsion from Paradise: his restoration to that kingdom has been the grand end of all God's subsequent dispensations (ages). This restoration, according to the divine plan, was to be accomplished through a mediatorial kingdom, of which the God-

man Christ Jesus should be King. Under this kingdom of the Mediator the universe should no longer be governed immediately by God, but immediately through the God-man, all power in heaven and in earth being given unto Him.²⁷

The first promise of this mediatorial kingdom is Genesis 3:15, in which God promises that the devil would be defeated and mankind would be restored to God. This verse is commonly referred to as the *protoevangelium*, for it is the first promise of the gospel in the Bible. It is the promise of God voiced to the serpent that the authority of the devil would be deposed and a promised Son of the woman would ascend as King over the restored kingdom of God. It further set forth a veiled prophecy of Jesus Christ's death of the cross that would secure this great victory. God declared,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen. 3:15)

As history began to unfold, God began to call people from the human race to return onto Him through faith. We read in Genesis 4:26 we read, “To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. *At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.*”

Early in history God preserved for Himself individuals, and some families here and there.²⁸ But when God called Abram and Sarai to leave their pagan roots and travel to a land that He would one day give to him, God made known that He would save a people, form that people into a nation, and establish that nation before Him in a place that they could live before Him in state of rest and peace (Cf. Gen. 12:1ff).

God had promised Abraham that one of his Seed would come to remove the curse of sin and restore his people to God. Later, after God had constituted Abraham's physical descendants into the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, God promised to bring His people into The Promised Land, where they could live before Him in a covenant relationship with Him. Israel would be a manifestation of a form of the kingdom of God in history. Later still, God caused kings to arise in Israel who would lead His people in victory over their enemies in order to enable them to live before God in peace and security

But the mediatorial kingdom of God in the Old Testament was largely in the form of God's promise as taught and illustrated through types and shadows that pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised King over the inaugurated kingdom of God. Yes, a form of the kingdom of God was seen in ancient Israel. Israel was a political entity comprised of a physical, ethnic people, the Jewish people. Israel was to invade and conquer the land that God had promised. Israel was to displace the Canaanite peoples of the Land, and establish a theocracy in which they lived under the authority of the law of God with God as its rightful King. However, it would prove itself not to be the mediatorial kingdom in which all of its citizens would live in joyful submission and compliance to God and His law. Nevertheless, Israel did set forth in the land in some ways what the promised kingdom should be and would be like. God had given to Israel His moral law, even the Ten Commandments, to order its national life. In addition God gave to Israel ceremonial and civil laws by which the people could serve God in a fashion that foreshadowed the true worship of God through Jesus Christ. But as we said, in the Old Testament the kingdom of God was largely in the form of promise, a kingdom that God had promised and that one day would be inaugurated. The coming kingdom of the Messiah would be an expansive kingdom, reaching far beyond the physical borders of ancient Israel. The promised Messiah's kingdom would encompass the world.

God had raised up David as king over Israel. It was through David that the nature and expanse of the promised messianic kingdom came to be understood more clearly. And as the gradual decay and disintegration of Israel unfolded in history that is recorded in the Old Testament, the hope and expectation of the coming Son of David and the establishment of His kingdom came to the forefront of Jewish expectation.

But in God's promise of the mediatorial kingdom of the coming Messiah, God declared that He would deliver His people from the control and power of evil forces that had them enslaved. He would do so even as He brings them into the kingdom of His Son. Through the salvation that God would accomplish on their

²⁷ Hezekiah Harvey, *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Backus Book Publishers, orig. 1879, 1982), p. 21.

²⁸ Eg. Enoch, Noah and his family

behalf, He would secure their willing and joyful obedience and compliance to His government over which He would install the Son of David. Within the kingdom of the Messiah, both Jews and a multitude of Gentiles from every tribe and nation (Cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

II. The realization of God's promise of His kingdom in Jesus Christ

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that when Jesus Christ was born, it signaled the time of fulfillment of God's promise of the long-expected kingdom of God. The opening verse of the New Testament signals this event when Matthew declared, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). The angel Gabriel made this clear to Mary that the child she would bear was the promised Son of David, who would inaugurate the promised kingdom of God. Gabriel said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)

And Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was inspired by the Holy Spirit to declare,

