

**Sermon Series Four: Believe and Live**  
*(The Gospel of John: Signs of the Messiah - 1:1-12:50)*

**John 2:23-3:15**

**Born Again? (Part 1)**

In a book titled, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells about Virgil, a man who had been blind from early childhood. When he was 50, Virgil underwent surgery and was given the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same as seeing. Virgil's first experiences with sight were very confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements, but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult. Over time he learned to identify various objects, but his habits, his behaviors, were still those of a blind man. Dr. Sacks asserts, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person." This illustration certainly raises the question as to what it means to be born again. A few decades ago it became rather common, if not popular, to say that you had been "born again." Jimmy Carter publicized that he was born again. It was not uncommon to hear Roman Catholics using this "new birth" terminology when previously it was practically unheard of. Almost any religious phenomenon was referred to as a new birth. Even dieters, when being encouraged with her dramatic weight loss would exclaim, "I've been born again!" But just where did this idea come from? What we will discover is that it comes from John, chapter 3. It was Christ who first used the terminology, "You must be born again." And he uses it twice in the same passage. What exactly does he mean by it? The answer is found in Christ's conversation with Nicodemus and the understanding of three terms in relationship to Nicodemus, the "man," the "mystery," and the "miracle."

**I. The Man (2:23-3:2)**

<sup>23</sup> Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. <sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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."

**1. Jesus knows the heart of a man or woman.**

When John says in chapter 3, verse one, "Now there was a man" he is deliberately repeating the word "man" which occurs in 2:23-25. In the days following Christ's first miracle, Jesus '*knew what was in "man"*' so he did not put his trust in them.

He knew that the initial enthusiasm and “faith,” based on his miracles, would soon evaporate and prove not to be saving faith. His knowledge of the true nature of their heart restrained his enthusiastic response to their expression of belief. They needed to progress from a belief in the signs to a genuine trust in the person of Christ - to believe he was the long promised Messiah. Indeed the present passage begins a thread of references to Jewish unbelief that builds to a crescendo in the dark conclusion of 12:37-50 - the ultimate rejection of their Messiah. Right away John gives two examples of Jesus knowing the heart of a man and woman in the persons of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus, as God, knows what is going on in your heart. He understands your motives and the superficiality or the authenticity of your belief in him.

## **2. Jesus knows that the best of men and women fall short of meeting God’s expectations for salvation.**

It is interesting that Jesus picks the ideal representative of the human race in that day. No better person could have been picked from that society. If you were to pick the man who would embody the best of your culture it would be a man like Nicodemus. **First**, Nicodemus was the best of the Pharisees. He was a theological conservative who believed that the Old Testament was the Word of God. He believed in the resurrection. He took God’s commands seriously and lived a highly moral and ethical life. He believed in a literal and accurate understanding of the Scriptures. He attended “church” regularly. **Second**, Nicodemus was a scholar par excellence. He was a great student of the Old Testament Scriptures and no finer teacher could be found in Israel. He was a representative of the most highly educated people in his day and had knowledge of not only Aramaic and Hebrew, but also of Greek and Greek culture. We see this in that although Nicodemus was a Jew he nevertheless had taken a Greek name. Nicodemus in Greek means “one who conquers the people.” **Third**, he was one of those rare trusted politicians. He was a member of the exclusive, governing body, the Sanhedrin, the highest legislative body in Judaism. This body conducted trials, investigated heresies, wrote laws, and carried on most of the official dealings between the people of Judea and the Roman authorities. In many ways he was like a Rockefeller, an Astor, an Einstein, a J. I. Packer or Eisenhower in the way people respected him.

## **3. Jesus knows that apart from him we are all in spiritual and intellectual darkness.**

**First**, as great as he was, Nicodemus was in **desperate need**. He needed a Savior! He was spiritually blind and needed to know God. The God of omniscience was standing before a religious Pharisee not in the least impressed with his credentials, or in his heritage, for he saw Nicodemus’s sinful heart. **Second**, the fact that Nicodemus came by night at least alludes to the **blackness of his soul and the darkness of his understanding**. We are not told why he came at night. Maybe he

wanted to keep his visit private and uninterrupted. Perhaps the antagonistic attitude of the Pharisees for Jesus caused him to want to avoid unnecessary conflict with his brethren. Maybe he wanted to avoid the heat of the day. But it will soon become clear that he did not understand what God required for salvation. **Third**, he did not have a **proper understanding of who Jesus was**. He rightly saw Jesus as a great teacher and a prophet from God, but he did not see him as the God-man, the Messiah.

## **II. The Mystery (3:3-13)**

*Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* <sup>4</sup> *Nicodemus 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?"*

<sup>5</sup> *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> 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."* <sup>9</sup> *Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"* <sup>10</sup> *Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*

### **1. To belong to the heavenly kingdom, you must be born again!**

If you are to experience eternal, resurrection life, and participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, you must be reborn. It takes more than physical birth into a privilege family or a privileged nation or a certain denomination to enter heaven. Jews in Jesus day generally believed that all Israelites would automatically have a share in the world to come with the exception of those guilty of apostasy or some other blatant sin. But Jesus completely rebuts the arrogance of that misguided thinking. They needed much more than natural birth. They needed a supernatural birth!

