

# How can I enter the kingdom of God?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 01 January 2023

Preacher: Michael Lin

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Numbers chapter 21 verses 1 to 9. When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, if you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And the Lord obeyed the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites and they devoted them and their cities to destruction.

So the name of the place was called Horema. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go round the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.

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 we loathe this worthless food.

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

[ 1 : 1 5 ] Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who's bitten when he sees it shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. So the second reading is from John chapter 2 verse 23 to 3 verse 21, which is on page 1070 of the Church Bibles.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man.

For he himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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. Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[ 2 : 3 9 ] 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? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[ 3 : 5 5 ] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

John, Philip, thank you very much for reading. Let me add my welcome. My name is Michael Lynn, as John said, and I'm a member of this congregation here. Please do keep your Bibles open. We're going to go to a few other passages today, so not just in John chapter 3. So it would be really helpful if you could just keep a finger by this passage and be ready to sort of flip with me to one or two other places as we go along.

[ 5 : 12 ] Well, today is the first of 2023. I think I got that right, have I? 2023? Good. Let me also add my welcome and also be the first to wish you a very happy New Year.

Now my guess is that many of us have spent time with family over the Christmas and New Year, and in the process we may have overindulged a little in food or drink or leisure or sleep.

Whatever it is. My hunch is that many of us, one thing we probably spent far less quality time on would be in God's Word. So really my big prayer for us today is that we start 2023 afresh, on the right foot, and we need a big view of Jesus.

And we just want to see how great, how loving, and how utterly glorious he is. So to that end, let me pray. Father, thank you for the great blessings that you've given us in 2022.

Please, would you magnify your Son now, and please may we see the depth that he went to for our salvation, and see just how glorious, how wonderful he is, and see afresh why he is worthy of our praise for his sake.

[ 6 : 38 ] Amen. Well, I wonder what your ambitions are for 2023 are. And really, in order to realize those ambitions, what are some of the key questions that we need to ask ourselves?

Perhaps it's a purchase of a new bike, or a new car, or a new house, in which case the question might be how much money we need. Or perhaps, rather than purchase us, in the sort of the climate of ever-increasing cost of living, the name of the game is saving.

In which case, what is a realistic monthly budget to stick to? Perhaps we're eyeing up a new job or career, like John. In which case, the question might be how might your CV stand out from the crowd?

Or perhaps you're anticipating a new member of the family. How exciting. In which case, firstly, let me be the first to congratulate you. But the question might be how might you best prepare for his or her arrival?

Well, whatever it is, I'm going to suggest that the most important ambition we can possibly have is for our eternity. Yes, it's a big ambition, our eternity, but that is what the scriptures demand from us.

[ 7 : 59 ] And how we respond to this passage may well determine how we spend our eternity. So the stakes really could not be any higher. So therefore, the most important question you or I could ask is how can we enter the kingdom of God?

How can you, how can me or anyone enter heaven? Well, let's dig in. And our passage here in John 3, we're effectively eavesdropping at an extraordinary conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

And now for a bit of context, our passage follows on from the wedding in Cana where Jesus turned water into wine. And also at Jerusalem where Jesus cleansed the temple. And the Apostle John's shorthand for these things that Jesus did were called signs.

We have it here in our passage in 223. Look down with me at the bottom of page, I think, 1070 in my Bible. Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

And just before, in chapter 2, verse 11, after Jesus turned water into wine, John recorded this first of the signs that Jesus did at Cana in Galilee.

[ 9 : 15 ] And manifested his glory and the disciples believed in him. But the trouble is, people saw these signs of Jesus and they were attracted to him and his teaching.

But they didn't really understand the significance of what they saw. They weren't seeing who Jesus really is and what this meant for them. And it's no wonder then that in verse 24, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Jesus knew what was in a person's hearts, minds, and actions. And it's not pretty. It's not pure. He knew what was in man. And immediately enter Nicodemus, chapter 3, verse 1.

