

UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN

John 3:1-15

Key Verse: 3:3

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

Have you thought about what is most important in your life? Is it money? Is it career? Is it honor? Is it human love? All of these are important for us. But one thing is more important than any of these; it is life! Jesus once said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mk 8:36-37) Here soul means the spiritual life. No matter how successful a person may be, without the spiritual life or soul, he or she cannot be truly happy, because, from a spiritual point of view, the person does not have a life.

In this passage, Jesus teaches Nicodemus why he must be born again. He also teaches the secret of how he can be born anew spiritually. May God help us to have the spiritual secret!

I. UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN (1-8)

One evening a Jewish official named Nicodemus privately visited Jesus. Who was Nicodemus? Nicodemus was a member of Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. This 70-member, political and religious council was consisted of high priests, elders, scribes and other members of the privileged families. Nicodemus was also a Pharisee, a special class of religious leaders at that time. To become a Pharisee, one had to receive a very strict training from childhood. He had to memorize not only the five books of Moses (Pentateuch) by heart, but also several other law books such as Talmud. He had to fast regularly twice a week and take bath three times a day. He had to give up many desires of the world to obtain the status of a Pharisee. No doubt Nicodemus was well-educated, perhaps getting his Ph.D. from Jerusalem University. Higher learning was a requirement to become a Sanhedrin member. Nicodemus was also rich (Jn19:39). In a word, he was a very successful man. Many Jewish girls must have dreamed of marrying this man. He seemed to have achieved everything which an ordinary man would like to achieve in a lifetime. But apparently he lacked something. Despite his glittering credentials, he had a big emptiness in his heart.

Nicodemus could not understand why he was unhappy. He had two shiny chariots in his garage. Every morning, as he would wear a purple robe and ride his chariot through the main streets of Jerusalem, people would look at him with the eyes of envy. When he came home, his servants would wash his feet and serve him with gourmet food. I must be happy. Don't I have everything that people want to have? He would talk to himself. Still, the things he had did not make him happy. Nothing could fill the emptiness in his heart. Bernard Shaw, the English writer who won a Nobel Prize, said that there are two kinds of despair for man. One comes after a failure and the other after a success. He said that the despair that follows one's success is more fearful

because, while a failure can be overcome but the despair after a success does not have a cure. Nicodemus reached a prime of his life after much struggling. But he knew that from then on, his life was a downhill. Did I struggle so hard only for this? He was disappointed at his life. Besides, he was already getting old. Sooner or later, his life would end. There was a shadow of death on his face.

One day he heard an unusual story about a young rabbi from Galilee. He heard that this Jesus of Nazareth turned wash water into first-class wine. He healed a man with leprosy and a paralytic. He opened the eyes of a man born-blind, they said. Nicodemus was fascinated about this rabbi. He knew that there were growing suspicion and jealousy among his Sanhedrin colleagues against Jesus, but decided to pay him a visit. Maybe I could learn a couple of tricks which might fill my emptiness in my heart, he thought. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night when it was dark. Perhaps, he did not want anyone to find out that he was visiting this country preacher. But the darkness was a symbol of his life as he did not have a clear direction in his life.

Nicodemus said to Jesus, “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” (2). Nicodemus was really interested in the miracles of Jesus. Perhaps he thought that it would take a miracle to solve his life problems.

As soon as Jesus saw Nicodemus, he knew what Nicodemus really needed. To his surprise, Jesus declared to him, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (3). According to Jesus, he lacked a spiritual life. He did not have the kingdom of God. Although he was a revered leader of the nation, as far as spiritual life was concerned, he was unborn at this point. What a surprise! What a shock. Nicodemus never expected this. His face became red. He almost uttered, how dare you young rabbi from Galilee speak like that to an honorable man like me. Instead, he decided to get back at him intellectually, using his knowledge in biology. “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” (4) This answer epitomized his inner way of life and thinking. Nicodemus was a very logical man. He won many arguments among his colleagues by his sharp logic. But the problem in Jesus’ point of view was that he was less than an infant when it comes to spiritual matters. His eyes were blinded by his stubbornness and insistence in applying his own logic in everything. He could not see God’s world. He could not see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus was unhappy despite his impressive achievements, because he did not have the kingdom of God in his heart. There is a big difference between those who have the kingdom of God in their hearts and those who don’t. Those who have the kingdom of God can taste true peace that comes from God, and deep inner joy and satisfaction that Jesus gives. Even when they suffer in this world, they don’t despair because the Almighty God is always with them. They rejoice in God and they give thanks to God for the living hope in his kingdom. On the other hand, those who don’t have the kingdom of God feel empty and despair even when they have many things of this world, because there is no satisfaction of their souls. Jesus teaches that to have the kingdom of God, one has to be born again.

