

John 3:1-13

"You Must Be Born Again"

We come to Jn chapter 3 with great anticipation and baited expectation. Because the curtain draws back on this chapter to reveal to us one of the most famous (& I dare say, "insightful") scenes (concerning salvation) in all the N.T., as a man by the name of Nicodemus emerges out of the shadows to inquire of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God.

The curtain *closed* on Ch 2 with people believing in *Jesus*, but Jesus not believing in *them*. He had no faith in their faith; it was "fair-weather" superficial faith, and Jesus simply doesn't commit Himself to faith that's not truly committed to Him. You say, "Well, how did Jesus *know* they weren't truly committed to Him? Because (vs 24-25) He *knew* them and knew *what was in them*. Translation? Jesus knows what's really happening in the heart of any given person at any given moment. You say, "I thought only *God* knew what was happening in a person's heart?" Exactly. The Bible is clear (in no uncertain terms) that Jesus *is* God.

Nicodemus was (evidently) one of those "believers" who was impressed with Jesus in Ch 2, and in Ch 3 Jesus speaks into what's happening in his heart.

Vs 1-2

This is one of those scenes that you can see in your mind's eye. We're not told how (or by what means), but somehow, Nicodemus arranged to meet with Jesus one of those evenings He was in Jerusalem during the feast of unleavened bread that took place after Passover.

And we learn some things about Nicodemus here. The 1st thing John tells us is that he was a man of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were an "Elite" class of religious Jewish men who literally made it their life's sole ambition to study the law of God and uphold it (in a meticulous manner) in the most minute of details. They believed in angels/demons, the resurrection of the dead (unlike the Sadducees), and they numbered around 6,000 in total. They were very much all about rules, regulations, rituals, and rites... extremely legalistic.

We also learn that he was "a ruler" of the Jews. This tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a group of men (71 in total) who were comprised of incredibly important people (members of the high priest's family, scribes, elders, and such) who acted (for lack of a better term) as the Jewish Supreme Court. They were the men *Jesus* stood before at His trial when he was condemned to be crucified.

Later, in Vs 10, Jesus refers to him as “the teacher of Israel”. Not “a teacher”, “the teacher” (meaning that he was recognized as the top-tier teacher of their time in the nation).

He was religious, educated, earnest, influential, and generally insightful. We also know that he was incredibly wealthy. When Jesus was taken down from the cross, John tells us that Nicodemus provided 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes (which would’ve been extremely expensive).

And we read that this man came to Jesus by night... The question a lot of people wrestle with is, “Why?” Why did he come to Jesus at night? Did he have questions he would be embarrassed to ask in public? Was he afraid of what the other leaders might think if he were seen with Him? I suppose those kinds of things are plausible. But it could also be something as simple as He saw the multitudes around Jesus all day, all the time, he was incredibly busy during the day himself (teaching and ministering around the temple), and this was the only time he could have a meeting with Jesus that would be undistracted and uninterrupted.

I think the mention of “night” is intentional by John. Nicodemus is coming to the light, but as for now... he’s in the dark. Very religious, very sincere... but in the dark. He’s spiritually blind.

But, far from being afraid of the leaders, he seems to be coming to Jesus as a delegate (or representative) of the other leaders. Because he says, “Rabbi, *we* know (who’s represented by the word “we...”, is it the general consensus of the people, the current estimation of the leaders...) *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.” I’m just going to tell you that from Nicodemus’ perspective, he just gave Jesus an incredible compliment. He (as the top-tier teacher of Israel) called Him “Rabbi” (essentially saying, we’re alike in this way). He’s acknowledging Jesus as his equal.

The reason this is a big deal (for Nicodemus) is because Jesus was a carpenter. He spent His years working with His hands. Nicodemus spent *his* years in the meticulous study of the law, in the traditions of the elders. Surely Jesus couldn’t know the Word like Nicodemus. But what Nicodemus is about to realize is that though he begins his evaluation of Jesus with the words “*we know*,” by the time this conversation is over, he’s going to see there’s way more he *doesn’t* know, and that *he* is the one who is ignorant of the ways and word of God.

