

You Must Be Born Again

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[0 : 00] I would like you to turn in your Bibles this morning to John chapter 3.

! And as we get started, I remind you that actually this morning you're going to be praying for several people. One is for Caleb as he is ministering somewhere in New York.

I'm not persuaded where it is. I just know he's out there somewhere. And God knows, and you just pray, and we're trusting that the Holy Spirit helps Caleb to preach with clarity, with simplicity, and with passion that lifts up the glory of Christ in a very troubling environment.

And I want you to know that you are going to be part of kind of setting a milepost in Caleb's ministry and his life. He will without question remember this Sunday.

And I want him to also remember what it is to preach with the prayers of people that are absent from him and lifting him up before the throne that he can know what it is to do it under the power of the Spirit of God.

[1 : 11] Well, if I would ask you to do that for Caleb, guess who else I'm going to plead for? That's me. I trust you'll do that. John chapter 3, verse 1.

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're 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. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he's 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 of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Our Father, for us this morning, our prayer is a confession, first of all, of our own frailty and inadequacy, a recognition that by our own enabling and our flesh, there is nothing we can do that is of eternal significance.

[2 : 39] And our desire is that this morning, the Lord Jesus Christ, who enjoys the worship of angels in heaven, and someday of all the redeemed, would be the one that is lifted up this morning by your Spirit.

We understand from John, as we will see later in our studies, Lord willing, that the ministry of the Spirit includes bringing attention to the Lord Jesus, and we pray that you would do that today.

I pray, Father, for Caleb, that today his preaching would be anointed and strengthened by the Spirit of God, and that in retrospect, as he looks back, he would say, Wow, that was something that God did.

That people would come to Christ there in New York. That people would have hearts that are comforted and encouraged, but also convicted and sobered. I pray, Lord, also for our fellowship this morning, as we sit under the teaching of the Word of God, that those who are here that do not know Christ would be drawn by grace to see the absolute despair of their soul and the inability they have of saving themselves.

Give to them a holy terror of what eternity without Christ will be, and draw them to find in Jesus Christ the only hope in this life and the life to come.

[4 : 07] Amen. Well, as we take this passage, we are in our process of moving through the book of John, and remember that John chapter 20, verse 31, gives us a thematic overview of what this book is all about, and it helps to remember.

It always helps to kind of have the central goal in mind because we do have a tendency of kind of getting lost in the weeds. Would you agree with me? Sometimes caught up in all the little details, and we forget the overarching theme.

It's important to remember, this book was written to make it clear from the evidence that is provided that Jesus is the Son of God, so that knowing that fact, you may come to faith believing on Him and have everlasting life.

As we have worked so far through the book, we've kind of come through that opening statement in the prelude in which we are reminded that Jesus indeed is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, and the One who by all things were made, and the One who is the light and the life of God.

We've also seen the reminder of the impact that He had at the very start, doing a very kind of small little miracle in a wedding in which He turned the water into wine. Later, we find that as you work your way through cleansing the temple, and subsequent to that, there were a lot of people that they believed in Him, they believed in the evidence that He was providing, but their belief was not a belief that drew them to genuine conversion and faith.

[5 : 43] And so it makes sense that as we are working our way through the book of John, on the heels of the statement that we have in John chapter 2, that there were a lot of people that believed, but it really didn't do anything, we now come to a very interesting little picture about what saving faith really comes down to be.

And as we open our passage this morning, we find Nicodemus, and I would say that probably John chapter 3 is one of those famous chapters in the Bible.

Most everybody knows John 3, 16. You've got that one. And we know the story of Nicodemus, kind of the background to what that little verse is all about.

As you look here, you find Nicodemus coming to Jesus, and in essence, what you're coming to grips with is a guy who had an empty heart. He had an empty heart. That's what we're looking at. It tells us here that Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews, he came to Jesus by night, and he said, hey, we know that you're a teacher come from God because no one could do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

[6 : 56] As we kind of step back a little bit to understand the context of this, I want you to understand that at the heart of all the religions of the world, all the systems of faith in the world, there are only two basic concepts.

