

April 28, 2013

## You Must be Born Again

John 3:1-8

**BI: Becoming a child of God does not happen by saying a prayer or being more religious. It comes as a mysterious act of God whereby He causes sinners to be "born again."**

As a pastor and biblical counselor I have the privilege of getting to talk with people about their deepest personal and spiritual concerns on a regular basis. And one of the issues that comes up rather frequently is assurance of salvation. In my experience the unfortunate reality has been that many people regularly struggle with the question of whether or not they truly know the Lord; whether they are saved; whether they are born again.

One author wrote about his experience of lacking assurance in the following narrative:

By the time I reached the age of eighteen I had probably 'asked Jesus into my heart five thousand times. I started somewhere around age four when I approached my parents one Saturday morning asking how someone could know that they were going to heaven. They carefully led me down the 'Roman's Road to Salvation,' and I gave Jesus His first invitation into my heart (J.D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart*, (2013) Nashville, B&H Publishing, (2).

The author then explains that a few years later after hearing a gospel presentation in Sunday School, he began to doubt his salvation. He writes:

So I asked Jesus into my heart again, this time with a resolve to be much more intentional about my faith. I requested re-baptism, and gave a very moving testimony in front of our congregation about getting "serious with God." Case closed, right?

Not long after that I found myself asking again: Had I *really* been sorry enough for my sin this time around? I'd seen some people weep rivers of tears when they got saved, but I hadn't. Did that mean I was not really sorry? And there were a few sins I seemed to fall back into over and over again, no matter how many resolutions I made to do better. Was I really sorry for those sins? Was that prayer a moment of total surrender? Would I have died for Jesus at that moment if He'd asked?

So I prayed the sinner's prayer again. And again, and Again, Each time trying to get it right, each time really trying to mean it. I would have a moment when I felt like I got it right, followed by a temporary euphoria. But it would fade quickly and I'd question it all again. And so I'd pray again (Ibid. p. 3).

Unfortunately, I suspect many Christians struggle with such turmoil of soul. But this morning I want to begin laying a foundation that I trust will offer much hope relative to assurance of your salvation.

You see, I believe that much of the confusion people experience is owing to something deeper and more foundational than the doctrine of assurance. In fact, I would submit that lack of assurance is often a symptom rather than a cause. The cause, I believe, is often a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of salvation. That is to say, in our current, watered down, man-centered, evangelical climate many people don't really even know how sinners become children of God. And that is what the passage before us is all about.

Read John 3:1-8

### I. A Case Study in Confusion: (1-2)

## **II. A Case Study in Confusion. (1-2)**

1. As we begin our study together it's helpful to note that the chapter breaks in our Bibles are not inspired and are sometimes confusing. It is generally agreed among GK scholars that this section really begins in 2:23, so let's read that together. Read 2:23-25

2. These verses set up the case study in confusion. Nicodemus was likely one who was already secretly believing in Jesus, but that didn't mean Jesus automatically entrusted Himself to him. As we saw last week, many people say they believe in Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean that He believes in them. Why? Because "He knew all men and needed no one to bear witness about them, for He Himself knew what was in man." You see, Nicodemus was a man who, in some sense, "believed" in Jesus. The problem, however, was that he didn't really belong to Jesus.

3. Chapter three then becomes somewhat of a case study of this man's personal interaction with Jesus. I am calling it "A case study in Confusion" because even though Nicodemus was highly educated in all things theological, yet he was terribly confused about the most fundamental question of all; Namely, how can a sinful man enter the kingdom of God.

### **4. What do we know about Nicodemus?**

We know that he was a Pharisee. That is, he was part of the governing council in Israel called the Sanhedrin.

We know that he was extremely religious and had a robust theological education. Implicit in this role as a member of the Sanhedrin was expectation of being highly educated. Nicodemus would have been from among such cultured and high-toned men as Gamaliel and Paul. He would have been viewed as a master theologian.

Unlike most of the other members of the council, however, Nicodemus (at least at some level) "believed" in Jesus. At the very least he had already concluded that Jesus has been sent from God. This put him in a rather dicey situation with much of the ruling counsel of the Jews. No doubt that's why he came to Jesus under cover of darkness.

Whatever belief in Jesus Nicodemus may have had it was apparently based on the miracles he had seen. He said, "*No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*"

Finally, as one of the guardians of O.T. ritualistic religion and tradition. Nicodemus' view of how a person gets into the kingdom of heaven would have been completely works-based. It would have been focused on when people can do to earn God's favor and appease His wrath.