He thought he was complimenting Jesus, placing Him on the same level. But Jesus *isn't* on the same level. He's on another level altogether. He's "from above," and He's going to tell Nicodemus that he has to be "born from above" if he's ever to see the kingdom of God. Notice.

Vs 3

This is where Jesus starts getting to the heart of the matter. (As we say, the heart of the matter is always the... matter of the heart.) Now, there's application here that guys like me like to make & that is this. Nicodemus was a wealthy man, he was an educated man, he was an influential man, and he was a *religious* man. Yet there was something still lacking in his life & he knew it; he kinda starts buttering Jesus up, "We know that you're a teacher come from God..." so on and so forth. Jesus cuts to the chase and says, "I know why you're here, Nicodemus, and unless you're born again, you'll never see the kingdom of God."

Mick Jagger tries & he tries & he tries & he tries, he can't get no... no, no, no. Bono (U2) still hasn't found what he's looking for... It's the age-old mystery of the emptiness of the human heart that no matter what I do, how much I accomplish, the pinnacle of success that I reach, nothing seems to fill it. *I'm a good person. I don't smoke, don't chew, don't hang out with those who do. What am I missing? Jesus comes along, brushes the debris aside, and speaks straight to the heart, "The answer will never be found in the pursuits, the accomplishments, the fame, or fortune of this world. You have to be born again. You're trying to fill a spiritual void with material substance, an eternal ache with a temporary fix."*

Listen, all that's true, and it may be why (at least in part) Nicodemus is there. But it seems to me that at its root, Nicodemus wanted to talk to Jesus about the Kingdom of God. He may not have even been *thinking* of his personal lack. After all, he was a Jew, the offspring of Abraham. *A child of the promise. He was a Pharisee, a member of the elite ruling class. He was the teacher of teachers in Israel... I'm sure he could see how others would need some change... but if anyone is where they need to be (Nicodemus' mindset would more than likely be), it's me!*

Let's remember, there's an overarching context to all of this. J.B. had been preaching for a while now. His message? *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"*¹ When Jesus began His public ministry (several months before this), He began to preach and say, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*²

¹ The New King James Version (Mt 3:2). (1982). Thomas Nelson.

² The New King James Version (Mt 4:17). (1982). Thomas Nelson.

Here's Jesus beginning to manifest "messianic fingerprints" (if you'll allow the term). He's performing miracles, healing the sick... The Jews were looking for the Messiah to lead a revolt to overthrow Rome and establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Nicodemus may've been sent to inquire of Jesus and seek Him out on that level. "Is there anything in the works, a revolution against Rome on the way, what role should we play???" Jesus cuts him off and says, "You want to talk to Me about *establishing* the kingdom? I'm telling you, that you won't even *see* the kingdom unless you're born again." (Maybe your Bible says, "born from above." Same concept, given a new nature by the Spirit of God).

Jesus is shattering the assumption that the Jew is automatically saved because they're of the offspring of Abraham. Salvation isn't tethered to ethnicity, or family, or any kind of physicality. Jesus will make it real plain; it's not being born physically that assures them their place in the kingdom of God. It's being born *again* spiritually.

Jesus wasn't there to usher in a new world. He was there to bring new life. Nicodemus knew a lot about Scripture (& that's a good thing), but it wasn't learning that he needed... it was life. He didn't need more *information*; it wasn't about *reformation*. He needed to be made a *new creation*... to experience *regeneration*.

It's true that to belong to the kingdom of God, you have to be "born into it." But not by blood (a certain ethnicity or human family), nor by following a set of rules meticulously (through trying hard enough), but by the Spirit of God. We can't do this for ourselves any more than we can be born physically by ourselves. We're brought passively into this life. Even so, it's the work of God (through J.C.) that gives us *new* life.

