



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES: JOHN

LESSON: BORN AGAIN – PART 1

JOHN 3:1-15

11/8/20

MAIN POINT

You must be born again.

JOHN CONTEXT

Nicodemus ... the curious ... sought out Jesus for conversation and learned that he must be born again if he were to see the Kingdom of God. The conversation fits perfectly within the purpose statement given us by the author, John: “[B]ut 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” (John 20:31).

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a member of the 71-member Sanhedrin, the ruling council for the Jews. John (and only John) speaks of Nicodemus, and gives us three encounters with him:

- **First Encounter - Curious:** Nicodemus came to Jesus at night for conversation. He received truth that – 2000 years later – Christians hide in their hearts. That conversation is today's lesson: John 3:1-15.

- Second Encounter - Open: Nicodemus spoke to a group of fellow Pharisees counseling against unlawfully seizing Jesus, saying: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:50-51).
- Third Encounter - Fan: After Jesus had been crucified, Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea – a fellow Pharisee and Sanhedrin member – in giving Jesus a traditional Jewish burial (see Mark 15:43, 46). Nicodemus “brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds” (John 19:39-42). Interestingly, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are each venerated as a saint in the Orthodox Catholic and Roman Catholic traditions. And while Baptists do not agree with the Roman Catholic view of sainthood, it is reasonable to conclude from John that they both had saving faith in Christ.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is man’s most fundamental physical need? (Answer: To stay alive.)

What is man’s most fundamental physical problem? (Answer: We each will die.)

Given that every man will die, how can man meet his most fundamental physical need? (Answer: Achieve life after death.)

Can you describe ... *just exactly how* can a person can have continuing life after his or her physical death?

As believers, we see things from *both* a physical and a spiritual perspective. Thus, we might ask ourselves what is man's most basic *spiritual* need? If we Google that phrase – “man's most fundamental spiritual need” – we will quickly see that the world is ready to offer us answers. But, our question is: What’s does *God’s Word* say?

EXPLANATION // ...believe Jesus is the Christ...

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOHN 3:1-3

Much has been made of the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night ... but that is not really the point of the story (at least, John did not provide any explanation for why coming at night is significant). So, let’s focus on how John’s story telling fits into his larger purpose of “that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (Jn. 20:31).

Nicodemus addresses Jesus respectfully, calling him “Rabbi” which means teacher. Nicodemus already believed that Jesus was “a teacher come from God” and he believed that “no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Nicodemus approached Jesus with an attitude of openness to being taught.

Interestingly, Jesus did not wait for a question by Nicodemus but jumped right in and made a declaration. Jesus was not teaching Socratically – asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking. Jesus began his lesson with a quick declaration of propositional truth: “Truly, truly, ... unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus was making the distinction between being *attracted* to Jesus and *being born* again.

John has already addressed the issue of being born again – back in John 1:12-13 where John said: “But, to all who ... receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born ... of God.” John tells us that Children of God receive Jesus, believe in His name, and are born of God.

What must all “good” people do in order to enter the kingdom?

What must all “religious” people do in order to enter the kingdom?

What must all “bad” people do in order to enter the kingdom?

All people must be born again! This is the message of the New Testament.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOHN 3:4-8

Nicodemus was a teacher, himself. In v. 10, Jesus calls Nicodemus “the teacher of Israel.” Nicodemus-the-teacher responded to Jesus’ declaration with a question and, then, a follow-up question: How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?

This may have been a brilliant rhetorical question or ... it may have been Nicodemus’ inability to elevate his understanding to a spiritual level. Either way, these questions by Nicodemus elicited Jesus’ explanation of his earlier declaration.

Jesus replied with another “Truly, truly.” When Scripture presents a “truly, truly” declaration, absolute divine truth follows. And, sure enough, Jesus declared a point of doctrine: “[U]nless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Being a Jew of distinction, Nicodemus would be looking for the Messiah and would be awaiting the coming Kingdom of God. For the Jew, the Kingdom of God would be basically equivalent to our view of Heaven. Jesus was saying that the person who is not reborn will not see the Kingdom of God or, as we would say, will not see Heaven. No re-birth, no eternal life. One must be born into the Heavenly Kingdom just as one must be born into the earthly kingdom.

Born of water and spirit is somewhat ambiguous and, thus, there are different views on the phrase “water and spirit.”

- It could be a shorthand way of saying both physical (water being the water that breaks to commence physical birth) and spiritual.
- It could mean the spiritual birth is “water and spirit” in the sense that the Greek for “and” is really the word “even” and, thus, the conjunction in English is actually a way of saying in Greek that the re-birth is strictly a spiritual birth separate and distinct from a physical birth.

- Some consider water to be a reference to baptism (cf. Acts 2:38: and Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...”).
- Another opinion is to view water and spirit as allusions to Ezekiel 36:25-27: “And I will sprinkle clean *water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and 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.” In this case, Jesus means that one must be cleanse from sin and receive the Spirit.

Regardless, the thrust of the language is that there has to be a divine re-making of the person.

At this point, Nicodemus wisely did not ask another question; he continued to just listen ... until the teacher stopped teaching. And, Jesus explained further: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Nicodemus’ facial expression must have been his response, for Jesus next said: “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” Commentators point out that the “you” used in this sentence is the plural form, meaning “all of you.” The new birth is a movement from flesh to spirit, from world to kingdom, and from death to life. This new birth is the “basic need” for every human being.

