

“Unless One is Born Again”

The Tenth in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 3:1-15; Ezekiel 36:22-32

Only in modern American do Christians qualify someone’s profession of faith by whether or not they are “born again.” Only in American evangelicalism do we find one of the movement’s most prominent spokesmen (Billy Graham) writing a best-selling book entitled “How to be Born Again,” when ironically, the biblical account from which Graham takes his title actually teaches that we cannot “born ourselves again” because this is something only God can do. Telling people “how” to be born again, is like publishing a book entitled how to be taller. In light of the confusion about what it means to be “born again” it is important that we work our way through John 3 (where this phrase appears) and that we consider what Jesus actually says about the new birth.

In the second chapter of his Gospel, John recounts the first of Jesus’ seven miraculous signs when Jesus attended a wedding at Cana. Jesus miraculously turned 150 gallons of water into wine so as to reveal his glory, and to fulfill a series of messianic prophecies which speak of the dawn of the messianic age in terms of a great feast with rich food and fine wine. When Jesus turns water in wine, he is beginning to perform those greater signs which he promised to his disciples. It is also clear from the nature of this miracle that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and that promised one in whom the messianic age dawns.

We read in the second half of John 2, that at some point shortly after attending the wedding in Cana, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was in Jerusalem that Jesus performed his second miracle when he cleansed the temple by driving out those who had corrupted the temple’s true purpose. Upon entering the temple, which Jesus calls his father’s house, Jesus was angry when he found the outer court of the temple filled with merchants selling animals to pilgrims coming to the city to celebrate the Passover. Money-changers were also present, engaging in currency exchange so the pilgrims could pay the annual temple tax. Jesus was not upset that the merchants and money changers were making it easier for Jewish pilgrims to celebrate the Passover. He was indignant that the Jewish religious authorities allowed these merchants to conduct their business in that part of temple reserved for Gentiles to worship YHWH. Making a cord of whips, Jesus drove them all out. *“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”*

At the end of chapter 2, we learn that *“when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”* Apparently, Jesus performed a number of unspecified miracles during the time he was in Jerusalem, and this attracted a number of people who began following him for all the wrong reasons. When John alerts us to the fact that Jesus did not entrust himself to these new followers (despite their faith in him) it was because Jesus knew what was in people’s hearts—darkness. He knew that true faith was not based upon miraculous signs, but is grounded in trusting in God’s promise to save sinners.

John’s statement at the end of chapter 2 serves as a transition to the next several sections of this Gospel in which John recounts Jesus’ encounter Nicodemus (John 3:1-15), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), the Gentile official (John 4:43-53) and the man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15), in addition to several other encounters. Just as Jesus saw Nathanael under the tree (without ever laying eyes on him), so too, Jesus knows what is in the hearts of the people. In each of these episodes, Jesus has divine insight

into the lives and circumstances of those whom he will meet. Jesus is God in human flesh, and although he lays aside a number of divine attributes which are rightfully his, Jesus' dialogue with these individuals indicates that he knows these people's past, their thoughts, and their motives.

In verse 1 of John 3, we come to Jesus' encounter with a man named Nicodemus. "*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*" Based upon the work of one scholar, we now know that Nicodemus was very likely a member of the Gurion family, a prominent, wealthy, and aristocratic family with deep roots in Jerusalem and closely associated with the party of the Pharisees.¹ Nicodemus was probably an older man, he was a noted teacher of the law, and a member of the ruling council (perhaps a reference to the Sanhedrin). It appears from John's account in the first 15 verses of chapter 3 that Nicodemus has seen Jesus perform miracles but does not yet believe in Jesus as did those mentioned in the previous chapter (John 2:23). He comes to question Jesus because he is not quite sure what to make of Jesus. We know from John 7:45-52, that Nicodemus insists to his fellow Pharisees that Jesus be treated justly, and in John 19, Nicodemus provides the spices used in Jesus' burial. But John never does tell us whether or not Nicodemus was a true believer (some think it is implied). But Nicodemus is certainly sympathetic to Jesus' mission, and he's wealthy enough as well as willing to provide for Jesus' proper burial after Jesus died the death of a criminal on the cross.

