

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

FEBRUARY 11TH - 12TH, 2023 // GOSPEL OF JOHN

BORN OF THE SPIRIT (JOHN 3:1-8)

At this point in John's narrative, Jesus has "gone public" with His ministry.

- During the Passover feast in the city of Jerusalem, many believed in His name as a result of the signs and miracles He performed (2:23).
- But not everyone who "believed" in Jesus was a wholehearted, committed disciple: Jesus knew the true state of every heart that claimed to trust in Him (2:24-25).

With the growing popularity of Jesus came attention and scrutiny from the religious leaders of the day.

- The Pharisees ("separated ones") were a religiously conservative Jewish group dedicated to preserving the purity of Jewish worship, identity, morality, and spiritual practice.
- One Pharisee named Nicodemus (who was also a member of the Sanhedrin) came to Jesus by night to speak with Him (vs. 1).

Nicodemus probably didn't come at night because he was embarrassed to be seen with Jesus—the evening hours were typically when Rabbis would discuss spiritual matters together.

- Nicodemus seems to come to Jesus with a sincerity and a genuine earnestness; he'd seen the signs Jesus performed and knew that Jesus had to have come from God (vs. 2).

Nicodemus, in a way, represents all the best and highest parts of humanity and human achievement:

- He's exceptionally religious and moral (leader of the Pharisees).
- He's educated (Nicodemus is a Greek name).
- He's influential and powerful.
- He's successful.

- And yet, Jesus "answers" Nicodemus's opening statement in a shocking and bizarre manner.

"...UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (3:3).

It's almost as if Jesus is perceiving the real intent behind this meeting and Nicodemus' words.

- It's as if Jesus is really answering the question he doesn't know how to ask yet: "How do we find God? How do we find reality, meaning, and redemption in this life? What does it take to get God's favor and gain eternal life?"

Many Jews believed that entering into the Kingdom of the Messiah was assured by their birth (their racial identity or religious pedigree)—but Jesus shattered that notion.

- Others believed that they must do a religious work to reform their life, cleanse their soul, or earn a place in the Kingdom—but being born isn't something we do, it's something that happens to us!

- Nicodemus is genuinely perplexed—how can someone be born a second time (vs. 4)?

Jesus' answer is, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (vs. 5).

- Being "born of the Spirit" is easily interpreted—to enter into God's Kingdom, we must enter into a spiritual new life that only the Holy Spirit can produce.
- But being "born of water"? What's that all about?
- Some have said this is a reference to baptism.

Another interpretation is that "born of water" refers to physical birth.

- Unborn babies float in a sack of amniotic fluid for nine months.
- When the time for birth arrives, that sack of "water" bursts, and the baby is born in a rush of water, entering a new world and new family.
- Jesus is drawing a parallel between a physical reality and a spiritual truth (vs. 6).

The other interpretation is that being "born of water" refers to spiritual cleansing.

- Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, would have naturally understood it that way (Ezekiel 36:25).
- Throughout the OT, water is used figuratively for spiritual cleansing.
- When Jesus made this claim, He was referring to humanity's need for spiritual cleansing.
- We all have the same spiritual problem.
- Our greatest spiritual problem can't be remedied by religion, moralism, education, success, or achievement.
- We must all be completely reborn spiritually into a new kind of life as a new kind of creation.
- This is an amazing mystery of being "born of the Spirit" we may not immediately understand, but we can see its influence and result like wind that blows (vs. 7-8).

FOR GOD SO LOVED... (JOHN 3:9-17)

"HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?" (VS. 9)

Nicodemus is confused—if his religion, moralism, and hard work couldn't earn him a spot in the Kingdom, who even could be saved?

- Jesus lovingly pushes back on Nicodemus, reminding him that as a teacher of Israel, he should at least be familiar with these ideas.
- Nicodemus should've recognized the need for and the promise of a new birth.

"And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." –Ezekiel 11:19

- "...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." –Jeremiah 31:33

Just looking at earthly things should've made the point clear to Nicodemus. If he couldn't see that he needed spiritual transformation, what more could Jesus tell him (vs. 11-12)?

- Since it was only Jesus who had been in Heaven before coming to earth, He spoke on these matters with great authority (vs. 13).
- The One from Heaven knew what it took to see and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus then references a story from Numbers 21 to illustrate how the new birth takes place.

- As the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they rebelled against God and were punished—God sent fiery serpents that bit the people, and many died.

- When the people repented, God told Moses to make a brass serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see.