Jesus says, "You acknowledge My mission, admire My miracles, that's not enough. You need to receive My *message*. You have to be born again

Vs 4

Nicodemus isn't arguing about what *needs* to happen, but rather, how *can* it happen. He's thinking of being morally reformed; Jesus is speaking of being spiritually *transformed*. So, he's just not connecting the dots. And we shouldn't expect him to. He's not *born again*. He's a "natural" (that is, unregenerate) man. Paul the apostle wrote to the Corinthians, "...the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."³

³ The New King James Version (1 Co 2:14). (1982). Thomas Nelson.

So he's trying to comprehend a spiritual matter with natural reasoning, and it can't be done. He's thinking along the lines of, "How can an old man start all over? It's not like I can re-enter my mother's womb and try again." He's telling Jesus, "I'm not picking up what you're putting down. I don't understand what You're talking about."

Vs 5-8

You might take note of how many times Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you..." Jesus isn't playing games with this. He's telling you... (He's telling me, matter-of-factly). If we're not born again, *we will not enter, we cannot enter* the kingdom of God.

I can't emphasize it enough. It's not about being religious, it's not about doing better, it's not about turning over a new leaf, it's not about trying harder. It's not in reading your Bible more, never missing a Sunday, praying all the time. It's not about anything *you do*. It's about receiving and believing (trusting in, relying on) what Jesus has *done*. **Somehow, and in some way, when you believe, a transaction takes place between you and God & you are translated from darkness into light, from death to life. You say, "I don't understand that." You don't *have* to understand it to be blessed *by* it and benefit *from* it! That's what Jesus tells Nicodemus right here (though I'm a little ahead of myself).**

Now. There is a lot of confusion that surrounds the words, "unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." What did Jesus mean by "the water"? There are a few thoughts on this. The one I reject emphatically is that He was talking about water baptism. **That's nowhere in the text; it's not found w/in the context, and it doesn't agree with the rest of Scripture that teaches that we're saved by grace through faith alone. If baptism is necessary for salvation, then it's not in Christ alone; it's also contingent upon some work of mine, which Scripture thoroughly and resolutely rejects.**

It's plausible that Jesus is speaking of how the Spirit of God takes the Word of God and imparts the life of God when a person believes. (The Bible speaks of the water of the Word & being born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever. Eph 5:26, 1 Pet 1:23).

Some say Jesus is saying, "Unless one is born of water, even the Spirit," pointing to the cleansing of the water as a euphemism for the work of God's Spirit in our lives. This carries quite a bit of weight considering Jesus will chide Nicodemus for not knowing this. The words of Ezekiel should've been drawn to his mind when Jesus said this. Ezekiel 36.

*"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them."*⁴

It's also possible that Jesus is simply saying, "Physical birth isn't enough, you've got to experience spiritual birth as well." Contrasting natural birth with supernatural birth. We all come forth from water. When you're born, the water breaks, and you enter this world.

But just being born doesn't get you to heaven. The world would have you think that. Just live how you want & in the end we'll all be in heaven. I wish I could tell you that was true... It's not. I'm sure most of you have heard the old expression. "Born once, die twice. Born twice, die once." We've got to be "born again" of the Spirit of God.

The reason I think this perspective on the text carries weight is that the entire context is Jesus contrasting the physical with the spiritual. Nicodemus brings up the re-entering the womb (albeit probably tongue-in-cheek). Jesus says, "That's not enough, even if you could. That which is born of the flesh is flesh... that which is born of the *Spirit* is spirit." Regardless of exactly what Jesus is saying, His meaning is plain enough. We need to experience the inward work of regeneration by the *Spirit* of God, or we'll never see the *kingdom* of God.