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
⁶⁹And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
⁷⁰As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
⁷¹That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
⁷²To perform the mercy promised to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
⁷³The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
⁷⁵In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. (Luke 1:68-75)

And so, with the presentation of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, the gospel of the kingdom of God is announced. The long-awaited promise of God of the kingdom of God had arrived in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And so we read of our Lord's ministry, "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching *the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. (Matt. 4:23). And later we read similarly, "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people" (Matt. 9:35). And later still He declared that after His departure from this world *this gospel of the kingdom* would continue to be proclaimed throughout the world. He told His disciples, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).²⁹

The point we wish to make is this: *the kingdom of God of the New Testament that God inaugurated through the ministry, death, resurrection, and enthronement of the Lord Jesus, is the promised kingdom of David of the Old Testament.* We are privileged and blessed to be citizens of the kingdom of God, living in the kingdom of the Son of David, foretold and foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

²⁹ I believe in this context "the end" is the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70.

But what God had brought before His people through the coming of Jesus Christ was not what the people were anticipating or desired. Their expectations were far removed from that which God inaugurated through Jesus Christ. The Jewish people of New Testament days expected a restored earthly, political kingdom with physical borders. But what God had actually promised ancient Israel was a kingdom that was spiritual in nature. The reason for this was because the real problem that brought an end to Israel's kingdom in the Old Testament was a spiritual problem. It was a problem with their sin which had alienated them from the life enjoyed by those who know God and live before Him in His kingdom. The Old Testament record of the physical enemies of Israel, their defeat of Israel, and subsequent oppression that all Israel had experienced, were God's just punishment upon Israel for its sin. Israel had broken its (Mosaic) covenant with God. Therefore, God's promise of a "restored" kingdom of David would be spiritual in nature, God having brought a remedy to their backsliding and rebellion, causing them to love Him and serve Him in faith and obedience. The Messiah would restore believing Jews to the promised kingdom. But He would also deliver believing Gentiles from their sin, bringing them into His kingdom. As our Lord Jesus declared of Gentiles in the Gospels, "

"And I say to you that many will come from east and west (i.e. Gentile lands), and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 8:11f)

All true disciples of Jesus would enjoy the spiritual and eternal blessings of God for being in a new covenant relationship with Him. The reason would be is that the Son of David would secure the obedience of His citizens through their conversion and by imparting to His people the Holy Spirit who would insure their faith and obedience to their king.

Moreover, the enemies from which God would deliver His people were not political enemies, the physical powers of Rome that ruled over Palestine. The deliverance that Jesus would accomplish was from "the principalities and powers" which the devil employed to keep His people enslaved in their sin and powerless to escape. Jesus would set His people free from the bondage of sin and the devil, enabling them to live before Him in faith, love, and obedience. Jesus told some Jewish leaders who wrongly thought they had salvation:

³¹Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³²And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

³³They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?"

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. ³⁶Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:31-36)

This spiritual freedom in which the disciples would live before God in faith and liberty of conscience was the blessing enjoyed by those who had entered the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our Lord taught His disciples throughout His earthly ministry the true nature of the kingdom of God. It was not a physical, political nation, as once existed under King David, it was a spiritual kingdom in which people are set free inwardly to love and serve God. In the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 our Lord both corrected and instructed His disciples in the true nature of the kingdom of God. When our Lord first told His disciples the parable of the sower, it prompted their question in 13:10ff.

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" ¹¹And He answered them, "To you it has been given to know *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Matt. 13:10-13)

It was through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross that the Lord Jesus fully and finally defeated the devil and his forces, breaking the devil's authority over His people, thus setting them free, enabling them to come unto Him in repentance and faith. We read of this in Paul's letter to the Colossians in which He tells of the work of God the Father in saving His people through Jesus Christ:

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13)

And in Colossians 2 Paul wrote of the believer's union with Jesus Christ in His life, death, and resurrection, thus being set free from the principalities that had bound them.

¹³And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (Col. 2:13-15)

III. Through His cross, Jesus stripped the devil of his power to prevent God's elect from coming to salvation.

In order for the Lord Jesus to bring salvation to His people, He had to deliver them from the power of the devil that ruled over them. In our Lord casting demons out of people, He declared that it was proof that He was inaugurating the kingdom of God that God had promised to Israel. We have read several times the episode of **Matthew 12:22-30** in which He declared this truth.