5. This is who Nicodemus is. But in some respects his testimony is really not very different from the one I read to you at the beginning of this message. In that case the author's struggle focused on "was I sorry enough?", "Was I sincere enough?", "Did I surrender enough?", "Did I confess enough sin?" Beloved, I want to say this in all gentleness and sensitivity, but it needs to be said. This kind of thinking is the mentality of works-based righteousness. All of these questions represent a man-centered, works-based understanding of how sinners are reconciled to God. Is it any wonder that such thinking would lead to a lack of assurance? The problem is, no amount of righteous deeds can justify us in the eyes of God.

6. Nicodemus is our case study of confusion. And I am convinced these are the kinds of questions on his heart because of how Jesus (who knows the heart of every man) immediately responded. Knowing the confusion Nicodemus was experiencing, Jesus cuts right through all the verbal camouflage and teaches a profound lesson in spiritual conception.

## **II. A Lesson in Spiritual Conception (3)**

### **1. Read v. 3**

2. Jesus begins with "truly, truly." Some believe this was Jesus' way of countering Nicodemus' statement in verse 2, "We know that you are a teacher come from God." The emphasis is on "We know." In other words, "We are men of understanding and knowledge and spiritual insight." But Jesus cuts Him off. It's as if Jesus is saying, "You may be convinced that you know a lot, but the truth is - you don't know nearly as much as you think. You don't even understand the most basic of all spiritual truth." "Truly, Truly I say to you..."

of all spiritual truth. Truly, truly I say to you...

3. What is it that Nicodemus didn't know? He didn't know that the people who will enjoy entrance into the kingdom of God are *NOT* those who know the most, or who were most sincere, or most committed; those who impressed God with their long prayers, elaborate sacrifices, or great financial gifts. They won't be people who were sufficiently sorry for their sin or even publically repentant. In fact, being qualified to enter the kingdom of heaven has nothing at all with what a man does. It has everything to do with what God does. The only people who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who are "born again." "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

4. Now that was unexpected. I don't know what kind of counsel Nicodemus thought he would get out of Jesus that night, but it wasn't this! This was shocking. This was confusing. And it was probably a little offensive!

"Are you telling me that I may be lost? Are you saying that despite all my morality, all my prayer, all my fasting, and tithing, and Sabbath-keeping I may be one of those who are excluded from heaven and cast into hell? Why, I'm a son of Abraham!"

Jesus is saying that while all of that may be true, none of it merits entrance into the kingdom of God. None of it has the power to reconcile you with Holy God. All of it together will not justify you in the eyes of God. The only people who will have the joy of final and ultimate salvation are those who are "born again."

5. We need to understand here that the term "born again" means to be "born from above." Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth. He was speaking of a kind of *spiritual life* that is not something that can be attained or earned but something that can only be received.

6. The theological term for this is "regeneration." It is literally "a new genesis" or a new "beginning." We see this in 2 Cor. 5:17 when Paul speaks of salvation in terms of being made a "new creature" or new "creation." It harkens back to when God created the heavens and the earth and breathed into man the breath of life. It's creation language. Paul uses it again 2 Cor. 4:6 when he writes, "For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Think about it - "Let light shine out of darkness." What is that? It's creation language. It's a "new genesis" or "regeneration."

7. Do you remember how Paul spoke of salvation when he wrote to Titus? He said (Titus 3:5), "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

8. You see, the Scriptures consistently speak about essence of salvation not in terms of what man does but in terms of what God does. There must be a kind of spiritual conception that takes place. God must give new life. The sinner must be "born again."

9. But Nicodemus did not immediately get his head wrapped around all of this. He just couldn't understand what Jesus meant when he said "Unless one is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

10. So we have seen a case study in confusion; a lesson in spiritual conception; next we see...

### **III. A Request for Clarification (4)**

1. Read v. 4

2. Clearly Nicodemus was at a loss. He just could not grasp what Jesus was saying. I don't take his questions of Jesus here to be combative or sarcastic. I think he was simply engaging in the dialogue by ruling out the obvious. Whatever Jesus was saying one thing is sure: He certainly cannot be talking about physical rebirth. So Jesus makes his meaning clear.

3. Nicodemus' request for clarification leads to Jesus' stunning explanation.

### **IV. A Stunning Explanation (5-8)**

2. What does it mean to be “Born again”? Jesus’ explanation has three parts.
3. First, Jesus appeals to biblical truth that Nicodemus should have already known. Whatever “born again” means it is synonymous with being “born of water and the Spirit.” What does it mean to be born of water and spirit?

