

JOH 3:1 "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

As the apostle John continues to express the ministry of Jesus Christ in this gospel account, we now move from the temple incident in chapter two, where Jesus cleared the temple of animals and merchants, to an encounter with one of the members of the Sanhedrin who makes up the leadership of Israel.

This is a rather familiar account with the well-acquainted "born again" phrase which bible believing Christians utilize to distinguish between someone paying lip service to Christ and someone who is a true believer, or a born again believer.

We'll look at this phrase and delve into its meaning and application for people today, but first we should note the individual mentioned in this third chapter of our text.

JOH 3:1 "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council."

Nicodemus was an elite religious leader in Israel. As a Pharisee he was one who was well accomplished in the ways of the Scriptures and traditions of Judaism. You'll remember that the apostle Paul was once a Pharisee and described himself as a zealot in that position when writing to the church in Philippi.

PHI 3:4-7 ".... If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of

Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. 7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

To be a Pharisee was to be the cream of the crop in the eyes of the Jews. To be a Pharisee was to be seen as one who was religious and holy and close to God. They wielded power and authority unlike anyone else in Israel.

Nicodemus was such a man and as verse one points out he was one of a group who ruled over the Jews. Nicodemus was a very influential man, and as we have seen earlier the Pharisees were very distrustful of Jesus as well as jealous of His popularity among the common people in Israel.

And so, for this man to come to Jesus to inquire of Him further gives us a sense that he was a seeker and desired to know if Jesus was in fact who He claimed to be.

JOH 3:2 "He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

The first thing we notice is that Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night. There are a variety of reasons as to why he waits until the night time.

Some have suggested that it was during the evening hours when Jesus was much more accessible as the crowds have gone home. And so, with no one else around Nicodemus can have Jesus to himself as he discusses spiritual things.

The more likely reason is that Nicodemus was doing this quietly, away from the eyes of his peers, so as not to jeopardize his status among the other leaders of Jerusalem. Keep in mind that Jesus was a no-body in their eyes. He didn't go to any school of higher learning as did the Pharisees. He didn't serve in the temple in any capacity.

He was simply a son of a carpenter who suddenly appears on the scene claiming to be somebody as He goes about Galilee and the surrounding areas teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God.

In other words, in the eyes of the Jewish leaders, He is a self-proclaimed teacher. They didn't ordain Him. They didn't examine Him to see if He was capable to assume this role. And so, many if not most of the Pharisees looked down on Jesus. And I'm sure that in their inner circle they discussed these things Jesus was doing and looked upon Him with disdain.

And so, for Nicodemus to want an audience with Jesus, knowing how his contemporaries felt about Him, was a great risk to his career. And yet, something compelled him to know more about this man from Galilee. And in the quiet and cover of night Nicodemus goes to Jesus and inquires of Him further. Look what he says in verse three.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

First off, Nicodemus identifies Jesus as Rabbi. This is a word which carries with it a couple of meanings. It is a title of reverence, the equivalent of calling someone sir or master. But it is also a title identifying the individual as teacher.

This is important to see here because Nicodemus in a sense is humbling himself, though one of the most important leaders in Israel, by acknowledging this traveling teacher as one who deserves the title of Rabbi; a title Nicodemus himself enjoys among the nation of Israel.

Now, why does Nicodemus call Jesus Rabbi? Well, for a couple of reasons. He's honest enough to realize that Jesus is the real deal when it comes to teaching the word of God. Being a teacher of the law himself Nicodemus understands that despite Jesus having no formal education in Israel, He teaches with authority.

But more than that Nicodemus also realizes that along with His teaching Jesus demonstrates the truth in power. "For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

And so, he puts two and two together and concludes that this man Jesus is most certainly sent from God. Why? Because the most intelligent and schooled men in all of Israel can't hold a candle to the ministry of Jesus as He teaches and does miraculous works which only God could be doing through such a man.

And by the way, when Nicodemus says that Jesus is a teacher sent from God, he means it in the way that would identify Jesus on a par with the prophets of old who were sent from God to Israel. Nicodemus understood that Jesus was no ordinary teacher.

But look at the way he addresses Jesus in verse two. He says to Jesus, "**we** know you are a teacher sent from God."

We? Is Nicodemus sent from the Sanhedrin to represent this most noble body of leaders? Not likely. Nicodemus would not be coming to Jesus at night if this were the case. No. Nicodemus is politely telling Jesus that he, along with the rest of the Pharisees, recognize Him to be special. But only Nicodemus is willing to put his pride to the side and humble himself to find out if Jesus is the Messiah Israel is looking for.

As we'll find out later the rest of the leaders in Israel were more concerned with their own personal power than in the truth that Jesus is in fact Messiah and King and Lord.