Having witnessed Jesus' activity in Jerusalem, we learn in verse 2 that Nicodemus "*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.'*" Readers of John's Gospel have wondered why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Was Nicodemus afraid that others would see him meeting with Jesus? Not a good thing for a man of Nicodemus' status. Was this a reflection of the fact that Rabbis had a reputation for talking about religion and politics until late into the night, and Nicodemus simply visited Jesus after one of these late night sessions? We really don't know for sure, but when we take notice of how John speaks of "night" elsewhere in this gospel (John 9:4, 11:10; 13:30) we know that John uses night as a metaphor for spiritual darkness. As one commentator puts it, "doubtless Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but his own 'night' was darker than he knew."²

Nicodemus addresses Jesus using the collegial term "Rabbi" (teacher), the same term used of him by Andrew and John when they first met Jesus. Nicodemus has seen the miracles Jesus performed and perhaps even heard Jesus teach. After observing these things, Nicodemus can tell that Jesus is a teacher sent by God because it is obvious that "God is with him" (i.e. enabling Jesus to perform these miracles). The language used by Nicodemus is interesting. It echoes the Old Testament—an important clue to understand a number of the statements in the following verses.

When Nicodemus speaks of God "being with Jesus" he is recognizing that God is with Jesus in the same way God was with key figures from the Old Testament. In Exodus 3:12 YHWH says of Moses, "*But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.*" In Jeremiah 1:19, we read this of the prophet. "*They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.*" In alluding to Moses and Jeremiah ("God is with you"), Nicodemus is not

¹ Richard Bauckham, The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 137-172.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 186.

confessing that Jesus is the Messiah, but he clearly recognizes that God is working through Jesus (as he did Moses and Jeremiah), and Nicodemus is obviously struggling to figure out who this man is.

But Nicodemus also speaks in the plural of the miraculous signs (meaning he saw more than one, or knew of more than one), and then says that “we” know you are from God. Based upon the use of the plural, it is likely that Nicodemus approached Jesus on behalf of himself as well as several other influential members of the ruling council who also did not know what to make of Jesus, but who could tell based upon his teaching and miracles that he was not just another religious zealot trying to make a name for himself or organize a revolt. Nicodemus’ statement provokes a response from Jesus even though Nicodemus has not asked him a question.

In verse 3, “*Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’*” Nicodemus was, along with the others on whose behalf he is approaching Jesus, trying to understand what Jesus was teaching. Nicodemus has seen the miracles. He has heard Jesus’ teaching. He knows that Jesus has been sent by God. Yet, as Jesus now tells Nicodemus using the “truly, truly” formula—indicating that what follows is divine revelation—Nicodemus does not have the ability to properly process what he has seen and heard. Nicodemus has seen the signs (the miracles), but he cannot see the reality. Why? Because he is not born again. And because Nicodemus is not born again, he may see the miraculous signs and know Jesus is of God, but he cannot understand the full reality of Jesus and his mission—that in the person of Jesus the kingdom of God has drawn near.

The Greek verb John uses is (*gennēthē*) which means to “be born,” a word which is used of natural birth, but also of regeneration (spiritual birth). The doctrine of regeneration appears throughout the New Testament. Regeneration refers to the fact that people who are dead in sin (all of Adam’s descendants) must be given new life by God before (or better “so that”) they may come to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of regeneration in Titus 3:5 (“[God] *saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*” Peter speaks of regeneration in 1 Peter 1:3 (“*blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*”) John has already made this point in verses 12-13 his prologue when he writes “*but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” Being “born again” (or being made alive in Christ, or being regenerated, or in John’s terms “being born of God”) refers to an act of God upon the sinner while the sinner is still dead in sin.

When speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus indicates that the birth of which he is speaking is “from above” or “again” (*anōthen*). What does Jesus mean by this? Does he mean that Nicodemus must be born from above through a supernatural work of the Spirit who comes from the realm of above? Or does Jesus mean that we must be born twice, once physically and once spiritually. Perhaps Jesus means both.³

Jesus is clearly informing Nicodemus that being “born again” precedes his “seeing” (or understanding) the kingdom of God. Nicodemus has seen the signs Jesus has performed, but yet cannot see (understand) the reality of who Jesus is, unless and until he be “born again.” God must act upon him prior to him understanding that Jesus is not only sent from God, but that he is Israel’s Messiah and that one in whom Nicodemus must trust, if he is to enter Christ’s kingdom (heaven) and receive the forgiveness of sins.

³ See the helpful discussion of this in: Carson, [The Gospel According to John](#), 187-190.

Here is Jesus telling one of Jerusalem's most well-known citizens and learned theologians that a new birth must occur before he can enter the kingdom of heaven.

