

STARTING LIFE ALL OVER AGAIN

Did you ever wish you could start life all over again knowing what you know now and having another chance to correct all the mistakes you have made? Well you can. All of us are born in sin. Our “first birth” makes us children of Adam. This does not mean that Eve gave birth to us physically but rather that we are descendants of Adam and Eve, which means we are born with a sin nature and that sin nature leads us to disobedience. Everyone who has been born after Adam and Eve, and that of course means everyone but Adam and Eve, has a sin nature. No amount of education, religion, or discipline can change that old nature; we therefore need to receive a new nature from God. He provides all of us with that opportunity to be made into a new person.¹

We will now get back to the conversation Nicodemus had with the Lord. Nicodemus was struggling with that very issue: how is it possible for someone to be made into a new person? We will begin in John 3:1 and continue through verse 15. Then we will continue taking a closer look at each verse where we left off at verse 4.

John 3: 1-21 ESV:

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi (teacher)², 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.”

3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 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?”

5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

8 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.”

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1997, c1992, S. 217.

² Parentheses added.

10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

11 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.

12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Let us now take a closer look at this conversation.

John 3:4 ESV:

4 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?”

Was Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher and leader in the Sanhedrin, so simple minded that he really believed Jesus was suggesting he climb back into his mother’s womb and be born again? Let us look at a couple of possible explanations for verse 4, both of which I can see as being true and applicable to what Nicodemus was thinking. Obviously Nicodemus had lost sight of that fact and the concept of a new birth if it had applied to non-Jews would probably have made some sense to Nicodemus because of the way the Jews thought about themselves. They could understand that someone who was not a Jew would have to go through some special process in order to become a Jew.

But the Jew thought that he was saved simply because he was a Jew, one of God’s chosen people. They had, however, no right to think that way because nowhere in the Old Testament was it suggested that Jews were saved because they were part of a nation God called to serve Him. The thought of a Jew having to go through some type of conversion in order to be saved was simply a lot of foolishness to a good Pharisee like Nicodemus.

It is also possible that Nicodemus may have given Jesus the benefit of the doubt that a new birth might be necessary for non-Jews and said what he said about going back into his mother’s womb simply as a way of expressing sarcasm that he was probably too old and set in his ways to change and that in his case that kind of spiritual rebirth was impossible.³

John 3:5 ESV:

5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus quite likely referred to water here to remind Nicodemus of the preaching of John the Baptist. Nicodemus was certainly aware that John the Baptist had preached a message

³ Tenney, Merrill C, John *The Gospel of Belief*. 1948, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, P.86.

of repentance and baptism and used water as a symbol of the cleansing of sin. People who wished to convert to Judaism in Old Testament times were said to become “as newborn children” when they were baptized to remove Gentile impurity. So water being used as a symbol for conversion is a concept that Nicodemus would have been quite familiar with. “Born of water” therefore makes it clear to Nicodemus that “born from above” meant conversion, not a second physical birth.⁴ Jewish teachers generally spoke of converts to Judaism as “newborn,” only in the sense that they were legally severed from old relationships. An actual rebirth by the Spirit would produce a new heart.⁵ The Greek wording of 3:5 can mean “water that is the Spirit.”

Verse 5 could then be read: “*Unless someone is born of water, that is, the Holy Spirit, they cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*” The water in baptism therefore only represents outwardly the cleansing that the Holy Spirit provides inwardly. So contrary to what some churches teach, it is not the physical baptism that one receives that provides salvation, but rather the inner cleansing that is provided by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ.

Ezekiel 36:24–27 used water symbolically for the cleansing that the Holy Spirit works in us:

24 For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land.

25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols.

26 And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.

27 And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. (NLT)

Being born of the Spirit requires a radical change, a new beginning, a complete change of heart.

Titus 3:5 NLT:

God saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.

To a Jew the idea of being baptized would be intolerable because it reminded them of a ceremony by which an unclean Gentile could become a member of the Jewish race. For

⁴ Jamieson, Robert; Fausset, A. R.; Fausset, A. R.; Brown, David; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Jn 3:5.

⁵ Keener, Craig S.; InterVarsity Press: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, Ill. InterVarsity Press, 1993, S. Jn 3:3

Nicodemus to go through this would be disgraceful and humiliating. He would in effect be admitting that Pharisees needed to repent and ask forgiveness of Christ for their sins just as a Gentile would.

