

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

I am sure that many of you are aware of the fact that the gospel written by the apostle John is recognized by many scholars as employing a fairly simple, almost repetitive vocabulary and grammar. It is fairly easy to read, so much so that I used it as a reader when our oldest son Chad was first learning to read. The subject material itself, as we noted last Sunday, consisting of just a few things Jesus did and said, was carefully selected by John to do what he said was his purpose of writing in **20:30,31**. In that passage he said, *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* That is what this book is all about. That is what this book does. It gives people a basis for deciding whether or not to believe that the man called Jesus was and is the Christ, the very Son of God. For those who do believe and all that entails, John says, they gain the opportunity of life.

With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John crafted this amazing book! Right now, in our New Testament Studies Curriculum, the Hartford church family is getting into its pages. If you are not a part of that, I wish you would seriously consider joining us. I suspect John’s gospel will soon become one of your favorite parts of the Bible, if it isn’t already.

Even so, as simple and as appealing as this book is, that doesn’t mean that everything in it is easy to understand. Jesus, through John’s writing lays some pretty challenging things before us, and I want to look at one of those with you this morning. I am talking about Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in **chapter 3**. If you will, please open to that chapter and read along with me from **verse 1-8**:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.” 3) Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 4) 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?” 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. 6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7) Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8) 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

John writes, *“There was a man...,”* and he writes that in such a way as to infer that he is about to give an illustration of the men talked about at the close of chapter 2. If you will go back and look at **verses 23-25**, we read:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24) But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25) and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Notice John says that while Jesus was in Jerusalem, a lot of people believed in him. They believed in him because they saw the signs that he was doing; signs referring either to miracles or unusual works that Jesus did. Driving the money changers might have been one of those signs. At any rate, because of what they saw with their own eyes, some people had begun to believe. That is, they had begun to believe that this Jesus of Nazareth might truly be the long-awaited Christ. Even so, Jesus did not entrust himself to those people. Why not, we might wonder? John tells us, it was because he knew people. He knew how people are. They believe one day and turn against you the next. They are hot one day, then cold the next. They profess one day and deny the next. Jesus knew people. John tells us, *“He knew what was in man.”*

So as we get into chapter 3, we find an illustration of that, of Jesus know what was in man. *There was a man, and he was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and he was a ruler of the Jews.* Now we learn two things immediately about this man.

- Number one, he is a member of the strictest sect within Judaism. Here is a person who believes in living by the law. He is extremely concerned with living a life that is wholly devoted to God.
- Secondly, we learn that he is a ruler of the Jews. In chapter 7 we learn that he was a member of the Sanhedrin council. So this is not a Jewish novice. He is a recognized leader among the Jews.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, which may or may not mean anything, and he has something very interesting to say to Jesus. He says, *“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.”* Now that is a rather striking confession for someone who is both a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. It stops short of saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but it is acknowledges that God is certainly working in him.

And that is when Jesus says something that shakes Nicodemus to his core. He says, *“Truly, truly,”* which is the Hebrew way of saying, “what I am about to tell you is something you really need to know and understand. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Now, think about that! Think about what Nicodemus just said, and think about what Jesus said in response.

- Had Nicodemus asked about being born again? No.
- Did Nicodemus say anything about the kingdom of God? No.

Now admittedly we may not have every word of that conversation recorded for us, but isn't that interesting? Nicodemus says, *“Rabbi, we know....”* “We,” probably referring to what he and a number of other Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin had been thinking and saying,

“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.”

- Great compliment!
- It wasn't a question,
- he wasn't being critical;
- he wasn't challenging Jesus for a debate.
- He wasn't asking anything about being born again.

He wasn't asking anything about the kingdom of God, and yet Jesus says to him, *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

You might get the impression from **verse 4** that Jesus's words were a complete mystery to Nicodemus, but that isn't what happened at all. Nicodemus wasn't confused by what Jesus said; he understood very well what Jesus meant. Whenever the Jews converted a Gentile, the proselyte was regarded as being born again, as a newborn babe. Nicodemus immediately understood Jesus was saying to him that he needed to be converted; that he needed to be born again. The Jews thought the fact that they were descendants of Abraham pretty much guaranteed their place in the kingdom of God. Now, here was this teacher, from Galilee of all places, telling a ruler of the Jews of all people, (and a Pharisee at that) that he needed to be born again, to be converted! Jesus' words were insulting.