If a man with Nicodemus' credentials and knowledge of the Old Testament cannot enter the kingdom of heaven apart from this new birth, then who *can* enter the kingdom of heaven? Only those upon whom God sovereignly acts and gives the new birth. This is why we must understand that Jesus is not commanding Nicodemus to do something ("be born again," as though Nicodemus had within himself the power to do so). But Jesus is telling Nicodemus a fact—unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God. In other words, "you must be born again" is not an imperative (a command), but an indicative (a statement of fact). This is what Billy Graham gets wrong in "How to Be Born Again."

Jesus' statement obviously confuses Nicodemus. As we read in verse 4, "*Nicodemus said to [Jesus], 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'*" Nicodemus thinks Jesus is speaking literally of a second birth. How can he, an old man, enter his mother's womb and be born a second time? Poor man. He doesn't get it. God must perform a supernatural work upon him so that he might see the kingdom of God—a point made by Jesus in verse 5. "*Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'*" In essence, Jesus repeats his point of verse 3, adding the fact that water and the Spirit are involved in some way in the new birth.

There has been much ink spilt over the meaning of the words "water" and "Spirit" in John 3:5. The two most common interpretations of this have been that Jesus is speaking of baptism (water) through which the Spirit gives the new birth (baptismal regeneration—the view of Roman Catholics, Eastern orthodox, Lutherans, and many Anglicans). If true, this means Jesus was speaking of a sacrament not yet instituted when answering Nicodemus' question—something highly unlikely. The other common view is that Jesus is referring to natural birth (water—as in amniotic fluid of natural birth) and spiritual birth (which occurs subsequently to natural birth).

I think the best way to understand Jesus on this point is to carefully consider three factors which appear in the account. First, Jesus mentions water and the Spirit as the explanation for a birth from above (a supernatural act of God) which means there is only one birth in view (not a physical and a spiritual one). Second, the source of this new birth is water and spirit (a unified source)—in the Greek, water and spirit are linked together by the preposition "of." Third, Jesus goes on in verse 10 to rebuke Nicodemus for not understanding the Old Testament, where, interestingly enough, water (cleansing) and the Spirit (the transformation of the heart) often appear in parallel in passages which speak of the glories of the messianic age to come.⁴ The key then to understand what Jesus means is to observe how water and the Spirit are linked together in a number of Old Testament texts.

In Ezekiel 36:26-27 (part of our Old Testament lesson) we read, "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*" The same kind of language appears in Numbers 19:17-19; Psalm 51:9-10; Isa. 32:15; 44:3-5; etc). The connection between the cleansing of the sinner (water) and

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 194.

the transformation of the heart (through the Spirit) is found throughout the Old Testament.⁵

In light of this Old Testament background, when Jesus speaks of water and the spirit, he is not referring to the sacrament of baptism, nor to a physical birth followed by a spiritual birth. Instead, he is echoing a host of Old Testament passages which teach that when the Messiah comes, the Holy Spirit will cleanse our hearts and transforms us from people who are dead in sin (with a heart of stone) into people who are alive unto God (with a heart of flesh). To put it in contemporary terms, Jesus is schooling Nicodemus (who should know better) about the true meaning those messianic prophecies which spoke of the messianic age as the age in which the Spirit of God takes the sinful human heart (stone), and transforms it into a heart of flesh—one of the characteristics of the arrival of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus.

Jesus' point to Nicodemus is that if anyone enters the kingdom of God, it is not because of something they do, but because of something God does—giving the new birth in which the heart of stone is changed into a heart of flesh. This was anticipated throughout the Old Testament and now realized through the person and work of Jesus Christ in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the messianic age is at hand, but Nicodemus cannot yet grasp this fact. Why? Because like the other religious leaders of Israel, he is still dead in his sins. He is not born again.