...Now, I'm not sure if Nicodemus' mouth was gaping open, or if he was standing there in a state of shock... maybe an "I'm so confused" expression on his face. But it was obvious to Jesus that he wasn't tracking. So Jesus says, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" He was "marveling" because (as I mentioned earlier) the Jews (especially these "elite", above and beyond religious Pharisees) thought they were good. No change needed (kind of a thing).

But this circles back to what I was telling earlier (when I got ahead of myself). "Nicodemus, you don't have to *understand* everything I'm telling you. You *do* have to *believe* everything I'm telling you." You don't understand everything about the wind, where it comes from, where it's going. It seems to move indiscriminately. But you can certainly experience it, see the effects of it. You can feel it, see the leaves rustling... Again, in my mind, there's a gentle breeze blowing that evening. Nicodemus is like, "I don't understand."

⁴ *The New King James Version* (Eze 36:25-27). (1982). Thomas Nelson.

Jesus, gesturing toward the wind. “You don’t understand the wind either (a natural illustration). But that doesn’t stop you from being blessed by it, receiving from it. Being born again isn’t something you have to understand intellectually; it’s something you need to undergo experientially.

Even with this illustration of the wind, Nicodemus should’ve been taken back to Ezekiel 37. The valley of dry bones. The Lord said to him, “Prophecy to the wind, breathe on these slain, that they may live.” (The *Spirit* of God, bringing new life to the *people* of God).

Vs 9-13

And with that, Jesus has set the stage to drop the gospel right in Nicodemus’ lap (which we’ll see next time). But first, He rebukes him for not even being able to grasp this principle of transformation that He’s communicating with him. He says, “Are you *the* teacher of Israel, and you don’t know these things? Nick! The scriptures are clear that the *kingdom* of God will be marked by regeneration, newness of life through the *Spirit* of God... how can you not understand this? You’re the top-tier teacher of Israel!

It's crazy that there are professors of theology, can quote scripture readily, but they don't understand the simple truth of the gospel. It's not novel to the N.T. The O.T. speaks of God dealing w/the heart of man and that God desires to change us from the inside out... It's so easy to concern ourselves with rites, rituals, ceremonies, and sacraments. God's concerned with what's happening in our hearts...

Now. We’ve spent about 40 minutes or so developing this. If you read it, it takes less than a minute. Nicodemus began with “*We* know...” He was speaking to Jesus about His mission and His miracles. In Vs 11, Jesus says, “I’m telling what *we* (perhaps motioning toward His disciples) know...” (He’s speaking of the *message*.).

“You’re confused, Nick... I’m telling you, *we know* what we’re talking about. If I’m talking to you about earthly things (water, wind, etc.) & you can’t connect the dots. How are you going to fare (believe) if I tell you of *heavenly* things... (redemption, the cross, transformation by grace through faith, new life)” Wow. Close

Jesus says, “I’m talking to you out of personal experience, Nicodemus. I’ve been *in* heaven, I’ve come *from* heaven. I’m the only Person on the planet truly qualified to talk to you *about* heaven.” Isn’t that a radical statement? He says, “We’re telling you what we know, what we’ve experienced & seen.” (A reference to those who are born of the Spirit).

Lots of people have lots of ideas about how to get *to* heaven. Wise is the one who will believe the words of the One who came *from* heaven.

But if you can hear everything I'm saying, everything Jesus has said, and still see no need for regeneration, for spiritual (inward) transformation, what more can be said? That's what Jesus is saying. "If you don't believe Me when I'm telling you this, there's nothing more I can say." You *must be* born again. If you *have* been, praise God. If you *haven't* been, believe on the Lord J.C. today, and you will be. Right here, right now.

Prayer Points:

God, we thank You for Your Word. For Your Son J.C., who has loved us, and given Himself for us. May we be the salt and the light that this dark world needs, that many might be drawn to You, changed *by* You, and made new.

If today is the day for you, don't delay. Turn from your sin, trust in J.C. and you will be forgiven of all your sin, transformed from the inside out, and made new... Born again by the Spirit of God.