Anyone who looked at the serpent lifted up on the pole would immediately be healed.

- How were the people saved, healed, and made new in Numbers 21?
- Not by performing religious works, but simply by looking in faith to the salvation God provided.
- In the same way, those who look to the Son of Man, who will be "lifted up," will have eternal life (vs. 14-15).

"FOR GOD LOVED THE WORLD IN THIS WAY..."

Any Jewish leader would've deeply bristled at the idea of God loving the world: they knew God loved Israel...but the world?

- This offer of salvation and life in Jesus extends to all people in all places of all walks of life.
- God doesn't just say that He loves the world; he demonstrates His love for the world in a profound and meaningful way.

"...HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON..."

The death of Jesus, the very son of God, in our place is proof that God loves us.

- His love for us required the substitution of Jesus in our place.
- "...so that everyone who believes in Him..."
- No one in the world receives or benefits from the love of God the Father until they believe ("trust in, rely on, cling to") in Jesus the Son.

"WILL NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE..."

God's love saves us from eternal destruction and judgment.

- We can have eternal life and experience the new birth by looking to Jesus in faith.
- God's work in sending Jesus was not to condemn the world, but to save the world from condemnation (vs. 17).
- Does this passage move me in any way?

PEOPLE LOVED DARKNESS (JOHN 3:18-21)

Jesus came to bring salvation, not condemnation.

- But those who reject that salvation, in a sense, condemn themselves (vs. 18).
- The responsibility for their condemnation is not on God; it's on them for refusing to accept the free gift of salvation that God provided at a great cost to Himself.
- What is it that keeps people from placing faith in Jesus and experiencing salvation and rebirth?

For most people, it's not that there is insufficient evidence to convince them that there is a God and Jesus is Lord.

- It is that if God does exist and Jesus is Lord, He'll probably have a say in how we are to live our lives.
- The main obstacle in someone "seeing the light" isn't intellectual: it's simply that ungenerate humanity is in love with darkness and evil.

"The light has come...but the people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil."

- The central sin of humanity is that we all have rejected God's rule and declared ourselves and our desires to be god in our lives.
- Humanity not only willingly and proudly commits sin that we know deep down to be wrong and against God's law (Rom. 1:32a), but we encourage, applaud, and give approval to others who also live sinful lives.

All of us will have different manifestations of the same central problem, and that is we want our way, desires, and will over God's.

- Even though this way of living a lifestyle of "evil deeds" is absolute and total darkness, there's a part of our hearts that loves this darkness.
- This is why many people avoid Christ, Christianity, and Church altogether.

Many are simply afraid the light will expose their deeds, which they love, and have no intention of giving up (vs. 20).

- Those who live by the truth come to the light: Jesus is speaking of those who walk in the truth of God and live by the light of God's Spirit (vs. 21).
- People walking in the light show that their works are "accomplished by God": that it's only God's work that changes us from darkness to light.

If you're walking in darkness, in love with your own evil deeds, and completely disinterested in God and the things of God, you can't do anything to fix or save yourself from the darkness.

- It takes a supernatural work of the Spirit of God to draw you to the light of God, soften your heart, transform you from the inside out, and create you into a person who does good works.

The only way for you to be born again into the Kingdom is for the Spirit of God to do it all!

- If you're not a Christian, you won't and you can't become one by work, effort, ability, or sacrifice.
- But you can pray for God to send His Spirit like the wind and blow through your dead heart and make you alive.
- You can look to the One who was lifted up on the cross on your behalf and be saved.

OBSTACLE #1: SKEPTICISM.

- Many trip over the claims of Jesus in John 3 because they're far too skeptical that it could be so simple. Religion and moralism seem far safer and more easily managed than surrendering to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit by placing faith in Christ.
- Will you have faith and believe in the Son of Man?

OBSTACLE #2: SIN.

- Others don't come into the light of Jesus simply because they don't want to give up their sin.
- Many who claim deep philosophical or intellectual issues with the Christian gospel simply are in love with their sin and don't want to face a God who will judge their sin and hold them accountable. Will you come into agreement with what God says about your sin?

OBSTACLE #3: SELF-RELIANCE.

- Still others can't stomach the thought of starting over "at the bottom" of the Kingdom by becoming a newborn all over again. Self-reliant pride, arrogance, and love of recognition/admiration will keep many from seeing the Kingdom of Heaven. Will you dare to believe that in the Kingdom the "first will be last," and the "greatest will be the least"?