

## INTRODUCTION

The Apostle who wrote this gospel selected significant matters from the wealth of information he had about Jesus. He begins his record of Jesus' ministry by showing his concern for the Father's worship. Next, he records an incident where Jesus taught the first principles of the Kingdom of God - what a person needs in order to be part of it.

This is a conversation with someone who wanted to learn about heavenly things - but he did not understand what God was doing before his eyes!

Jesus taught him that is impossible to be part of God's kingdom without something happening first (verses 3-8). He also showed that God sent his Son to be our Saviour, and calls us to look to him for what we need (14-16). That consists of cleansing from sin ("water" 5), and renewal of the Holy Spirit ("Spirit" 5).

## WHAT WE NEED TO BE PART OF GOD'S KINGDOM

Nicodemus made two wrong assumptions - that Jesus was only a human rabbi (although God was obviously with him), and that the Jewish people were on their way to heaven (with the exception of gross sinners). People often assume that Jesus is just a religious teacher, and that they are in God's kingdom and on their way to heaven.

Jesus showed that both assumptions are false, and showed us the way forward.

We can understand why Nicodemus thought the way he did. God had made a covenant with Abraham to be his God and the God of his descendants. He had reiterated that in Moses' day. They had the prophets, the promises, and divine worship. On one level it was not surprising they took God's favour for granted.

It is easy for us to make the same mistake. Baptism symbolises union with Christ (and all that involves). Many people assume that baptism sets them on the road to heaven - that is not necessarily so. Britain used to be a Christian nation. Many people assumed that meant they really were Christian - not necessarily so. Many preachers (especially at funerals) say that God in his love saves everyone. Not so. Others assume they are on the way to heaven because they belong to a sound church - not true. People who think in those ways need to listen to what Jesus taught. It is harder to understand Nicodemus' view of Jesus. John the Baptist was well known in Jerusalem and had pointed to Jesus as the coming Messiah. In any case, both his false assumptions needed to be corrected.

Jesus shattered his assumptions by saying that people need to be "born again", or "born of water and of the Spirit" in order to be part of God's Kingdom. There has to be a fresh start. There has to be cleansing. There has to be a work of God's Holy Spirit giving life where there had been none before. These are different ways of looking at the same thing.

The reasons are not hard to find. The reality of the Fall is evident from the facts of trouble, death, sin, and forgiveness.

Humanity's estrangement from God is evident from: ways that are contrary to his ways; lack of love for God; guilt and fear. If we are not in sympathy with God we are not part of his kingdom but strangers. If we do not enjoy God's company here, how can we expect to spend eternity with him in heaven? If we do not share his character here, how can we expect to share his life hereafter? We need a new start - to be cleansed from sin and given the character of his children. That is why Jesus spoke about being born of water and of the Spirit.

He also spoke about himself as the Saviour God had sent – and that he would give the life and cleansing that we need.

## WHAT GOD PROVIDES

Jesus spoke about what God has done. He used an illustration from Old Testament history. The people of Israel had brought God's judgement on themselves and their encampment was invaded by poisonous snakes. When they prayed to God for mercy he ordered Moses to make a bronze snake, erect it where people could see, and tell them to look to the snake with the promise that God would heal them if they did. Jesus told Nicodemus that spiritual life and healing would result from Jesus being lifted up before the people and people believing in him. He would reconcile them to God. He would cleanse them from sin. And he would give them the Holy Spirit so they would share in the life of God's Kingdom.

He spoke about God sending a Saviour (verse 16-17). It is the greatest evidence of his love for us that he would not leave us to perish in our sin but send his Son to save us from it. We can think of that salvation in two ways, corresponding to the illustration he uses (of water and the Spirit) – being cleansed from the sin that disfigures us and alienates us from him, and receiving eternal life. Paul refers to it as “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”, but that is preceded by forgiveness through Christ. And that in turn is the result of what Christ did once for all at the cross.

Cleansing in the blood of Christ is a Biblical theme. It is illustrated in the Old Testament sacrifices where the shed blood led to forgiveness since the debt of sin had been paid (“Without the shedding of blood is no remission of sin – Hebrews 9:22). Isaiah spoke of God's Servant suffering the penalty of our sins and clearing the name of many as a result. This writer speaks of “the blood of Jesus God's Son cleansing us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). It explains why his crucifixion is at the heart of his work. This is the message that has brought spiritual freedom to many (see e.g. the Ethiopian eunuch – Acts 8:26-39). Forgiveness for Christ's sake is the basis of all God's saving work. It is something done for us – the rest is done in us.

A change takes place in a person's outlook and disposition when this “new birth” takes place. It is not an experience it is a change, although many people are conscious of the change taking place. A positive attitude toward God develops. That is seen e.g. in a desire to know him and sorrow that we have sinned against him. There is a new self-awareness that takes God's side against wrong in our heart or life – and as a result we confess our sin to him and ask him to save us from it. We want to do what is right and to please him. Christ Jesus takes on a new significance – we see him as the living Saviour we need and believe he is there for us – we welcome him and rely on him to do what we need. Often that begins when we see that he died for our sins.

This change of attitude is a moral cleansing, corresponding to the cleansing of forgiveness but taking place within ourselves. It is the beginning of a new nature – the very character of God as we see it in Christ Jesus. It happens as a result of something the Holy Spirit does deep within us – hence Jesus' comparison of the wind that we cannot see. It is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise that God would “put my law within them and write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33); “And I will put my Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:26).

Hence Jesus' comment about “born of water and of the Spirit”, and Paul's comment about “washing with water and renewing of the Holy Spirit”.

## CHRIST AND HIS BENEFITS ARE OFFERED FREELY

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus he used the illustration of the brazen serpent. The similarities are obvious – forgiveness of sin, and life in place of certain death. But there are others.

The remedy was free. There was no price – the invitation went out and anyone could make use of it. So it is with Christ. Salvation is free – we do not have to work for it, for it is God’s free gift. All they had to do was believe Moses’ word and act on it. So we have only to believe the gospel and look to Christ to save us.

The remedy was given to all and sundry. It was lifted up on a pole and made visible. Similarly Christ was lifted up on the cross, and his gospel has gone into all the earth so that anyone can make use of him.

Everyone bitten by the serpent was healed when they looked to the serpent of bronze that Moses had given them. Christ is faithful, and he will save every person who looks to him to do that – just as he did when he lived on earth.

Some people have read Christ’s teaching about the new birth in the worst possible light – as if they were to sit tight and wait for something that might never come. Christ was showing Nicodemus (and us) that he is the Saviour of sinners, and that he will do all that we need if we receive him. That is the first principle of God’s kingdom – “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.”