Now there was a man. Now remember the chapter and verse numbers and the headings are not inspired text and wasn't in the original. So it's meant to follow on and it's not to be treated as a different passage.

So let's go back to Nicodemus. So we learn that he's a Pharisee. He's a ruler of the Jews. And he's an esteemed member of the religious elite, if you like. Which means he's well-versed in the scriptures.

[ 10 : 32 ] He teaches it and tries to live faithfully by it. And in many ways, he represents Israel. He represents the old covenant. Now others look to Nicodemus and think, he's probably as holy as they get.

If anyone can get into heaven, he can. Yet put him side by side next to Jesus, what is he? He's just a man. And Jesus knew what was in man.

So it's no surprise then that Nicodemus acted exactly as a man would. Verse 2. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a great teacher come from God.

And no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Nicodemus saw the signs that Jesus did. But he came to Jesus under the cloak of night, trying to figure out who Jesus was, but didn't really want others to know about it.

And then in verse 3, Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you. Now, notice a couple of things here. A, Jesus answered Nicodemus without Nicodemus actually asking a question.

[ 11 : 46 ] And B, whenever Jesus says, truly, truly, I say to you, it's as if Jesus shouted into a megaphone, This is important. Listen up. What I'm about to tell you is more important than anything else in your life.

Drop everything. If you only know one thing, know this. So truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Like many others, what Nicodemus saw were the signs. But the one thing he really needed to know, the only thing that is important, was how to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And to do that, you need to be born again. I wonder if you noticed that. You need to be born again. But how could that be possible?

Well, same question that Nicodemus asked. Verse 4. How can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

[ 12 : 55 ] It is, after all, physically impossible. But that's precisely the point. By human effort, it is impossible. And that's part one of the answer here.

It's not through human effort. Not through human effort. We don't get to see the kingdom of God by our own steam. It can't be done. Nicodemus was supposed to represent the best of Israel.

But even he didn't get it. And now see Jesus' response from verse 5. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Now, I don't know very much about childbirth. I've obviously not experienced it or seen it from the side.

[ 14 : 00 ] But I understand that during childbirth, it's 100% the mother's effort, baby's effort, zero. I see nodding heads. I'm on the right track.

Good. And just like our first birth, we contribute nothing to being born a second time. Therefore, because it's humanly impossible, the second birth can't be of this world.

It has to be from above. The second birth is a spiritual birth. God has to do it. Now, notice Nicodemus, sorry, notice Jesus talked about being born of water and spirit.

Now, these are recurring Old Testament themes that Nicodemus should have picked up immediately for someone of his position. And one place to go to is Ezekiel 36.

I've put Ezekiel 36 there on screen and in the service sheet. Ezekiel 36, verse 25. Verse 25.

[ 15 : 05 ] I will sprinkle clean water on you. You shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols, I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give your heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Now, Israel's history is marked by a pattern of their rebellion and God's grace. Despite all their privileges, Israel could never do it. yet somehow, God promised that he would save his people from destruction. He will give him a spiritual cleansing. He will forgive their sins symbolized by the washing of water. And he will give them a new heart, a new spirit. His spirit, literally, a new life.

And is it any wonder that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones follows straight after God's promise of a miraculous spirit-filled rebirth? That's in chapter 37.

[16:21] It's a striking image, a valley full of dry bones, not a drop of moisture in them. Yet as God's word was proclaimed to them, sinew began building on bone and then layers of flesh and then finally topped with skin until they were remade into human beings.

They laid lifeless, though, until God's breath or spirit was breathed into them. And finally, they were brought to life and formed an exceedingly great army.

We haven't got time to go to that today, but do look at that in your own time. Effectively, what it does mean is it's death with no hope to life.

It's a visceral picture of rebirth. Yet that's exactly what is happening with every human being on the planet. Without rebirth, we simply remain spiritually dead without hope.

None of us can see, let alone enter, the kingdom of God. Rebirth means a brand new start. It means God cleanses our past by forgiving our sins and the spirit dwells in us so our future is secure.