You've heard me say this, but I want to drive it home because it has bearing on our lesson this morning. One system of belief is of the persuasion that men by their effort may work their way up the ladder into heaven.

And we bump into those people all the time, don't we? We say, so what gives you confidence that you're going to be in heaven? Well, I'm a pretty good person. Or on the other side, we have those people who say, well, I'm not really sure.

I'm hoping that my good outweighs my bad. Or you have people say, well, I hope God grades on the curve. And whatever you're dealing with there, you're listening to someone who has the idea that salvation really must be something that comes about because of human effort.

On the other hand, the Bible teaches us clearly that salvation is not something that happens because of human effort.

[8 : 11] It is clear in the Scripture that salvation happens because of God's grace in His ministry in the lives of broken and ruined sinners. How do people come to Christ?

By the way, how many of you know that the name Jesus actually tells you the fact about how salvation happens? Jesus means what? Jehovah is salvation.

It doesn't say that Jehovah helps with salvation. It says, hey, salvation is something God does. And so as we deal with Nicodemus, as we open up this passage, we find here a man that, driven by the emptiness of his heart, he comes to Jesus.

And I want you to understand something about Nicodemus that we know from the very beginning. This man was very serious about doing his best. He wasn't one of those guys that really wasn't all that interested in how his performance was.

He was a guy who checked on his grades all the time. How many of you remember people like that in school? They bothered me marginally. What I mean by that is that, well, I figured they were just in a different parallel universe and I wasn't all that concerned about them, but I did.

[9 : 20] Well, I have a 98 in math. What does that look like? You know, it's like, forget that one. Nicodemus was really all over how he was doing. He was a very religious and very conscientious person.

And we know that because he was a Pharisee. That's what it tells us. Now, we use the term Pharisee kind of as a little dig at somebody. Oh, you're a Pharisee. I want you to understand that the Pharisees were pretty serious people about religion and behavior. They were people who had all different kinds of rules about how to keep the Sabbath. And one that I found most interesting was, here's the deal. If a chicken laid an egg on the Sabbath, I'm serious, you were allowed to eat that egg so long as you planned to execute the chicken the next day for breaking the Sabbath. Now, the logic is just irrefutable. You follow that, don't you? Let me say it again so you get it. If a chicken laid an egg on the Sabbath, you were allowed to execute that chicken and eat that chicken. [10:27] Now, how did you eat chicken if you didn't cook it? I haven't figured that one out. But they were, okay, you could kill, you could eat the egg. I don't know, forget it. Anyway, here's the deal. You were allowed to have that egg so long as the chicken was going to be slaughtered the next day for breaking the Sabbath.

Do you understand? If you were to go to the web today, and I did this earlier in the last week, I went to the web and kind of checked on what kind of rules would be affecting me if I were a Jew today. And here's the deal. If you are an Orthodox, a practicing Jew, serious about keeping the Sabbath, and you turn a light switch on, on the Sabbath, you're not allowed to turn it off. Got that? You may not cook. You may not turn on electricity. And so one of the things that a lot of times would happen in a Jewish home is that come around about Friday evening, just at the right time, they'd go through the house and flick on the lights that they wanted on for their next 24 hours. And they would leave them on. So when you go to sleep at night, guess what you do? How many of you sleep with those things over your eyes so that you pretend that it's dark? There are lots of little rules that go with, you cannot drive a car to the synagogue. [11:46] And so how many of you have been in Cleveland and see the herd of them, the large group of them walking towards the synagogue? The reason they're doing it is that they're not allowed.