So the phrase Jesus used in verse 5 about being born of water could mean “converted by the Spirit.” If so, we could then read the verse this way: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is converted by the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* We see further evidence of this in John 7:37–39 NLT:

37 On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me!

38 Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”

39 (When he said “living water,” he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him.)

Paul described the Kingdom of God, which John refers to at the end of verse 5, in Romans 14:17 NLT:

For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

When a sinner kneels before Christ and confesses he is a sinner and that he has come to realize that Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin that he would have had to pay on his own, and tells Jesus that he wants Him to be his personal Savior, God through His grace grants that believer salvation and assures him of a place in Heaven for eternity. God seals that promise by placing His Holy Spirit within that person to help guide and strengthen him/her in resisting sin and also to enable the individual to live a righteous life. That is how a person enters the Kingdom of God. Only by being born again can we enter the Kingdom of God.

John 3:6-8 ESV:

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Do not marvel (be surprised)⁶ that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

8 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.”

The “spirit” that is born from God’s Spirit may refer to the “new spirit” of Ezekiel 36:26, which we read a few moments ago.⁷ When something is born it resembles whoever gave it life. We resemble our parents. Your litter of puppies resemble their parents. When

⁶ Parentheses added.

⁷ Keener, Craig S.; InterVarsity Press: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993, S. Jn 3:6.

something is born of the Holy Spirit of God it is something that resembles the Holy Spirit of God. It is not God, but is like God. "Flesh is flesh. Spirit is spirit," as we read in John 3:6.

Now let us consider the word "*flesh*" in verse 6. **Flesh** is not just our physical body. It includes all that comes into the world through birth, the entire person. This is not just a human being but a human being who is corrupted and has a tendency to commit unethical, immoral, and evil behavior. This flesh is a person who is a slave, a prisoner to the sin that came through the fall of mankind when Adam and Eve sinned.⁸

Romans 8:4-7 NLT:

*4 But—"When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love,
5 he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.
6 He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.
7 Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life."*

The Spirit was symbolized as wind in Ezekiel 37. The wind is unpredictable and uncontrollable. In Old Testament times the Holy Spirit only came to specially chosen people to do special work as directed by God. But there was no indication in the Old Testament Scripture that the Holy Spirit would come and live within all who received the Messiah as their Savior. When Nicodemus heard this he would be very surprised at such a suggestion. The mystery and the reality of the Holy Spirit's work were included in the comments Jesus made about the wind. The origin of the Holy Spirit could not be determined either, but yet the presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life was obvious. Nobody could deny its existence.⁹

Regeneration, in other words is a complete renewal of one's motives and behavior. It is the basis of salvation. We should be quite certain that we are truly "born again," for there are many people who think they are, but who are not. Just because a person calls himself a Christian does not mean that the inner nature of that person is truly Christian. Being born in a country that is supposedly Christian does not make a person a Christian. Claiming to belong to a Christian church does not mean that a person is a Christian. Something must take place as the result of faith in Christ, whereby the person is "born again" by the power of the Holy Spirit. Being "born again" is something so mysterious that human words cannot describe it. But it is a change which is both known and felt. It is known by works of holiness and it is felt by experiencing the presence and grace of God in our lives.¹⁰

⁸ Jamieson, Robert; Fausset, A. R.; Fausset, A. R.; Brown, David; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments.* Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Jn 3:6.

⁹ Op cit., Tenney, P.87.

¹⁰ Spurgeon, Charles Haddon, *Morning and Evening Devotions*, The Old-Time Gospel Hour, Lynchburg, VA, P. 132

This incredible transformation comes from God Himself and is supernatural. It is not something which a person performs for himself/herself. It is not merely an attitude adjustment. However God accomplishes the process, the rebirth produces a new person. God renews the heart and the soul in a way that affects the entire individual. It is not a change of name or plastic surgery to change one's appearance or weight loss to make one look better, but a renewal of one's nature so that the person is not the person they used to be, but a new person in Christ Jesus. To wash and dress a corpse is far different from making the corpse alive. Human beings can dress the corpse, but God alone can make it come alive to a new life. If you have been "born again," you can rejoice by saying, "*Lord Jesus, You are my new Parent. If it was not for You breathing into me a new and holy life, I would still be dead in my sins. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" (Galatians 2:20). I trust the Lord will help each of us to be certain of this reality this morning.

