

John 3:1-21
Numbers 21:1-9
Psalm 96

“You Must Be Born Again”

April 12, 2020

What was lifted up in the wilderness?

The bronze serpent.

A representation of that which afflicted them.

Why did Jesus have to die on a cross?

What afflicts us?

Our chief affliction comes not from outside us – but from within.

Man’s biggest problem is man.

Therefore a *man* had to be lifted up.

The problem is that man keeps dying – and never coming back!

Death always wins.

We need a man who can triumph over death!

And that is what happened when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

We sing of the coming of God in salvation in Psalm 96

Sing Psalm 96

Read John 3:1-21

If there was a controversial fellow who came to town –
and you didn’t want to be seen with him in public –
but you really wanted to talk to him –
when would you go see him?

How about after sundown?

1. Nicodemus Came By Night – Three “Truly, Truly’s” (v1-15)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him,

Nicodemus had probably been in or around the temple when Jesus had cleansed it.

At any rate, he certainly heard about the stories!!

So he comes to Jesus at night...

Why at night?

We saw the contrast between light and darkness back in chapter 1

"In Him was life, and the life was the LIGHT of men.

And the Light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not comprehend it"

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

Nicodemus is a man of the darkness.

He is a Pharisee--a ruler of the Jews

He comes at NIGHT to see the light of the world--

and as the conversation shows us,

Nicodemus does not comprehend what Jesus is saying!

Keep your eyes open for how John uses the imagery of light and darkness.

Nicodemus, the man of the darkness, does not comprehend Jesus' teaching.

And at the end of their conversation,

Jesus will tell him (verses 19-21)

*¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world,
and people loved the darkness rather than the light
because their works were evil.*

*²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light
and does not come to the light,
lest his works should be exposed.*

*²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen
that his works have been carried out in God."*

You came to me in darkness--now walk in the light.

Three times in John's gospel – in John 8:12, John 9:5, and John 12:46,

Jesus will identify himself as the light of the world.

So let us look at this conversation between the man of darkness and the light of the world:

Nicodemus says (v2)

*"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."*

He acknowledges that Jesus has come from God.

The sign that Jesus did in cleansing the temple was the sign of a prophet.

Nicodemus is clearly a God-fearing man (he will later convert as John 19 says)

He believes the Law--and so when Jesus cleanses the temple,

Nicodemus rejoiced to see righteousness prevail!

Nicodemus says to himself--aha!

this is a prophet who will call us back to love and obedience toward God

He wants to find out who this Jesus is!

He knows that God is with Jesus--so he comes and speaks with him.

But he comes by night.

Because he fears people more than he fears God.

Yes, he is a God-fearing man!

But he is still a man of darkness – man who comes by night.

And Jesus doesn't waste any time here!

He says simply: (v3)

a. Unless One Is Born Again He Cannot See the Kingdom of God (v1-3)

³ *Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again^[b] he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Let me just say right here that the conversation was likely a lot longer than the handful of sentences we have here!

What John reports is the core – the central point of Jesus’ message.

But still, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if this was Jesus’ opening line!

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”!

There are three “truly, truly” statements in this passage – and they highlight the central point of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus – and to you.

The first one is designed to catch you off guard:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”!

Nicodemus is puzzled.

What does Jesus mean?

How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

What does it mean that you have to be born again?

the words can be translated "born again" OR "born from above."

In fact, it is a play on words:

BOTH fit what Jesus is saying.

Yes, you must be born again—there is a new birth in view—
but it is not an ordinary birth.

You must be born from above.

This fits with John 1:12-13—

you must be born by the will of God—a heavenly birth.

And this is also what John says in 3:31:

“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.”

Just as Jesus is the one who comes from heaven,
so also your new birth is a heavenly birth.
It must come from above.

But Nicodemus only hears the first part—he thinks Jesus is simply saying,
you must be born again.
He misses the heavenly aspect entirely.

So Jesus answers: (v5-8)

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.^[c] ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind^[e] 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 is now flabbergasted!

"How can these things be?"!!!

Jesus, what are you saying?

How does Jesus respond?

Does Jesus say, "Oh I'm sorry, let me make it clear to you!"

No!

Jesus rebukes him! (v10)

"Are you a teacher of Israel?"

You ought to know these things!

This is EXACTLY what the OT teaches!

So if you don't understand the scriptures, what are you doing as a teacher of Israel!

(and notice this in verse 11)

"Truly, truly, I say to you (singular--Nicodemus),

We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, but you (plural--Pharisees)
do not receive our testimony" (v11)

Nicodemus will one day repent and step into the light.

