

Must I Be Born Again? Part 1 - John 3:1-15 - Jn07

The term “born-again” has become misused and misunderstood by the world today. So many people outside the church have a distorted view of the term “born-again,” don’t they? I recently heard a story of a father, who knows me personally, who warned his son not to get too involved with this very church because he was afraid his son would become some kind of “born-againer.” That’s one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard. Today, in John chapter 3, we’re going to find out what Jesus meant by the term “born-again.” And my prayer is that, in these two messages, some stereotypes might be crushed and some eternities might be changed as we answer the question, “Must I be Born-Again?” Let’s get started.

John 3:1 begins

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

There’s actually a flow of thought or contrast here from the “many” at the end of chapter 2, who had only superficial belief, to the one “Nicodemus,” who had a yearning to know God. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and also a member of the ruling party of the Sanhedrine, which made him like a “Super-Pharisee” like Paul. He was well respected. He was very influential. He was a teacher of Israel, a ruler of the Jews, and a very wealthy aristocrat. Nicodemus was so influential that the Jewish Talmud, a commentary on the Jewish laws called the Mishnah, actually mentions Nicodemus by name and refers to him as one of the richest men in Jerusalem. Clearly Nicodemus had reached great success in every area of his life, but there was still something missing, and somehow he sensed Jesus might know what it was. So on a quiet Jerusalem evening, He sought out Jesus Christ.

John 3:2

“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.”

Nicodemus had seen the signs that Jesus did, and they had spoken to him, so he searches for Jesus at night – probably at night for fear of “backlash” from his fellow Pharisees. And when Nicodemus finds Jesus, he approaches Him very respectfully with the title “Rabbi,” and he acknowledges that, clearly, Jesus had come from God. Now it appears Jesus ignores Nicodemus’s introduction, but He really doesn’t. Jesus is listening to Nicodemus’s heart – not his words – and He speaks directly to the heart of the matter in Nicodemus’s life, just like He does in our lives.

John 3:3

“Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly (*“verily, verily” in the King James*), I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The word translated “verily, verily,” in the King James, is same Greek word as “AMEN,” which is *Am-ane*. Jesus uses this term three times in this conversation, and it’s always used to put maximum emphasis on the statement that follows. It’s critical we understand who it is that Jesus is saying this to. Nicodemus was the best kind of person that good upbringing and good religion could ever produce. From an earthly point of view, he had mastered it all, and Jesus speaks very directly to him and simply says, “Unless you’re born again, your eternity is hopeless – period!”

Do you know someone who seems to have it all together? They've grown up with good morals, a good upbringing. They're a good person – moral, upright, and honest. They have a perfect home life, perfect reputation, and a perfect future laid out for them. That's who Nicodemus was. Here Jesus says to that person, "Unless you're born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God – period!" This term Jesus uses for "born again" is a great one because it can also be translated "born from above." In one Greek term, Jesus is saying, "You must be born again – and that, from above." The Rabbis had a saying at this time that went like this. "A proselyte who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child." All things are to be completely new and all old connections are to be destroyed. Nicodemus had a "frame of reference" from his Jewish teaching of "everything becoming new, of starting over." So the next comment by Nicodemus is not one of ignorance. It's one of frustration.

John 3:4

"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?""

This is Nicodemus crying out to Jesus, "HOW?" – not out of ignorance, but out of frustration from trying it on his own. How can a person truly have a "RE-BIRTH?" How can everything start over NEW? How can I really be born again? Nicodemus is saying, "If this is what it takes to see the kingdom of God, then how can I ever attain it? You might as well tell me to enter my mother's womb a second time." In other words, Nicodemus says, "I don't understand how it happens."

There's something very important to notice in Nicodemus's question. He asked the Lord "HOW," but he did not ask "WHY." He didn't say, "Why isn't my way good enough?" He didn't say, "Why can't I use some other way I heard about in college?" He simply said, "Please tell me how I can have this new-birth," and Jesus is going to tell him. But first, he's going to lay the foundation for Nicodemus and for us.

John 3:5

"Jesus answered, "Most assuredly (*"verily, verily"* [emphatic] in the King James), I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

This is one of those "fun" verses because it can be easily interpreted a number of ways, and because the word "water" is used to symbolize a number of different things in the New Testament. All I can say about that is, generally, the simplest and clearest interpretation is the best, and it's OK for water to be a symbol of a number of different things:

- Water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit;
- Water is a symbol of the Word of God; and
- Water is a symbol of the Repentance that John the Baptist preached.

All three of these things – Repentance, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit – each have a critical role in the miracle of being born-again. We must come with Repentance to God. We must be changed by the Word of God. We can't even receive this New Birth without the power of the Holy Spirit. But what's important here is to remember the context of this passage has only one clear M.I.P. (Most Important Point). That is, you must be born-again, or born from above, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. That is the M.I.P. The simplest interpretation of verse 5, that's most clearly part of the context, is that Jesus is simply referring to the natural birth. Not only must we be born naturally, but we must also be born of the Spirit, and this interpretation of

natural birth and spiritual birth of verse 5 is the one that fits perfectly with verse 6, as Jesus continues explaining this miracle to Nicodemus.