Driving burns gasoline and anything that involves fire is wrong. The Pharisees were very, very, very particular about keeping all the rules. And it tells us here that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, was a ruler of the Jews. What that means is that he had kind of worked to the top of the food chain. Furthermore, we understand that being a ruler of the Jews meant that he was one of the Sanhedrin, the 70, that were involved in making kind of legal and cultural decisions for the Jewish nation. He was at the top of it. His spiritual or his religious discipline was so well-regulated that other people paid attention to him and said, hey, Nicodemus is a model. [12:49] That's what you're supposed to be like. Now, when you look in John chapter 7, verse 50, where it tells us that he was part of the Sanhedrin, we get the idea that he was at least willing to stand up for what he understood about the truth and he appealed that Jesus should not be judged prematurely, but on the basis of what he actually had done.

So I want you to understand that Nicodemus, as we think about this guy, was a guy who had worked very hard for a long time and he was top in. Despite being respected by everybody that he was around, Nicodemus was really not satisfied. How do we know that? We know that because Nicodemus came to Jesus and he came, in essence, asking a question about spiritual issues. And we know that he asked that question because Jesus, as we saw in the previous verses in John chapter 2, understanding the heart of man, he knew what was really going on inside. And so I want you to recognize that even though Nicodemus had all these benefits and accolades and he was accepted by the culture that he was in, he sensed his loss and he came to Jesus looking for spiritual help. [14:12] That's why he was there. Some have made quite a bit out of the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. And I do want to take just a minute and explain something.

If the Bible doesn't tell us something, we are doing no more than mere speculation if we try to figure out why he came to Jesus at night. How many of you understand what I just said? If we don't have the clear evidence, speculation is just that. In fact, speculation sometimes when it is declared to be fact can become frustrating and confusing and misleading.

Truth of the matter is we don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He could have had a long work day. Or whatever the reason, we just find that there he was in front of Jesus and he was coming to Jesus because he recognized that Jesus was a source of spiritual insight.

And how do we know that? We know that you are a teacher come from God. And how do we know that you're a teacher come from God? Because no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

[15:28] He recognized the evidence that Jesus' signs provided. I've got to tell you something about Nicodemus. I respect him because he was willing to recognize the emptiness of his soul and he was willing to do something about it at least in asking questions.

Do you understand that? It's one thing to be convicted about things that are going on in your life and not do anything about it. That's wrong.

Here was Nicodemus. He was convicted. He sensed the emptiness of his heart. He recognized that even though he was at the top of other people's opinions, he really wasn't inside what he needed to be spiritually and there was a vacuum and there was an emptiness.

emptiness. So I've got to tell you if you're sitting here this morning and you have an emptiness in your soul, if you have a secret sense of the darkness of your heart, if you have no confidence about where your eternity will be spent and you are struggling this morning with the reality of the burden of sin in your life, I would appeal to you, at least do what Nicodemus did, go find Jesus.

To sit there in the sourness and the bitterness and the hopelessness and the despair of your heart that is at this moment under the convicting power of the Spirit of God is wrong.

[17:00] Do something. I appreciate the fact that Nicodemus was willing to confess that he had a spiritual problem and it was one he couldn't fix.

And so I would plead with you this morning as you sit here, if you are here today and there is a spiritual issue going in your life and you recognize it's not something you can solve, at least be humble and humble yourself and come to him and ask for help.

Jesus, I need help. Let's look at a second thing this morning as we look at the passage and recognize the divine remedy. Jesus, having Nicodemus come to him and says, hey, listen, you're a teacher come from God and I know it because of these signs.

Instead of Jesus saying, well, you know what? I'm glad you picked up on those things. Jesus doesn't respond according to the input or the comments that Nicodemus brought.

In fact, what we have him do is go on a completely different tack and Nicodemus didn't pose their actual question but we find that Jesus addressed it quite clearly.

[18:09] You see, Jesus cut to the heart of Nicodemus' concern because what he said was this and allow a little bit of liberty here as I kind of reverse the order here for you to think about. Here's what Jesus said in essence as you look at verse 4 or 5.

You're not going to heaven unless you start over by being born again and that's a fact. You're not going to heaven unless you start over again by being born again and that's a fact.

Look at the verse. Truly, truly, that's the fact part, right? Anytime the teacher in your class would say this is important, even the average scholar does what with that information?