John 3: 9-10 ESV

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Nicodemus now seems to be concerned about what this new teaching means and how he might obtain this assurance of renewal and everlasting life. From this moment on in the conversation Nicodemus has nothing more to say. It now appears that he has accepted Jesus' message and wants to hear more details. "*How can I experience this new birth?*" would be a fair paraphrase of verse 9.¹¹ Jesus replies with a mild scolding of Nicodemus. Note that Jesus says: "*Are you the teacher . . . ?*" "The teacher" would suggest that Nicodemus is possibly the most respected teacher in Israel, or at the least one of the most respected. And yet he did not know a very basic truth taught in the Old Testament.

The evidence in the Old Testament was clear. It was necessary for a person to trust and obey God in order to obtain salvation. This salvation was not available because of one's birthright, or because one went through some kind of ceremony, or to those who did good works, or more accurately, thought they did good works. Regeneration was available to people in Old Testament times as well, before the coming of Christ.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that no one has in the past, or will ever have in the future, a spiritual experience of salvation without the assistance of the Holy Spirit.¹² Evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament may be found in the following passages: Joseph--Genesis 41:38. Bezaleel--Exodus 31:3; 35:31. The seventy elders--Numbers 11:17. Balaam--Numbers 24:2. Joshua--Numbers 27:18. The Judges: Othniel--Judges 3:10; Gideon--Judges 6:34; Jephthah--Judges 11:29; Samson--Judges 13:25; 14:6, 19; King David--1 Chronicles 28:11, 12. The prophets: Azariah--2 Chronicles 15:1;

¹¹ Op Cit., Tenney, P.87.

¹² Jamieson, Robert; Fausset, A. R.; Fausset, A. R.; Brown, David; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments.* Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Jn 3:9.

Zechariah--2 Chronicles 24:20; Zechariah 1:1; Ezekiel--Ezekiel 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; Daniel, Daniel 4:8; Zacharias--Luke 1:67; Elizabeth--Luke 1:41; Simeon--Luke 2:25, 26.¹³

A **spiritual experience** here would be defined as a joining together of the person's own spirit with the Holy Spirit. Christ had promised to give all believers the Spirit and that the Spirit would remain within them when Christ returned to Heaven (John 7:37-39; 14:16,17,26; 16:7,13,14).

John 3:11-13 ESV:

11 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.

12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

“*We speak of what we know, and . . . have seen,*” would seem to be a reference to the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is referring to **absolute** knowledge and experience that only He could have had with God, as John described earlier in John 1:18 NLT:

No one has ever seen God. But the one and only Son is himself God and is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

The phrase, “*But you do not receive our testimony,*” would indicate both Nicodemus himself as well as the group of religious leaders to which he belonged. If Nicodemus and his associates could not understand these things that were clearly taught in the Old Testament that was available to them here on earth, how could they grasp a concept that could only be considered supernatural? How could they comprehend something which was not yet known here on earth because it originated in Heaven?

John 3:13 ESV:

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

This verse basically states that knowledge of God is not obtained by a person going up from earth to heaven to receive it. No human being from earth has ever done that and then returned to tell us what God wants us to know.¹⁴ Firsthand knowledge from God comes only from the Son of God. Jesus, whose home has been in Heaven from the very beginning, has taken on human flesh and descended to earth to reveal to mankind what the Father wants them to know.¹⁵

¹³ Swanson, James; Nave, Orville: *New Nave's*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1994.

¹⁴ Paul and John came the closest to doing so, but they indicate that they had visions of the heavenly scenes which they then have relayed to us (2 Cor. 12:2-4; Rev. 1:10-19 and much of the book).

¹⁵ Jamieson, Robert; Fausset, A. R.; Fausset, A. R.; Brown, David; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Jn 3:11.

Jesus was the only link they would have with Heaven, and what He had to say was the final Word from God Himself.

Matthew 11:27 NLT:

*All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son **and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.***

No one can come to the Father except by believing in Jesus Christ.

This fact assumes monumental importance today, when there are a number of religions and cults that acknowledge God as the heavenly Father. But these cults and religions do not accept the Person and work of Jesus Christ as God's only Son. But Jesus stated, "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

John 3:14, 15 ESV:

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life.

A while back we looked at the passage from Numbers 21 which spoke of the poisonous snakes God sent among the people when they were rebelling against God and Moses. Let us read it again because it is important to the understanding of this section of John chapter 3.