Nicodemus will believe the message of Jesus,

but most of the Pharisees will keep rejecting the testimony of the Son of God

So what does it mean to be born again? to be born from above?

Let's think about what Jesus is saying:

b. Unless One Is Born of Water and the Spirit He Cannot Enter the Kingdom of God (v4-8)

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.^[c] ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you,

‘You^[d] must be born again.’⁸ The wind^[e] 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.’

First, in verse 5, Jesus says that it means to be born of water and the Spirit.

Water and Spirit are closely associated in the OT

At the creation the Spirit of God hovers over the waters.

The creation started with water and the Spirit.

In Ezekiel 36, God promised that when he sent the Messiah,
he would sprinkle his people with clean water,
and he would pour out his Holy Spirit upon them.

Isaiah 32:15 declares that the coming of the kingdom of God
would be marked by the outpouring of the Spirit,
when God would make the wilderness a fruitful field.

Likewise Isaiah 44:3 says that God will “pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;

I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing upon your descendants.”

This is why Jesus rebukes Nicodemus.

A teacher of Israel should understand the connection between water and the Spirit.

When God restores his people—when he establishes his kingdom—
in other words, when the new creation comes,
then the people of God will be reborn by water and the Spirit.

This is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday!

Jesus Christ is the one who was baptized with water and the Spirit at the Jordan River.

And on the day of Pentecost, God poured out his Spirit on his Church.

And when the people see this glorious outpouring,
and hear of the coming of the kingdom,
they cry out, “what shall we do?”

How can we participate in the new creation—the coming of the kingdom?

And Peter says, you too can share in the promised Holy Spirit.

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins,
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In baptism, our bodies are washed with water,
and our souls are cleansed by the Holy Spirit.

So when Jesus says that unless we are born of water and the Spirit,
he is saying that we must not only receive the outward sign of baptism,
but we must also receive the inward reality--the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Some have argued that the “water” here does not refer to baptism.

But the context of John 1-3 indicates otherwise.

In John 1, Jesus was baptized,
and just after finishing his conversation with Nicodemus,
Jesus goes to the Jordan and starts baptizing (v22).
So after saying that you must be born of water and the Spirit,
Jesus goes and demonstrates what he means,
and he baptizes his disciples, and others who come to him.

But notice how Jesus says it:

he says, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit,
he cannot enter the Kingdom of God"

Now, there may be somebody who dies an hour after trusting in Christ.
If so, we can have confidence that that person is saved!

But ordinarily,

baptism is required for entrance into the Kingdom of God.
Now--that's NOT to say, that all you have to do is get baptized
and then you are guaranteed to go to heaven!

After all,

Jesus does NOT say that you must be born of *water only*.
You must be born of water AND the Spirit.
Without the work of the Holy Spirit in your life,
water won't do a thing!

And this is the second point which we see in verses 6-8:

To be born again means to have a second birth (not of flesh but of Spirit).
Jesus says that this birth is a spiritual birth.

It is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

We have all had a fleshly birth--right?

You all were once born of natural mothers and natural fathers.
And that which is born of flesh is flesh.

Well, what's the problem with that?

Why is a fleshly birth not enough?

Remember what we saw a few weeks ago?

We saw in John 1, that the problem with flesh is that flesh is weak.

The flesh is powerless.

The flesh is impotent.

Flesh cannot save!

And so when Jesus says, "that which is born of flesh is flesh"

what he is saying is,

as long as you remain in the flesh,

you have no hope of salvation!

As long as you only have one birth,

you will never see the kingdom of God.
This is why you must be born of water *and the Spirit*.

At this point, Nicodemus asks a very good question:
"How can these things be?"

c. Unless the Son of Man Is Lifted Up, There Will Be No Heavenly Birth (v9-15)

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you^[f] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[g] ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[h]

How is it possible for a person to be born of the Holy Spirit?

Nicodemus is asking a very good question.

Again, though, Jesus rebukes him, and then shows him how these things can be!

The New Birth is possible because of the Son of Man who has come down from heaven.

(Read v11-12)

¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you^[f] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

What is Jesus saying?

What are the earthly things that Jesus has talked about?

This is what Moses and the prophets have taught.

If Nicodemus doesn't understand

that the kingdom of God comes by water and the Spirit.

If he cannot comprehend the earthly realities promised in the scriptures,

how will he understand their heavenly source?

If you don't understand Moses and the prophets,

how will you understand the new revelation that Jesus brings?

If you haven't understood the earthly picture,

how will you comprehend the heavenly reality?

Well, what is this heavenly reality?

What is the "heavenly thing" that Jesus teaches Nicodemus?