[17:33] Death to life, a totally fresh start. start. And notice the spirit is sovereign. We can't control the work of the spirit, but we can see the effects.

Back in John. Just as we sense the wind blows, we can feel the effects of a spirit-born person. We've seen that in Philippians, haven't we, recently?

And that's something that really struck me, personally. It's having that gospel partnership, that mindset, that radical living, striving side by side with other Christians for the sake of the gospel. It's living in a way that others can't help but notice something different about us, what we think, what we say, what we do, all pointing to Jesus. The spirit is at work in a spirit-born person, but the rebirth can't be done through our own efforts.

So how then can anyone enter the kingdom of God? Well, that leads us to part two of the answer. We can only enter heaven through God's one and only lifted up son.

[18:43] Through his lifted up son. Now see with me, back in John, chapter three, verse nine. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be?

Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In many ways, Nicodemus represented Israel in the old covenant and here, throughout John's gospel, Jesus shows us that the old religious establishment is broken.

Israel's failure has shown that man can't do it by himself. There has to be a new covenant. And here, we need to understand two key Old Testament references, one in Daniel and one in Numbers.

[19:58] So, back to our fingers again. So, in Daniel 7, Daniel 7, you'll find it on page 900, verse 13 to 14, the son of man.

The son of man is described as someone who came with the clouds of heaven and ultimately given authority, glory, and sovereign power for all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. The son of man then is not just a man, he's not just a man, he is the man, he is humanity perfected, the sinless one to finally reconcile God and humanity and to rule everything. A second reference is from our first reading which John read for us, it's back in Numbers 21. And it's a rather sort of bizarre episode in the wilderness.

God brought the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt, he defeated her enemies, provided for them and sustained them, but Israel kept on sinning and complaining. In verse 4, we find out from Mount Hor, they set out by the way of this Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way, and the people spoke against God and against Moses, why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

[ 21 : 36 ] For there's no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among them people, and they bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died.

And 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 to the people, and the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

In God's righteous judgment, he sent a plague of poisonous snakes upon them, and whoever got bitten would die. Yet God provided a single way, a single means by which people can be forgiven and live.

Moses had to make this bronze serpent as a symbol, so that the very thing that was killing them was lifted up, put on display for all to see. that thing took the judgment, so whoever repented and looked on that bizarre symbol might be forgiven and live.

[ 22 : 52 ] This is a foreshadow of Jesus on the cross. Jesus, the son of man, the man, the sinless one, the one who was given all authority, glory, and power, he was nailed to a cruel wooden cross, lifted up for the world to see.

He became the ultimate symbol of Roman humiliation and abject shame. He bore the sin of the world unto himself. The very thing that's killing the world, sin, our deadly venom, was put on Jesus. He took our judgment, so that whoever repents and looks to him may have their sins forgiven and live. By ourselves, we can't be born again.

We can't see this kingdom of God. But God, in his great love for us, provided a way, the only way, by which anyone can be spared of his righteous wrath and live.

So therefore, the lifted up son is the gate to new life in Ezekiel's vision. The lifted up son is the king of kings that Daniel saw. And the lifted up son is the foreshadowed salvation in the book of Numbers.

[ 24 : 04 ] repentance. Repentance and belief in the lifted up son is the only way to be reborn. He is the only way to enter heaven.

There's no other way. If there was, God would have done it. It was his son. It had to be that way. And so, this is the new covenant then, back in John verse 16.

It's probably the best known passage in the entire Bible. Martin Luther once called it the gospel in miniature. This is how much God loved us.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. And then continuing verse 17.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he is not believed in the name of the only son of God.

[ 25 : 15 ] Without God all of us remain spiritually dead. Yet, in his great mercy God loved us so much that he gave his only son his precious son that though he was without sin he became sin for us and died a shameful death on a cross.

So that whoever repents and believes in him the condemnation they deserve fell on Jesus. They are cleansed and forgiven. The old self is dead the new is born.