²²Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. ²³And all the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

²⁴Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons."

²⁵But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶If satan casts out satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. ²⁸But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. ³⁰He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.

After He declared the present reality of the promised kingdom of God, the Lord Jesus spoke of the necessity to restrict and restrain the devil in order to set His people free from their sin enabling them to become citizens of the kingdom living under Him. Our Lord spoke of the necessity to first "bind" the strong man before his (satan's) house could be spoiled. In order for Jesus to become the Savior of His people, He had to first strip the devil of his authority and his ability to keep his people in bondage. This is what He accomplished when He died upon the cross. He in effect deposed satan's authority. When our Lord was raised from the dead, He ascended and was enthroned in heaven, thereby vanquishing the devil as his conquered enemy. As a result, the Lord was able to expand His kingdom throughout the world.

Take note in the passage above that our Lord referenced two kingdoms. He mentioned the kingdom of God in **verse 28**. But He alluded to the kingdom of satan in **verse 26**, "If satan casts out satan, he is divided against himself. How then will *his kingdom* stand?" Our Lord made it clear that through His ministry the kingdom of God was defeating the kingdom of satan.

The Lord used a metaphor of a man who intended to rob another man's house. If the thief were to be successful in his plan to rob a house, he must first be the "stronger man" in order to overcome and tie up the

owner of the house who would attempt to defend his goods from being taken from him. To bind the strong man, therefore, is a metaphor to describe the preventing of satan from defending his “house”, that is, rendering satan unable to retain under his authority those who belonged to him. When our Lord delivered this man from demon possession, it signaled that He had rendered the devil “bound”, unable to prevent the release of the one he had held captive.

IV. The binding of the devil and the doctrine of the millennium

Now we have asserted that God’s promise of a coming kingdom in the Old Testament has been realized through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was due to Jesus’ obedience unto His Father even unto His death on the cross that led to and resulted in the enthronement of Jesus Christ over the kingdom of God when He ascended from the dead and ascended into heaven. When Jesus received from the Father the promised kingdom, He sat down on His throne and commenced His reign over the kingdom that God had promised to and through King David. We read of Jesus, “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (1 Pet. 3:22).

But in contrast what we have set forth and affirmed regarding the present kingdom age of the Messiah’s reign, most evangelicals do not believe what we have affirmed today. They do not believe that the kingdom of God that was promised to King David was inaugurated by the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus. Rather than understanding the kingdom of God to be the restored kingdom of David, which is wholly spiritual in nature, they advocate and promote a yet future “literal” kingdom of David that will be inaugurated at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. They believe that the throne on which the Lord Jesus presently reigns is not the promised throne of David promised in the Old Testament. They believe and teach that the nature of the “future” kingdom is just like the one that the Jews had anticipated when the Lord Jesus conducted His ministry. They look for an earthly, political kingdom, which will be given to a renewed political state of Israel, a kingdom whose citizens will be predominantly ethnic Jews. They say that the capital of this this earthly kingdom will be the city of Jerusalem, and that Jesus will one day take his seat on an earthly, political throne of David, to rule over this world for 1,000 years. They actually advocate two future kingdoms, the kingdom of God during this church age, and then a second kingdom, a future earthly Jewish kingdom of David.

Here, then, is where the matter of “the millennium” comes into view. The issue at stake is the nature and identity of the kingdom of God to which the Holy Scriptures speak. We who are thoroughly reformed in our understanding of the Scriptures advocate that when our Lord spoke of the necessity to first “bind” the strong man before his house could be spoiled, that it speaks to what our Lord actually accomplished when He died upon the cross and rose the third day. The kingdom of our Lord was inaugurated, the Lord Jesus was enthroned in heaven, and satan was “bound” with respect to his ability to prevent his kingdom (his house – Matt. 12:29) from being spoiled. The Lord Jesus in effect deposed satan’s authority when He ascended above him in authority, vanquishing him as his conquered enemy. Satan’s kingdom continues to exist, but because the Lord Jesus had “bound the strong man”, the devil rendered incapable to prevent the reception of the gospel among his people. As a result, the Lord Jesus was able to expand His kingdom throughout the Gentile world. The “stronger Man” had come, even Jesus Christ, and through His life and death He had “bound the strong man” and then proceeded to make a spoil of his house, the unbelieving world.