### **2. But how can a man be born again?**

**First**, we must be *born from above*. That is, we must be born spiritually. This makes it very clear that the new birth is supernatural and has its origin in God. This is not something that man does. **Second**, you must be *born of water and the Spirit*. There are a number of understandings of this difficult phrase. Whatever its meaning, being born of water and the spirit must be synonymous with being born again or from above since Jesus used this phrase to clarify the process of the new

birth for Nicodemus. The construction of the phrase in the Greek text indicates that the preposition “of” governs both “water” and “spirit.” That is, it is speaking of one thing that comes from one source. Probably the best explanation is that both “water” and “Spirit” denote one spiritual birth. The Old Testament passage in Ezekiel 36:25-27 speaks of God’s cleansing of human hearts with water and their inner transformation by his Holy Spirit. Ezekiel says, *“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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”* Gentiles who were received into the Jewish community were washed completely, issued new clothing, and then received into the people of God. When God saves you, you have a new beginning, a complete cleansing, and a decisive inner transformation in your life. You become an altogether new creation in Christ! **Third**, just as physical birth is necessary for life on earth, so spiritual birth is necessary for life in heaven. There can be no evolution from flesh to spirit - from natural birth to spiritual birth. Our natural beings in their entirety (body, soul, and human spirit) are dominated and motivated by our sinful nature. We cannot, unaided by the Holy Spirit, please, obey, or even understand God. We must be reborn! **Fourth**, this ministry can, at least in part, be illustrated by the wind. Jesus probably is making a play on words, for in the Greek the word for wind and Spirit are the same. Interestingly, there are three similarities between the wind and the Spirit. They both operate sovereignly and are completely beyond the control of man. Man cannot control, apart from being given new life by the Holy Spirit, his destiny. We cannot visibly see either the wind or the Spirit and so we perceive the presence of both by their effects. We can see what the wind does and you can see what the Holy Spirit does in lives. We cannot fully explain their actions since they come from unseen and partially unknowable factors. We do not have exhaustive knowledge of either the wind or the Holy Spirit. Much about the two is a mystery.

### **3. Often the world’s greatest minds and even greatest theologians do not understand the new birth.**

Nicodemus was a prominent teacher of the Bible and theology in his day. Yet we learn three things about the natural religious man (the unsaved man or woman) through him. **First**, they do not know their Bibles. Nicodemus portrays his ignorance of the Old Testament even though many recognized him as “the teacher” in Israel. Jesus’ astonishment is that he had been speaking about things of which Nicodemus should have been aware. His study of the Scriptures should have told him that no one can come to God in his own strength or righteousness without the necessity of God’s spiritual cleansing **Second**, they refuse to accept the teachings

that they do know. In the end, it is not that Nicodemus and his fellow rulers have not heard Jesus' witness, or even that they completely failed to understand it. At the root, their failure was not intellectual, but rather consisted in their refusal to accept the testimony of Christ (the Trinity) and his followers. Jesus came as an eyewitness and revealer of God and Nicodemus was rejecting his witness. Even now, he is rejecting Jesus' teaching about the new birth. **Third**, one cannot expect the knowledge (or claim to have knowledge) of the deeper things of God when they do not understand or reject very basic truths about God - about Christ! How can a person help you to grow in your Christian life, to properly understand the world around you, to deal with suffering, and to live a holy life if they do not properly understand how to become a Christian in the first place. If a person refuses to believe foundational, elementary, and basic things dealing with the present earthly life, how can they understand the more advanced heavenly realities? If you don't understand John, how will you ever understand Revelation? **Fourth**, they do not understand the uniqueness of Jesus. Apart from God, there's absolutely no one else in the universe like him. No other human being has descended from heaven and ascended back up into heaven. Consequently, no teacher can speak as authoritatively about heavenly things as he could. He had personally been present in heaven with God. He was face to face with God and indeed is God.

### III. The Miracle (3:14-15)

<sup>14</sup> *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* <sup>15</sup> *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Jesus references the miracle in the wilderness found in Numbers 21. The scene is one of judgment in which the Israelites needed immediate deliverance or their lives would be snuffed out. God has sent poisonous snakes to judge rebellious Israel. Moses intercedes for his people and God provides a way of salvation in the form of a raised or "lifted up" bronze serpent. When anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. **First**, the words "lifted up" have a double meaning which link Christ's being lifted up on the cross to his being lifted up or ascension into glory. Just as the snake was lifted up so it would be necessary for Jesus to be lifted up. **Second**, and most importantly, Jesus likens the restoration of people's physical lives, as a result of looking at the bronze serpent, to people's reception of eternal life - as a result of "looking" in faith at the Son of Man. **Third**, this eternal life or salvation is available to not just Israel, but the entire world. There is a markedly universal tone to Jesus' words.

## **Conclusion**

The obvious question then is, “Are you born again?” There is no possibility of salvation apart from this supernatural rebirth. Jesus words are both sobering and comforting. You must be born again! Thankfully God does not ask you to come up with some remedy or cure. He does not put you through some rigorous form of self reformation. He does not tell you that you must belong to some elaborate social organization. He simply asks you to look to Jesus and live. You are to look to Christ on the cross. We have been bitten by sin and we are dying of sin, but God sent his Son to die for our sin that we might believe on him and never die. All he asks you to do is to believe and rest in what he has done for you and you will be saved. It’s not about what you do but about what he has done. You needed to live a perfect life. Christ did! It’s done! You needed to pay in full the debt that your sin owed to God. Christ did! It’s done!