And so, Nicodemus comes before Jesus and honors Jesus with words, which in one sense are designed to disarm as well as respect the one he addresses. And I'm sure Nicodemus is expecting Jesus to acknowledge his kind words and sit down with him and discuss the situation at hand.

But instead of Jesus reciprocating by giving accolades back to Nicodemus, He has a very short response for this renowned leader of Israel.

JOH 3:3 "In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Okay. So what's that got to do with Nicodemus calling Jesus Rabbi, teacher and miracle worker? Why does Jesus seem to respond in such a way as though He hasn't paid any attention to all Nicodemus has just said?

Well, the truth of the matter is that Jesus knows the real reason for Nicodemus coming to Him. Jesus doesn't need to play some game with Nicodemus and exchange niceties. Remember, at the end of the last chapter we're told that, "He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man." (JOH 2:25)

In other words, Jesus knows the heart of all men, including Nicodemus. Jesus knows that Nicodemus is coming to Him to find out more about this man sent from God. And what Jesus has done

here in this response is to answer a question Nicodemus didn't even know how to ask.

In God's grace and mercy our Lord Jesus has cut to the chase and given Nicodemus the answer to a question Nicodemus would never have asked and yet needed to hear for his own salvation.

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

What did this mean to Nicodemus and what does it mean for us? Well, to Nicodemus it meant very little at this point. I'm sure it took him completely by surprise. He's going down one track and Jesus switches tracks.

But the words, "born again" are important to investigate. The words born again could be better translated, born from above. The inference is that one is born spiritually from heaven, or from the hand of God.

But, more than that, what the apostle John is doing here in recording this particular incident is setting up the entire basis for salvation. He is stating at the outset that salvation is of the Lord. Jesus doesn't begin by teaching what the Pharisees would teach under similar circumstances.

They would contend that one's salvation depended on the observance of the law, doing your best on a daily basis as you look to God for strength. This is essentially what Nicodemus was teaching. And Jesus pulls the rug out from underneath of him by stating that to see the Kingdom of God you must be born from above.

It's not a matter of something you do for God, it's a matter of God doing something for you to bring this eternal relationship into being.

And to express to Nicodemus the importance of this truth Jesus uses an expression to get his attention. The NIV uses the expression, "I tell you the truth." The NASB puts it this way. "Truly, truly I say to you", whereas the KJV says, "Verily, verily."

The words used here in the Greek are the words we often associate with the word amen. In fact, amen is spelled the same in English as it is in Greek. And it is this word which is used twice in this sentence.

And so we could literally translate this “Amen, Amen I say to you.” Now, when the word amen is used at the beginning of a thought in the Greek it is better translated, of a truth, of a truth, which is why the NIV uses the expression I tell you the truth.

But it is much stronger than that. Jesus is making it abundantly clear, by repeating this word twice, that what is to follow is of utmost importance to grasp.

Basically, Jesus is saying here in verse three, "Don't lose me here Nicodemus, if you want to see God and be with Him forever, than you better rethink your approach to Him. It's not by keeping the law or by doing good works to earn His favor, it is by being spiritually born from God."

This is the last thing Nicodemus expected to hear. And this is why we see his response in verse four.

JOH 3:4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Now, Nicodemus is not being silly here, nor is he asking a question which is seriously entertaining the idea of being physically born again from his mother's womb. This is a rhetorical question with the implied answer, "we're certainly not talking about being physically born again."

But in this question Nicodemus demonstrates his spiritual ineptitude by not grasping the most basic aspect of how God works in the life of His people. And this is why Jesus doesn't let go of this concept.

JOH 3:5 "Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

Jesus comes right back with the same truth. In verse three Jesus says, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again, and now in verse five He says, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

What Jesus is doing here is now further explaining what it means to be born again and the agent involved in this spiritual birth.

Being born again is the equivalent of being born of water and the Spirit. In other words, the agent who causes this rebirth is the Holy Spirit of God. This is why the ministry of the Holy is so important in the world.

Yes, salvation comes by placing our faith in Christ, but if it were not for the Holy Spirit causing our spiritual birth, or to put it another way, if the Holy Spirit didn't give us eyes to see and ears to hear, as He made us alive, we would not repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the way, this expression, being born of water and of the Spirit, is one which has caused some confusion. Some theologians take this to mean that unless one is water baptized, along with being born by the Spirit, they cannot have salvation.

This is what the concept of baptismal regeneration means. The problem is that the word of God doesn't teach this. If water baptism were essential to our salvation then our work of receiving water baptism, together with Christ's work of dying on the cross for our sin, would necessarily have to work together before we could be saved.

This is what the Galatians were struggling with when they tried to add their works of keeping the law to the work of Christ.