John 3:6

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

This is a perfect explanation of why we must be born again. Jesus simply says, “That which is born is of the same nature as that which gives it birth.” Everything reproduces after its own kind. It’s a natural law. How can we imagine that we, being born of the flesh, could ever change our very nature to the extent that we would be born of the Spirit? It’s impossible. We were born of the flesh, and IF that’s our only birth, then we will certainly die in the flesh. The Bible clearly says our flesh was conceived in the sin nature, destined for separation from God. Our best efforts in the flesh can never come close to bringing us new birth in the Spirit, and that’s why Jesus says in John 3:7:

John 3:7

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Flesh only conceives flesh, and flesh isn’t going to heaven. Only Spirit can conceive spirit, and spirit is what’s going to heaven. So “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” Jesus is going to explain what’s happening in Nicodemus’s heart and what happens in our hearts as we respond to the love of God.

John 3:8

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for “wind” and “Spirit” are the same, and this is a perfect example of what being “born again” looks like. We know the wind is real because we see its effects in the leaves on a tree. We don’t have to see the wind because we clearly see its effects. And when the Spirit of God blows through a life with the new birth from above, you can see the effects on that life. We don’t have to see the Spirit of God because we clearly see its effects on a person’s life who is born again.

Is the Spirit of God blowing in your life today? Can you see the effects of the Spirit of God in your life? If you’ve not yet been born again, then the effects of the Spirit are seen in your longing to know God. If you have been born-again, then the effects of the Spirit can be seen in the changes He’s made in you. And if you’ve been born-again but there doesn’t seem to be much change from the blowing of the Spirit in your life, then you probably need to move from the passing belief of the crowds in John chapter 2 to the longing to know God Nicodemus has in chapter 3. There’s a measurable effect of being truly born again, just as there’s a measurable effect of the wind blowing through the trees. In verse 9, Nicodemus continues to try to grasp this revelation.

John 3:9

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’”

The picture here is NOT of Nicodemus questioning whether this is true, but instead, saying, “How can these things become true in my own life? How can this be true for me?” Now Jesus kind of “puts him in his place” in verse 10.

John 3:10

“Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?””

The word translated “teacher” can actually be translated “great teacher” or “great master,” and this “great teacher” was in the middle of the greatest lesson of his life, but he was still on the wrong side of the “line-in-the-sand” that Jesus was drawing. There’s a day coming, at the beginning of eternity, when there will be only two groups of people – those who believe and those who don’t. That’s not a general statement. This is literally going to happen. Read Matthew 25:31 and fast forward to see the day Jesus divides the sheep and the goats. Nicodemus appears to still be on the wrong side of that decision. How about you? What side of that “line-in-the-sand” are you on? In verses 11-12, Jesus will challenge Nicodemus to make a choice by faith, and that’s exactly what each of us must do. We must make a choice to believe by faith.

John 3:11-12

“¹¹ Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

“Nicodemus, will you believe by faith – or not?” We can not be born-again by logic and understanding. This miracle comes only through believing by faith. But Jesus isn’t done revealing to Nicodemus who He is. Because of His great love, He continues to draw Nicodemus. In verses 13-15, Jesus drives home who He is and what hangs in the balance for Nicodemus, and He does it using an Old Testament scripture that Nicodemus had probably taught many times over. Jesus starts by introducing Himself. Then He perfectly conveys the New Testament plan of salvation through a prominent Old Testament scripture.

John 3:13-15

“¹³ No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Turn to Numbers 21. Israel was yet again committing their most common sin – the sin of unbelief.

Numbers 21:4-9

“⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged [impatient] on the way.

⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”

⁶ So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.”

⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”

This is a picture of a world dying in sin, and the cross of Jesus Christ raised up in its midst for salvation. Look at the picture of salvation in this text:

- 1) Sin brings death, as Israel’s sin brought the judgment of God;
- 2) They came to God in Repentance and asked to be saved;
- 3) The serpent is the symbol of sin, ever since the garden;
- 4) The Lord had Moses use a “likeness” of a serpent, and Romans 8:3 says that God sent His own son “in the likeness” of human flesh to condemn sin in the flesh;
- 5) Galatians 3:13 says that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us;
- 6) The likeness of the serpent was lifted up in their midst, just as Jesus Christ, bearing all of our sin, was lifted up on the cross; and
- 7) Most importantly, in verses 8-9, all the dying people had to do was look in faith to the bronze serpent. No matter how horribly or how many times they were bitten, no matter how sick they were with the disease of sin, the opportunity for salvation was there, and salvation came, not by them understanding the logic, but by simply believing God’s plan by faith.

Turn back to John 3:14-15

“¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

We know that Nicodemus became a believer because he came with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the Lord’s body, and his conversion is actually mentioned in the historical documents. I wonder if his salvation came when he saw Jesus raised up on the cross and all these truths came rushing back to him. Being Born-Again comes from believing by faith in the One who God raised up on the cross to take away the death sentence of sin. You’ve been bitten by the serpent of sin and, without a remedy, you will surely die. God has raised up the only remedy possible. His name is Jesus. Will you come to Him in repentance and ask Him to save you? If you would, then all you have to do is “look upon Him” and believe by faith that He is your only salvation.