Numbers 21:6-10 NLT:

6 So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died.

7 Then the people came to Moses and cried out, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes." So Moses prayed for the people.

8 Then the Lord told him, "Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!"

9 So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

The bronze serpent in this Old Testament report was a representation of the Messiah, Jesus, and that He too would be able to save the people in a similar way when He came. Here, near the beginning of His ministry, Jesus is predicting His death on the cross. As the serpent was "lifted up," so would Jesus be lifted up on the cross, and by looking to the cross people could also be saved just as the people in the Old Testament on their way to Mount Hor were saved by looking at the pole. However, the cross would not be a means of saving them physically, but through faith it would be a way to heal them spiritually.

The venom of these poisonous snakes was spreading through the bodies of the Israelites

and thereby spreading death throughout the camp. This is a perfect analogy to the death awaiting all mankind because of sin. The healing power in both of these situations was provided by the grace of God. And we find that in both situations the cure resembled the disease. In the Numbers account the snakes are the problem and a snake on a pole is the solution.

In John's account in John 3:14, the problem was sin causing men and women to face an eternal death in Hell. The cure was a man "*in the likeness of sinful flesh*" (Romans 8:3) who would be hung on a cross. Just as one man (Adam) brought death, one Man (Jesus) brought life. Just as the snake hanging on the pole had no venom to cause the Israelites death, the Man hanging on the cross had no sin. In both situations the cure is placed right out in the open in a prominent place where everyone can see it. In both situations one is healed by looking to the cure. In the case involving the snakes, one looks with the eye on the cure God sent and believes in their heart God's promise that they will be healed. In the case of Christ they look upon Him on the cross and believe in their heart that they will be saved.

Isaiah 45:22 NLT:

Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

Both concepts are far beyond human reason. Both concepts are foolishness to the enlightened mind of the intellectual. Having faith in Christ instead of earning their way into Heaven was a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:21-25 NLT (taken from Isaiah 8):

21 Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe.

22 It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom.

23 So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

24 But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

Romans 9:30-33 NLT:

30 What does all this mean? Even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God's standards, they were made right with God. And it was by faith that this took place.

31 But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded.

32 Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting in him. They stumbled over the great rock in their path.

33 God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, "I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced."

In both situations the process is the same. The bottom line in both cases is faith and trust in God that His promises are true. All one had to do was take a quick look at the serpent on the pole to express faith in one case, and in the other simply believe that Jesus was who He had shown Himself to be by fulfilling prophecy and performing miracles. The consequences of disobedience are the same in both cases. I would not be surprised if many of the Israelites thought such a suggestion was ridiculous. Imagine thinking that a piece of metal in the shape of a snake hanging on a pole would cure them. Many of them probably sought all kinds of other cures until they dropped over dead. Unfortunately the teaching about the cross of Christ is met with the same kind of attitude. People go around believing in all kinds of other religions and philosophies based on their own logic and intelligence until they drop over dead. Then one second after they die they receive the shock of their lives when they find themselves surrounded by the horrors of Hell, and then of course it is too late to change one's mind.

Some time back H. R. Block Inc. reportedly offered walk-in customers a chance to win a drawing for a million dollars. Glen and Gloria Sims of Sewell, New Jersey, won the drawing, but they refused to believe it when an H. R. Block representative phoned them with the good news.

After several additional contacts by both mail and phone, the Sims still thought it was all just a scam, and usually hung up the phone or trashed the special notices. Some weeks later, H. R. Block called one more time to let the Sims know the deadline for accepting the million-dollar prize was nearing and that the story of their refusal to accept the prize would appear on an upcoming NBC "Today Show."

At that point, Mr. Sims decided to investigate further. A few days later he appeared on the "Today Show" to tell America that he and his wife had finally gone to H. R. Block to claim the million-dollar prize. Mr. Sims' final words were: *"From the time this has been going on, H. R. Block explained to us they really wanted a happy ending to all this, and they were ecstatic that we finally accepted the prize."* This is so typical of how the Good News of the Gospel is treated. We resist the happy ending that God wants for us. Had the couple continued to assume the phone calls were not real and not believed the representative, they would have died missing out on the fortune just like those who refuse to accept the free gift of salvation by believing in Christ's death on the cross as payment for their sins. I pray that no one here this morning will be so foolish.