GAL 1:6-9 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

If water baptism were essential to our salvation then everyone before the earthly ministry of Christ would be lost eternally. And yet, we're told that Abraham, for example, was not lost, but was a friend of God for one reason and one reason only. He believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

The thief on the cross was saved that day as he trusted Jesus and Jesus said to him, today you will be with me in Paradise, which is heaven. That thief was not water baptized.

It was the apostle Paul who made an interesting comment on water baptism to the Corinthians.

1CO 1:16-17 "(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel - not

with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

Paul was simply saying that water baptism was something which he acknowledged and encouraged, but that as far as salvation was concerned it was not meant to be central to his gospel message because the message of Christ's cross was the only message to be embraced for one's salvation.

If water baptism were central to the gospel you better believe Paul would not have said, "Christ did not send me to baptize."

This doesn't mean water baptism is unimportant or that we should avoid it. It just means that when it comes to receiving eternal life there is nothing, no matter what spiritual significance we place on some work we perform, which can earn us righteousness before God.

EPH 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - 9 not by works, so that no one can boast."

And this is exactly what Jesus is telling Nicodemus. Well then, what does He mean by the expression that one must be born of water and the Spirit?

Some suggest that Jesus means that one must be born physically before he can be born spiritually. And so, they take water to mean the physical birth process and the watery habitation of the baby in the mother's womb.

This is a bit of a stretch. There is a much more reasonable explanation from the Scriptures themselves, and it has to do with the way the word water is used in connection with salvation in other portions of God's word. Let's take the woman at the well for example.

JOH 4:13-14 "Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The water that Jesus wants to give the woman at the well is not talking about H<sub>2</sub>O. The word water is used to describe spiritual life being received. Jesus points this out again and zeroes in on who that water is.

JOH 7:37-39 "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." 39 By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

Here Jesus makes the connection between drinking spiritual water which He offers and receiving spiritual life and refreshment as it wells up within him. And then John points out what Jesus meant by this when he said, "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

It is the Spirit of God who is life. It is Jesus Christ who purchased that life for us, and it is the Father who made it all possible by sending His Son into the world to purchase us. It's not a coincidence that the Spirit of God is called the Holy Spirit. If we received spiritual life, it only makes sense that it is the Holy Spirit who gives that life.

So, are you saying that the Holy Spirit is better than Jesus? That's like saying, is God better than God? There is only one God. But He has revealed Himself in three persons, and it is quite apparent that each person of the Godhead plays a role in our salvation.

No one person in the Godhead can possibly be more powerful or important or privileged than the other. God is God. Remember, we're trying to understand with our little finite minds the infinite and almighty God.

ISA 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

That's a gentle way of saying you haven't got a clue as to the extent of My being and My life and My power and My will.

ISA 46:9-11 "... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. 10 I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. 11 From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do."

God is Sovereign and He will accomplish all His will in the way He has determined. Therefore, when He says, that unless you are born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter into the Kingdom of God, He means it.

And the expression being born of water and the Spirit is nothing more complicated than being born by the will of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit who brings us life eternal, through the redemptive work of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

This was evidently a revolutionary idea for Nicodemus, because as I said earlier, his take on salvation was to be a good Jew by keeping the law. Jesus comes along and turns his world upside down by demonstrating through His teaching that the Kingdom of God can only be entered into by the will of God which does not include trying to earn His salvation through some good work.

In fact, the apostle John has already pointed this out in the beginning of this gospel account.

JOH 1:12-13 "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Our spiritual birth did not come through some human invention. It didn't come through some spiritual enlightenment we gave ourselves. It didn't come through some spiritual maturity we grew into. We didn't open our eyes to see the things of God. We didn't give ourselves ears to hear the things of God.

And the reason for this is because we were spiritual corpses outside of Christ. We were spiritually dead. Had it not been for the Spirit of God regenerating us to life we would never have reached out to the Savior.

This is the point Paul made to the Ephesians.

EPH 2:1 "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,..."

That word for dead is the Greek word *nekros* and it means lifeless, dead, without breath. And when we come back next week we're going to examine how God can and will bring the breath of life to a spiritually dead human being. It is an amazing miracle by God, but it is the miracle we need and the world needs.

With man this impossible, but with God nothing is impossible.  
And Nicodemus is going to learn this as he humbles himself before  
Jesus Christ.

Our salvation must be accepted by faith as we look to Christ, but  
we should never underestimate God's involvement in our lives to  
bring us to the point where we want and need this life. For without  
it we remain dead in our trespasses and sins, and we know the  
wages of sin is death.

Who can deliver us from this body of death, as Paul says to the  
Romans? "Thanks be to God -through Jesus Christ our Lord!"  
(ROM 7:24-25)

If you know Christ, then you have this life, you have been born  
from above. You have been born from God. Thank the Lord  
every day and show your thanks with lives of love and obedience  
and service unto His honor and glory.