Some think this means physical birth and spiritual birth. Born of water would refer to natural birth while born of the spirit refers to spiritual birth. The problem with this view is that nowhere in Scripture do we find natural birth being described as “born of water.”

Some see this a pointing to baptism. But Nicodemus would have known nothing about Christian baptism. Furthermore, if baptism was the means of salvation, Jesus would not have avoided baptizing people. Rather, it would have been the focus of His ministry.

There are other views that are also suggested, but the important thing to realize is that Jesus expected to Nicodemus to understand what he was saying. He must have been thinking of some Scripture.

4. Turn with me to Ezekiel 36:24-27 (Read)

5. Here is a passage that Nicodemus would have known, and it shows that regeneration was an O.T. truth. It was not something that Jesus made up. What is regeneration? How does a person get “born again”? The point of this passage is that it is something only the H.S. can do. Regeneration happens when the H.S. comes and does something amazing in a person’s soul. It’s like having all your guilt and sin washed away, and it’s like having a spiritual heart transplant.

6. Consider Jesus’ next statement: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In other words, even if it were possible to experience physical birth all over again it wouldn’t help you. Human nature can only produce human nature. It can only generate flesh, but that’s not what sinners need. Sinners need something that they can only get from the H.S. Only He can impart a new nature. Only He can cause a person to be born again.

7. Finally, consider Jesus’ last statement: “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

8. Jesus is saying, “Stop being shocked by this! You should already understand it. The only hope for a sinner (such as yourself) to be reconciled to God is this: “*You must be born again.*”

9. And then a final illustration to drive the point home. How does one get “born again”? (v. 8) “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” In other words, regeneration is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. The wind cannot be controlled. It blows wherever it wishes. Its effects can be observed but it cannot be controlled. The same is true of the Spirit. His sovereign work of regeneration in the human heart cannot be controlled, manipulated, earned, or even predicted. But the effects of His work are easily seen through the transformed lives of those who He causes to be “born again.”

10. Do you want a good definition of regeneration? Here’s one from Dr. Wayne Grudem: “Regeneration is a secret act of God in which He imparts new spiritual life to us.” The apostle John makes this clear when in John 1:13 he describes God’s people as those “*who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*”

11. So you see beloved, assurance of salvation doesn’t come by asking yourself, “Was I sincere enough?”; “Was I sorry enough?”; “Did I confess enough?”; “Did I surrender enough?”; “Did I really mean it?” Do you see what the focus of all these statements is? “I”. “I”, “I”, “I”, and “I”. That’s why these are all the wrong questions. The answers is always dissatisfying because the questions never hit the mark.

12. When the question is whether or not you are “born again,” the answer is never about what *you* did. It’s always about what *God* did.

13. It’s impossible to tell what happened to Nicodemus after this encounter with Jesus. He may have left offended and unchanged. We just don’t know. Later on, however, when the Sanhedrin was trying to condemn Jesus without a trial (John 7:50), it was Nicodemus who reminded them that the law required evidence. Then later, after Jesus had paid the ultimate price on the cross a rich

that the law required evidence. Then, later, after Jesus had paid the ultimate price on the cross a Roman man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea received permission to take Jesus body away for burial. And when he brought the body to the tomb we learn of another man who arrived with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to make sure Jesus had an honorable burial. And do you know who that man was? John says (19:39) it was Nicodemus, the same one who had first come to Jesus by night.

14. What happened between that original conversation and the night of Jesus burial? All we can say is that perhaps the “wind” blew. Perhaps God in His infinite mercy caused Nicodemus to be “born again.”

15. Now you may be thinking, “Where does faith fit into this equation? That’s a good question, but this text was not written to answer that. It was written to stun us with the reality that God is absolutely sovereign over salvation.

16. How should we respond to this?

First, we should respond in humble worship. For a moment here, let Jesus push us completely out of the picture so that all we see is God. That’s where a true understanding of our salvation begins. That is the unshakable ground of assurance.

Second, we should repent. We should repent of our self-focused worship and self-righteous attitude about relating to God.

Third, some of you may be wondering, “If salvation is all God’s work does that mean I can’t do anything to get it?” That’s a good question. The reality is there is nothing you can do to **make** God save you. But you can ask. You can come to Him in all humility not to tell God that you accept Him but to ask if He would, purely in an act of undeserved grace, accept you.

**Becoming a child of God does not happen by saying a prayer or being more religious. It comes as a mysterious act of God where by the sheer impulse of His sovereign grace, causes sinners to be "born again."**