In verse 6, Jesus continues his explanation. He says to Nicodemus, *“that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* Here, Jesus is contrasting human birth (flesh) with spiritual birth (that born of the Spirit). To be in the flesh is to be in Adam, i.e., “dead in sin.” To be in the Spirit is to be incorporated through a supernatural act of God (i.e., the new birth) into the kingdom of God. To put this in the words of the prophets, God must take away our heart of stone (which cannot see or understand) and give us a heart of flesh (we must be regenerated). In light of this distinction, Jesus goes on to scold Nicodemus in verses 7-9, *“do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

Nicodemus needs to understand that God—who cannot be controlled or manipulated by sinful human beings—must act upon him first, *if* he is to see (understand) who Jesus is and what his mission truly entails. No doubt, Jesus' words echo the famous dry bones prophecy in Ezekiel 36-37 when the prophet foresees the messianic age as one in which God's spirit causes dead bones to come to life with muscle, organs and flesh, and then forming a mighty army. God must act upon the sinner, if the sinner is to see (and therefore embrace) the kingdom of God. We cannot enter God's kingdom through any means—such as baptism, or through “accepting Jesus as your personal savior.” God must make us spiritually alive through a new birth which enables us to see the kingdom of God and to trust in Jesus in whom the kingdom of God is present. To put this in theological terms, regeneration precedes faith.

Lacking such regeneration and thoroughly confused by Jesus' words, in verse 9, Nicodemus expresses his frustration. *“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’”* None of what Jesus says fits his current theological categories. In verse 10, Jesus *“answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’”* This is an implied rebuke of Nicodemus, but Jesus' comments are more indicative of the sorry state of Israel's current religious leadership as a whole. Israel's religious leaders do not understand the messianic teaching of their own Old Testament scripture. Israel's Messiah

⁵ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 193-195.

has come to his own people, and to his father's house (the temple), and yet the religious leaders do not receive him, just as John has already told us would be the case.

Jesus continues his rebuke, using the plural just as Nicodemus had done. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”* Once again, Jesus is revealing things previously hidden. Jesus tells Nicodemus that people ordinarily speak of things they know and act upon it—Nicodemus has just told Jesus *“we know that you are a teacher come from God.”* Having seen the miracles and heard Jesus teach, Nicodemus should have known who Jesus is, and then placed his trust in him. But Nicodemus' failure to *“accept our testimony”* is the proof that he does not believe in Jesus (in the sense of “saving faith”), even though based upon what he has seen and heard, he should. Since Nicodemus does not believe in Jesus even though he has admitted that God is with him, how is he ever going to accept the heavenly things Jesus is yet to reveal?

The key is regeneration—or in Nicodemus' case, the lack thereof. If Nicodemus cannot understand Jesus' basic teaching about regeneration, what will happen when Jesus talks about additional heavenly things associated with his messianic mission? Nicodemus will reject heavenly things because he does not understand them, unless he be born again. Jesus proves this very point by immediately speaking of heavenly things in verses 13-15 when he tells the old man, *“no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

It was common for the Jews of Nicodemus' days to tell stories about Old Testament saints who supposedly ascended into heaven (like Moses, or Elijah). But unlike these Old Testament figures, Jesus can speak of heavenly things with YHWH's authority—which is why he uses the plural “we” and “our.” Unlike Moses, Jesus descended from heaven. He identifies himself to the learned theologian as the Son of Man spoken of in Daniel 7:13-14, who is given his authority by the Ancient of Days (YHWH). Appealing to the well-known passage in Numbers 21:4-9 and the account of the bronze snake which was lifted up on a pole to rescue the Israelites from a plague of snakes sent by YHWH as punishment for their constant grumbling, so too, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he too [Jesus] must be lifted up, just as the bronze serpent was. This must happen, Jesus says, in order that people believe may believe in him, and have eternal life. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that all of these Old Testament passages pointed ahead to him, leaving Nicodemus struggling to make sense of Jesus' re-interpretation of these Old Testament passages.

When Jesus says he must be “lifted up,” he is making a prophetic reference to his crucifixion for the sins of the world—a point which John will flesh out in the next few verses and to which we will turn next time. The heavenly truth which Jesus is now revealing to Nicodemus (“truly, truly”) is that Jesus' coming death for sinners lies at the heart of those heavenly things which Nicodemus cannot understand, even though as a teacher of Israel, he should. It is only when Jesus is lifted up through his suffering and dying upon the cross, which, in turn, is the content of the gospel which is to be preached to the nations, that people are born again, they trust in Jesus to save them from their sins, and are then granted entrance into the kingdom of God. These are the heavenly things about which Jesus is speaking but which Nicodemus cannot understand. And this is why Jesus says to him, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Therefore, we must be born again, *if* we are to see and truly understand who Jesus is and the nature of his mission. But this is not something Jesus commands of us, but something he gives to us through the preaching of the Gospel. This is what John was getting when he told us in his prologue that being born

of God does not come through the flesh or an act of the human will. Rather, this is an act of God.