What did you do? You do a circle around it and you said this will be on the, on what? The test. You paid attention. So when Jesus said truly, truly, that was like saying this is, get this.

This is important. This is very important. And so as you stop and look at this statement, Jesus makes it clear what I'm going to say next is significant and you'd better tune up and pay attention.

[19:21] Secondly, he makes that very interesting statement, you must be born again. The Greek word that is used there in verse 3 and I'm not going to belabor the point here but it could be taken two different ways neither of which changed the meaning of it and both actually help drive a point home.

For one, that word again can mean to do again, second time, over again. It could also mean from above. And in both cases, the issue is that something pretty dramatic needs to take place in the life of the person who is concerned about what's happening in their life spiritually.

There are some of you sitting here this morning that the truth of the matter is you've not believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior. You've never come to faith and you have sat and listened to the preaching and the announcement of the word of God and the undeniable declaration that this is indeed the Son of God who's come into the world to save sinners and in practical terms as you sit there and refuse that truth.

In essence, what you're saying is Jesus is a liar because what he says about himself is not true. It is a weighty moment to realize that Jesus puts us on the spot of saying yes or no to who he is and what he's here to do.

And it's appropriate to understand that. Jesus cuts right to it. He says, listen, let me tell you something. Unless you're born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God. Furthermore, apart from the new birth, in essence, what he is saying is no one's going to heaven.

[21 : 03] Apart from the new birth, no one is going to heaven. I am stunned today by the number of people that I bump into that are professing evangelical Christians and what I mean by that mouthful is there are people who say, well, Jesus is the pretty important guy and I kind of believe what the Bible says but I don't believe in hell.

I really think that at the end of the day, how many of you heard the phrase love wins? I have someone who I periodically read their posts and they keep on commenting about love wins and love wins and love wins and love wins and the implication is that at the end of the day when it's all said and done that God is not going to send anybody to hell.

Let me help you understand something. The reason Christ Jesus came into the world was to satisfy the debt and the judgment that sin has created and the truth of the matter is that sin, any sin, every sin that I commit is against a holy God and His infinite glory makes even the smallest thing that I do infinitely offensive.

And the satisfaction for that infinite offense is an infinite penalty. And God sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to pay that infinite price by dying in my place.

And so when Jesus said to Nicodemus, you've got to be born again, you have to understand He was talking to a person who was at the top of the food chain, so to speak, religiously in Israel.

[22 : 51] And in essence, Jesus says to Nicodemus, you, who have your PhD in religion, have to start all over again. And Nicodemus says, what?

Play out with what He says here. How can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Some have taken this to mean that Nicodemus was kind of being a little sarcastic and taking what Jesus said and played it out a little bit with an edge.

I don't know that at all. I think Nicodemus came with sincerity. He took the information that Jesus provided and he was completely blown away by it because his mind wasn't tracking in that range. It just wasn't there. And so he asked the obvious question, how can that happen? How can that happen? Then in verse 5, Jesus answered and said to him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, or I said, sorry, verse 5, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, so I want you to understand what's being said here. Salvation cannot happen apart from the exclusive work of God. It's very interesting when you, how many of you understand what it is to take a text and preach what you want to say?

[24 : 19] Let me give you an illustration. Some have looked at this passage and thought that it referred to baptism. I mean, anytime you have water, some people think it means baptism. I've heard the story of a pastor who was really kind of big on preaching on baptism, and one day, he actually hit a passage where there was no water in any place in the text, and he says, now some of you may have noticed this passage does not refer water.

He says, that brings up baptism. Sometimes you want to get wherever you're going to get where you want to go. And here is Jesus making the statement, you have to be born of water and the spirit, and I got to tell you, it has nothing to do with being born physically, and it has nothing to do with baptism.

How many of you have study Bibles? Raise your hand and wave at me so I can see the study Bibles out here. Okay? Study Bibles are not bad tools. One of the problems with study Bibles is that they don't get everything right, but it's a starting place.