Nicodemus was insulted by what Jesus said, and that is clear from what he said next. **Verse 4** says, *“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’”* The man wasn't that clueless! He knew the answer to that question before he asked it, so it is clear that he was trying to dodge the obvious implication of what Jesus had just said. Jesus doesn't let him get away with playing dumb. He says, **verse 5-8**:

*“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, **he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8) 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.”*

Now, if for Nicodemus, this conversation was going nowhere fast! Now Jesus is telling him, completely contrary to everything he has been taught and believed, that he isn't even in the kingdom of God, that he is the one who must be born again. And he knows well what Jesus means by *“of water and the spirit.”* When John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness and calling people to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ, many of the religious leaders and rulers went out to hear John. What did John call them, do you remember? Look at **Matthew 3**, beginning in **verse 7 [thru 12]**:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8)

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9) And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10) Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11) 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

There is a very good chance Nicodemus would have been among those that John confronted that day. According to **Luke 7:30**, many Jewish leaders refused to be baptized by John. These would have been people who felt that they didn't need to be baptized, that such was beneath them. Why did they need to be baptized when it was obvious that they loved God more than everybody else?

But it wasn't just that Nicodemus needed to be born again of the water. He also needed to be born of the Spirit. Now, please understand, that isn't talking about two different births at different times. Some try to explain this passage as saying that being born of the water refers to one's natural birth, and being born of the spirit refers to one's spiritual birth. That won't work! Jesus is talking about one birth which is of water AND the Spirit. Two mediums are employed in the case of our being born again: the water, and the Spirit. Jesus is talking about being baptized in water and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit which is spoken of in Acts 2:38.

- It is the act of becoming a new creature that Paul talks about in Romans 6, when the old man of sin is put to death and a new creature is raised.
- By honoring God's command to be baptized, immersed in water, one puts himself in the position where Christ's blood washes away his sins, and he is given a new heart in which the Holy Spirit begins to dwell.
- They are given a new name and Christ adds them to His Father's kingdom (Colossians 1:23).
- In **1 Corinthians 12:13**, Paul writes, *"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."*
- When the multitude heard the gospel being preached for the first time following the death and resurrection of Christ, they wanted to know what they needed to do since they had been guilty of putting Jesus to death. **Acts 2:38** says Peter told them, to *"Repent and baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins,"* and he went on to say, *"and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

Jesus told Nicodemus, *"that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."* In other words, he was telling him, not to put his trust in his fleshly connection with Abraham. That's something emphasized in several New Testament passages.

And then he says, *"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"* So John makes it clear that Jesus was saying this to Nicodemus—He needed to be born again! That's what Nicodemus understood Jesus to be saying and he didn't much like it, so he tried to turn the

conversation. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't want the conversation changed. He stayed on the subject—"you must be born again." For Jesus this wasn't simply an intellectual argument to be batted around; this was about the man's soul; a soul he had come to save. And it became obvious, that on the one hand, while the man had some kind of faith in Jesus, it was not a saving faith. Saving faith is always an obedient faith. Saving faith is not just a professing faith. It isn't a faith that expresses itself in nice compliments. It is a faith that obeys. We know that because in the last verse of this chapter, **verse 36**, John writes, "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*"

So what about you, and what about me? Have I been born again? Have you been born again? You might say, as I could say, "Yes, I've been baptized." But that isn't necessarily the same thing. **Listen to me carefully:** It is possible that people today might have the same mistaken notion about baptism that Nicodemus and other Jews had about being a descendant of Abraham. Nicodemus had been born a descendant of Abraham, but Jesus still told him he needed to be born again. It is true that baptism is an essential part of being born again but one might be baptized a dozen times and never be born again!

You might be thinking to yourself, "Well if that is true, how does one know if they have been born again?" And that is a very good question. And the answer is, you know if you have been obedient from the heart what God has commanded. Turn to **verse 31**, and we will close with this...

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32) He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33) Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34) For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35) The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 36) Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

- "*He who comes from above is above all.*" That of course is a reference to Jesus and His coming into the world.
- "*He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.*" That is John's way of contrasting those who listen to God with those who listen to themselves.
- "*The one who comes from above, or heaven, is above all.*" There is no authority greater than God, which has been invested in His Son.
- "*The one who comes from above bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.*" Jesus came to bring us the truth; the truth about God, about our sinful condition and the truth about how to be righteous before God. You don't receive what Jesus says by simply hearing it. You have to be obedient as well.

- *“Whoever receives his testimony set his seal to this, that God is true.”* Those who truly receive the truth that Christ came to bring us are those who recognize that God alone is true.
- *“For he whom God has sent”—*again that refers to Jesus, but also to all who in the name of Christ faithfully proclaim His gospel—*“utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”*
- *“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”* For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. God had a plan to save the world from sin, and he executed that plan when He sent His Son into this world.
- *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,”* belief in the Son of God is not merely a mental or even verbal acceptance of the deity of Christ and His death on the cross. It is always a trusting obedience to God’s will. That is clear from what John goes on to say: *“whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”*

So the choice is ours, isn’t it? We can have eternal life, or we can remain under the wrath of God. Only a fool or an angry rebel would choose to remain under the wrath of God. The problem is, some choice has to be made. If we do not choose to be born again, if we do not choose to believe in the Son, if we do not choose to obey the Son, then by default our choice becomes to remain under the wrath of God.

So which choice have you made? Jesus said, *“You must be born again!”*