READ v13-15

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[g] ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[h]

The heavenly reality that gives salvation its power,

is the descending and ascending of Jesus Christ.
He is the Word of God--the eternal Son of God--He IS God.
And yet, he is the Word made flesh!
He is true God and true Man--two natures in one person!
Jesus speaks of his incarnation and his ascension in v13
No one can ascend into heaven except the one who came down FROM heaven

God must become one of us before we can become one with him.

And Jesus speaks of his death in v14
"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

We read that story earlier.
When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness,
they grumbled and rebelled against God,
and so God sent poisonous serpents into the camp,
and thousands upon thousands of Israelites died of snakebites.
But God told Moses to make a bronze serpent,
and that anyone who looked upon the bronze serpent would live!
Even so,
now the Son of Man must be lifted up,
that all who look to HIM will have eternal life.

Think about it--it was the image of a serpent
that healed those who were dying because of serpents.
And even so, it was the image of sinful flesh
that brought healing to those who dying of sinful flesh!
And by looking to the Son of Man, and believing in HIM--we now may live!

2. But God Sent Light (v16-21)

a. God Loved the World in This Way: He Sent His Son to Save the World (v16-17)

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world,^[i] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

And this is where we find that famous verse,
"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life

What does it mean that "God so loved the world"?

In English you could almost take it to mean God loved the world "so much"

But not in Greek.

This verse would be more clear if we translated it,
"For God loved the world thus" or "For God loved the world IN THIS WAY...
that he gave his only begotten Son!"

How did God love the world?

He refused to let us die in our sins!
He refused to allow us to remain with only a fleshly birth!

How did God love the world?

He sent his SON--his only-begotten Son--to be the bearer of our sins.
He sent Jesus to be the one who hung there on the cross,
so that whoever believes in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.

God loved the world in *this way*:

that he sent his only-begotten Son
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse says that the Son of Man must be lifted up (in other words, crucified),
for whom?

Who are the ones who benefit from Christ being lifted up?
Those who believe.

Okay.

Who are the ones who do not perish, but receive everlasting life?
Those who believe.

Good.

So John 3:16 teaches us that Christ's death brings salvation to whom?

To those who believe.

This means that Christ did NOT die for everyone in exactly the same way!

Rather, his death redeems THOSE WHO BELIEVE.

And if you look back to John 1:12-13,

John even TELLS us who believes!

"But as many 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"

In other words,

Christ's death saves those who are born again by water and the Spirit.

Yes, God loved the world in THIS WAY,
that he sent Jesus Christ to save his people!

How does God view the world?

Some like to say that God condemns the world, and saves his people out of it.
Others like to say that God saves the world, but destroys the wicked in the process,
because they refuse to believe.

This latter way of saying it is the approach of John 3:17-18 (read)

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

God did not leave the entirety of humanity to perish in our sins,
to wander in darkness forever!
No, God has sent his only-begotten Son to be the Light of the World,
and the Savior of those who were lost!

And so, Jesus brings us to the real point:

b. Do You Love Light or Darkness? (v18-21)

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

To be born again means to come to the Light and leave the Darkness behind (v18-21)

Nicodemus came at night.

Jesus says, in effect, leave the darkness and come, walk in the light.

The Light of the world has come!

The Light of the world has risen from the dead!

Will you put away the deeds of darkness?

If you who are wicked come into the light, Jesus says,
your evil deeds will be exposed!

And one day,

Christ WILL reveal the hearts of those who dwell in darkness!!!

But,

if you LOVE the Light!

if you DO what is true

then when you enter the Light,

the Light will reveal that what you have done, you have done IN God.

Listen to these two phrases:

1) DOING what is true

2) carrying out your deeds IN God.

"Doing what is true"

Normally, we think about "believing" the truth.

But Jesus says that we are to DO the truth.

What does he mean?

Truth is not simply something that you believe.

Truth is also something you DO.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God?

that he is the Word made flesh?

and that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life?

That's nice.

But do you practice that truth?

Do you DO it?

Truth is to be lived—not just believed!

But you can only do this truth IN God (v21)

Your deeds must be "carried out in God."

This clearly follows from what it means to DO what is true.

If we have received eternal life;

If we have been born again of water and the Spirit;

And if we have believed IN the Son of Man;

then all that we do is to be done,

NOT in the flesh,

BUT in the Spirit.

Not by human power,

But by the power of God.

And if you DO the truth,

and if you carry it out IN GOD,

then you may walk in the Light with joy,

because the Light reveals that you are in Christ!

Yes, you are a sinner, and you will continue to repent every day along with the rest of us!

But Jesus wants you to see past the earthly,

and to see the heavenly reality!

You are no longer who you once were!

You have been forgiven!

You have been redeemed!

You have been BORN AGAIN!