Jesus then explained, specifically, that He was talking about a spiritual re-birth, saying, in v. 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.” In other words, just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not real. These last four words of verse 8 sum it all up; being born again is being “born of the Spirit.” We “do not know where [the Spirit] comes from or where it goes” (v. 8).

Our spiritual re-birth is not of the will of the flesh. As John has already told us, back in 1:13, our re-birth as believers – Children of God – is “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” It is not accomplished by the will of man, but of God. There is simply no room for any work of man. It is a mystery of the Spirit. As one commentator says, “We are not improved caterpillars but by faith have become spiritual butterflies.”

What stands out to you in these verses about Nicodemus? Based on these verses, what was Nicodemus’ purpose in coming to Jesus?

Try to put yourself in Nicodemus’ shoes. What would you be thinking about what Jesus had just told you?

Do you think Nicodemus is speaking literally or rhetorically when he asks “How can a man be born when he is old?”

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOHN 3:9-15

Finally, Nicodemus answers Jesus’ explanation by simply saying: “How can these things be?” At this point, Jesus says:

1) “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

2) “Truly, truly, If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

It appears that Jesus-the-teacher-of-heavenly-things is calling the question – making it clear that this “teacher of Israel” has been told enough to believe and that he has to now decide if he is willing to believe.

Jesus has given propositional truth, has given explanation, and then follows with an appeal to Nicodemus’ knowledge of Scripture – the Old Testament – for Jesus next talked about:

- 1) the Son of Man who had descended from and ascended into heaven and
- 2) Moses lifting up the serpent on a pole in the wilderness for the healing of all who would look upon the serpent in belief.

Let’s think for a moment about these two references by Jesus. To what could be Jesus be referring?

V. 13 - “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Jesus most often referred to Himself as “the Son of Man” – 80 times in the New Testament. This title is found in the Old Testament, referring to the promised Messiah.

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

“Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” (Psalm 80:14-19).

If anyone knew the Old Testament Scriptures, it was Nicodemus – “the teacher of Israel.” A common Old Testament, Jewish understanding of God’s “son” was “the people of Israel.” Jesus was telling Nicodemus that HE was the Son of Man.

Vv. 14-15 - 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.

When Edom had denied Israel permission to cross its land on their way to Canaan (Num. 20:14-21), God told Moses not to fight against Edom (Deut. 2:4-5) ... so, Moses turned the people southeast (the Promised Land was northwest) to make a long, difficult journey around the land of Edom. This caused the Israelites to grow impatient with Moses. They had just seen victory over some Canaanites (Num. 21:1-3) ... so, they reasoned, why could they not they march through Edom and kill any Edomites that opposed them? They grumbled against God and Moses (Num. 21:5), saying: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.” As a result of their grumbling and despising God’s gracious provision of manna and His taking care of them in the wilderness all these years, the Lord sent snakes among the people as

judgment. The snake bites burned like fire and people were dying. They needed relief. The people realized their fault, acknowledged their sin, and came to Moses to ask him to pray for a remedy. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and tell everyone in Israel who had been bitten that they must look to the serpent on the pole in order to be healed. (This serpent on a pole – the Caduceus – is the logo, still today, for all practitioners of the healing arts.)

Jesus took this strange Old Testament story and applied it to Himself, telling Nicodemus, in effect: “Just as those who looked in faith to the serpent in the wilderness were healed, so those who look in faith to the Son of Man will have eternal life.” Jesus was telling Nicodemus that He (Jesus) is the only means of salvation and that looking in belief to this Son of Man for salvation is the way to the new, spiritual birth that will lead to citizenship in the Kingdom of God – eternal life. Nicodemus need only look to experience the new birth.

This last part of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus would have caused Nicodemus to immediately re-think all that he already knew from Scripture (much as Paul did after his Damascus Road experience). Jesus was telling Nicodemus that HE is the Son of Man – the unique God-man Messiah who could come from Heaven and return to Heaven and who could deliver to Nicodemus, and all, salvation – entry into the Kingdom of God!

Based on these verses, what was Nicodemus' purpose in asking “How can these things be?”

What do you think is meant by the word “believes,” as in “whoever believes may in Him have eternal life” (3:15)?

Why do you think Jesus answered Nicodemus by telling him:

“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.”

Do you think this was enough for Nicodemus to “get it”?

APPLICATION // ...have life in His name.

In this lesson, Jesus has a conversation with a Pharisee and Sanhedrin-member named Nicodemus. In this conversation, Jesus tells this very religious man that he must be born again. Jesus' message to Nicodemus was that his religion, and all of his efforts to be good and do good things, weren't good enough to get him into God's Kingdom. Jesus points to what he will accomplish on the cross as the only means by which a person, regardless of who they are or what they have done, can enter the Kingdom of God.

When conversation turns to “spiritual things,” how do you transition the conversation to a presentation of the Gospel?

Have you ever responded to questions about Jesus or the Bible or Eternal Life with a declaration like: “Let me just cut to the bottom line truth: Unless one is born again he or she cannot experience an after-life with God.”

How about the use of the Scripture? How do you tell people about the relationships between the God of the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament?

What does the phrase “you must be born again” mean to you? Has this lesson changed your concept of that phrase? Do you think it is effective, today, to use the phrase “born again Christian”?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, may we take inventory of our spiritual life – to make sure we are trusting in the blood of Jesus Christ and nothing else. May we experience the fullness of having been born again – having been born both physically and spiritually.