The thing that is important as we look at this passage and we try to understand what does Jesus mean when he says water and the spirit, we have to remember that the best thing to help us understand the Bible is the Bible and the enabling of the spirit of God and the context.

And by that I mean, who was Jesus talking to? He was talking to a guy who had his PhD in Old Testament theology and knew the scriptures backwards and forwards. Later on, he's going to say to Nicodemus, kind of a snort, you know, there's no snort in the text in case you're wondering, but it's like, don't you get it?

[25 : 58] Are you a teacher in Israel and don't know these things? Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand the Old Testament. Clearly, in Jewish thinking, baptism at best was not something that saved.

Baptism was merely an outward evidence of something happened, that had happened in the heart. But, if you will turn in your Bible over to Ezekiel chapter 36, by the way, just notice, some of you may have cross-references over in the margin that says, go to Ezekiel chapter 36.

And in this case, go there. Ezekiel chapter 36, and we're going to look at verse 25-27.

What does the water refer to? I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from your idols. I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from 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 be careful to obey my rules.

You see, when Jesus made this statement to Nicodemus, who'd come and said, hey, listen, I've got a spiritual problem and we need to do something about this, or I need to do something about it, Jesus said, hey, this is not something you can just decide.

[27 : 37] It's got to be something that somebody else does for you. And when he says the water and the spirit, he was referring to the ministry of the spirit of God in the heart of the man who recognizes his desperate condition and his absolute inability to save himself.

Water and spirit refer not to the physical part, but they're referring to that which is of the spirit's work in a man's life.

And so when Jesus went on there in verse six, that which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the spirit is spirit, what he was saying is this, is that the human body produces human, mental, physical results.

Only the spirit of God can produce spiritual results. How many of you ever tried to persuade people into the kingdom with all the logic that you possessed?

You ever tried that? How many of you ever tried to argue somebody into the kingdom? I remember at one point in my ignorant youthfulness thinking that much of witnessing was just kind of being persuasive with a couple Bible facts.

[28 : 55] And there was a time when I thought that maybe I was going to be a salesman, and I thought, well, I can carry that discipline over into spiritual realms. And so do you realize that there's a way you can manipulate people to say yes about enough times that they'll buy a used vacuum cleaner from you?

Now, because of that, there's a three-day reversionary rule. How many of you know that? You sign it in your home, you have three days to decide no. Well, I talked many people into quote-unquote conversion, and they exercised the three-day reversionary clause as soon as I left.

You can't persuade people with intellect to become believers. I understand that, right? It has to be the work of the Spirit of God. And the point that Jesus was making here is the physical part of man cannot produce genuine spiritual life.

It's not going to happen. And so all the self-help books in the world, all the name-it-claim-it hucksters, all the yoga and meditation and vegan diets that you decide to follow, they're not going to change who you are inside.

Spiritual life and salvation can only come through the work of the Spirit of God. Look at verse 7. Do not marvel. When I say to you, when I said to you, you must be born again.

[30 : 24] You see, here was Nicodemus who came with this emptiness in his heart. He sensed that something was wrong, and he saw that Jesus was doing things that were exceptional.

And he came and said, man, I need help. And Jesus said, hey, this is not a problem you can solve by yourself. Spiritual life and salvation can only come through the work of the Holy Spirit.

And so here you are in verse 8. It says, the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Jesus is taking a very simple little thing, and he's making an application to help make the point to Nicodemus.

You at least understand that the wind which you cannot see, and probably as smart as Nicodemus was, he was not a meteorologist and did not understand all the nuances of how the wind works.

How many of you remember the little poem, who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I. Okay. But when the wind is rustling in the leaves, we know the wind is going by.

[31 : 42] And Jesus says, hey, listen, you don't get the idea of what the wind is necessarily, but you see the evidence of it. And he was pointing out that what Nicodemus could see was the work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives that was drawing attention to what he needed inside.