The Holy Spirit dwells in them and the initial stages of eternal life begins. Those who repent and believe in Jesus not only see the kingdom of God but may enter it.

They are welcomed into God's family adopted as his children. and may forever enjoy the stunning privilege of dwelling in his glory. That is how much God loves.

It is utterly utterly mind-blowing. It is utterly utterly glorious. So in a way the obvious question it leaves us with is so what?

[ 26 : 33 ] what now? And what of Nicodemus? Was he saved or not? Well in a way that question is left hanging and John's question really is much much wider than just Nicodemus' salvation.

It is really a question for us the reader to everyone to respond. Are we born again? it is as if the creator of the universe himself is writing you an invitation.

You are cordially invited to enter heaven. All you need to do is accept. And we can choose by believing in Jesus or rejecting him.

But the choices are binary. Reject Jesus life is meaningless. We stay condemned and we perish. But believe in Jesus we are saved.

Life is full of purpose and eternal life begins. The stakes cannot be any higher. But wonderfully it's so simple a child could understand.

[ 27 : 43 ] And I suppose the most obvious implication is to those who are yet to put their trust in Jesus. In which case may I say that the gospel is an invitation that is wonderfully inclusive.

Whoever believes in Jesus whoever believes in Jesus is no longer condemned and should not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus' invitation is for absolutely everyone. You simply need to accept the invitation. If you sat on the fence for a while or if you're looking in on the Christian faith what might you be waiting for? Perhaps you're looking for a sign perhaps you think you're not good enough yet? And Nicodemus saw the signs that Jesus has done and he tried to earn his salvation his whole life but what he needed was simply to believe in Jesus.

So why not resolve to make accepting and following Jesus your top priority for 2023? 23? If you listen to this and that's what you want to do why not tell a neighbor here or to a friend or family who brought you here or to John or myself we'd love to hear that and chat with you more about it.

For those of us who already follow Jesus I said in the beginning that one of my aims is for us to start the ear seeing Jesus afresh to burn a big view of Jesus into our heads and to keep us going.

[ 29 : 16 ] And I hope this message this passage is wonderfully encouraging and exciting for you as it was for me. It's a simple gospel that brings rebirth. Jesus high and lifted up the king of kings died a shameful death so that we might be saved.

It's God's surprising yet glorious means of salvation. So let's keep going. Why not resolve to keep growing in faith and love him more and more? And some of the ways to grow might be ordering your day.

You know start 2023 afresh ordering your day so your quiet times could be more consistent or perhaps working on a passage before a talk or growth group meeting so that you get more out of it and others also help with that as well.

Or spending less time on YouTube and that's me. And more time on the Bible that's also me. Or reading a Christian book instead of a secular book. I'm sure there are many others.

And our Christian walk should be marked by the effects of a spirit born person. People should be able to tell if we're born again. And I suppose one of the implications is are we true to Jesus?

[ 30 : 28 ] Do we take sin seriously enough? Are what we think, say, and do, able to withstand the light of Jesus? Now verse 20 to 21.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

Sin is described as evil, wicked. We need to hold Jesus tighter than anything else. Temptations are all around us. Don't give in to the fleeting pleasures of sin.

Nip it in the bud. Don't let that grow. Instead, grow in your love for Jesus. Let what you think, say, and do withstand the light of Jesus.

And finally, and again, our entry into heaven should be our primary concern. We need to be born again. And it's only through repentance and belief in the lifted up son.

[ 31 : 35 ] Let's start 2023 with a big view of our loving God and let's live in right response to his grace. Let me pray.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your lifted up son. Only through him we can be born again so that we can see and enter heaven.

Thank you that we don't have to do it ourselves. In fact, we can't do it. But that Jesus has already done it on the cross as he is high and lifted up.

Therefore, Father, please cause us to hold on to that wonderfully big and glorious view of Jesus. And please would you help us make 2023 a year that is marked by loving him as our priority and