So when you look at this passage, what should you do? What should you do? I want to remind you that the purpose of preaching is really to bring people to the point of saying yes or no to God. And there are some of you sitting here this morning that the truth of the matter is have never come to the place of coming to grips with the absolute moral bankruptcy of your heart and the emptiness and the darkness of your soul.

And as a result of that, there is this void that you cannot ultimately fill with your own efforts. So what do you do?

Number one, I want you to understand that the work of the Spirit of God is to bring conviction. And if you are sitting here this morning and the Spirit of God is convicting you of the darkness of your soul and the reality of your spiritual bankruptcy, I want to tell you that's good news.

That's not bad news. That means the Spirit of God is drawing and working and he's in the process of persuading you that you're absolutely hopeless in your own condition.

[33 : 15] You cannot save yourself. What's the second thing that we do? One, we're convicted by the Spirit of God. Number two, we confess. And confession means essentially to say, God, you're right about my heart.

You're right about my heart. It is dark and it is hard. It is an idol factory. It is filled with bitterness and dissatisfaction. It is broken in its condition and I can't do anything about it.

And third, we call out in faith. And we believe in the promises that Jesus has made. And here's the promise that I want you to hold on to. Here's what the Bible says.

It says, whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord, what? Shall be saved. Do you understand how simple that is? Do you understand that nobody gets there without, first of all, being convicted by the Spirit of God and recognizing the bankruptcy of their soul?

That's the work of Christ. Tim Kroyer and no one else in this church, no one else that you will ever bump into has the ability ultimately of persuading you of the darkness of your heart.

[34 : 26] Only God can do that. But when that persuasion comes and that convicting power of the Spirit of God bears down on your heart, the thing to do is to confess and say, I am a bankrupt sinner deserving the judgment of God.

And yet I understand that God sent His Son to die for my sins upon the cross. And I will not in my arrogance say, no thank you.

I will cry out. And I will confess. And I will believe that He who sent His Son to be my Savior and to die in my place will keep His promise.

You know what He promised? He said this in the Scriptures, whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Do you know what? At the end of the day, you cannot receive the blessing and the benefit of salvation just by sitting there and saying, well, it sounds good.

You have to reach out and say, I need that desperately. I receive it for myself. I believe Jesus died for me and I trust Him as my Savior. Let's bow our heads and come to the Lord in prayer.

[35 : 55] I want to appeal to you this morning as you sit here to come to grips with where you are in your spiritual journey. There are some of you here today that I think are not saved.

I don't know that for a fact, but there are some of you here that have never come to faith in Christ. You're kind of going through thinking you're a pretty good person, but I want to tell you this.

Jesus didn't die to waste His life on the cross. He died because no one can save themselves by their own effort. And this morning, the Spirit of God is working to bring conviction and to help you who sit here under the teaching of the Word of God recognize the moral bankruptcy of the empty heart of man.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He died on the cross to satisfy the judgment of God for all of your sin. How can you turn away from that offer that He graciously makes to you this morning and say, not today, I don't care.

I would plead with you in Christ's stead. Hear the convicting truth of the gospel and humble yourself for the glory of Christ.

[37 : 16] Father God, You know our heart. You know our need. And I ask that Your Spirit would work to draw us to the cross and to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in whom alone is salvation.

And I ask this because of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Let's stand together as John leads us in our singing. And as we are singing, we give a moment for you.

Some of you are here today and the Spirit of God is touching your heart that there's something you need to take care of publicly. It may be that you need to be obedient to the Lord in a matter of baptism.

It may be that He's calling to be part of this fellowship. You know, it's one thing to kind of wave at the bus going by. It's another thing to get on and say, I'm part of it. Hmm? And all God's people said what?

Okay. And then there may be some of you here today that desperately need Jesus as your Savior. I would plead with you. Don't walk out of here without taking care of that. Now we're going to sing.

[38 : 18] We're going to sing our hearts out. Aren't we going to do that? And if God is working in your heart, don't you mess with Him this morning. Be humble. Be humble. Be humble. Be humble. Be humble.