What does it mean to be born again? It means 'to be born from above' or 'to be born anew.' To be born from above means to be born through the power of God. To be born anew means to be born intrinsically. This means to do away with the nature of Adam and to be renewed in Christ. Therefore, to be born again here does not mean some improvement of condition or reformation, but a new creation. When a person is born again in Christ, he becomes a new creation (2Co 5:17). He becomes a child of God (Jn 1:12).

On the other hand, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. The natural man who is not born again still remains in Adam's nature, that is, in sin. He is dead in his transgressions and sins. He is by nature an object of God's wrath (Eph 2:1-3). He is under God's curse while in this world, and after death he cannot avoid God's judgment. Some people think that death is the very end of everything. However, the Bible teaches us that the death of our body is only the first death. There will be the second death (Rev 20:14). This second death is the terrible judgment of God on those who are not born again. This death is like living eternally in the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Rev 21:8). No matter how successful a man may be in this world, he cannot avoid this judgment, unless he is born again in Jesus. Now, what do you think is the most important matter in our lives? Is it money, wealth, fame, power, or human recognition? We learn that the kingdom of God is worthy to sacrifice anything and everything in this world.

Then how can a man be born again? Look at verses 5. "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Water symbolizes repentance (Mk 1:4). The Holy Spirit is always concerned with our lives. And the Spirit is closely related to the word of God. The apostle Peter said, "... you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1Pe 1:23). When we repent our sins from our hearts and accept and obey the word of God, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to change us into new creations. No human can change our sinful nature. But the Holy Spirit can help us to become new men and women in Jesus!

Look at verses 6-7. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" Jesus teaches an important principle. The physical birth and the spiritual birth are fundamentally or intrinsically different. A physical being cannot become a spiritual being, no matter how it is polished, nurtured or grown. A physical being remains in the physical realm even when it is educated, reformed, or made religious. A physical person cannot upgrade himself to the spiritual realm by being a morally good person. Instead, he needs to be born again. He must repent his sins and let the Holy Spirit come into his life. Those who are born again in Jesus have a new value system and hope which are different from those of their old selves. They abandon their old self-centered lives and begin Christ-centered lives.

How can we be sure that the Holy Spirit works in us? Look at verse 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.” We cannot see the wind with our eyes. We don’t know where wind begins and where it ends. Yet, no one can deny the existence of wind. When a gentle breeze passes by, tree branches dance gently. When the Hurricane Hugo swept Florida, everyone saw its force. Likewise, we cannot see the Holy Spirit with our eyes. We don’t know how the Spirit works. Yet, we cannot deny the existence of the Spirit, because we can see the result of the Spirit’s working. Many terrible sinners have been changed into men and women of God by the Spirit. A sorrowful woman becomes a woman who joyfully serves the Lord. A despairing man is changed into a man of encouragement. There is undeniable evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in and among us.

II. FAITH AND ETERNAL LIFE (9-15)

Jesus taught Nicodemus about the secrets of new spiritual birth in various ways to help him understand and accept. Nicodemus should have humbly accepted Jesus’ word and repented his sins before God. But he was too proud. He still insisted on his own thinking and reasoning and said to Jesus, “How can this be?” (9) The Holy Spirit could not work in his heart when he was proud and did not accept Jesus’ word. At this point, Jesus could have given him up. But Jesus did not give up. He rebuked Nicodemus’ stubbornness by saying, “You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?” (10)

Look at verses 11-12. Jesus pointed out that Nicodemus’ problem was that he did not accept and believe the testimony. He kept on repeating “how?” instead of believing the word of truth. Why might Nicodemus refuse to accept Jesus’ word? Perhaps because he did not want to change. Some people want to believe in Jesus and start a new life, but at the same time, they are afraid of change. Nicodemus did not want to give up all that he achieved in the world. He did not want to give up his old self. However, a new plant cannot be born unless the old seed dies. Likewise, Nicodemus had to give up his old self in order to be born again in Jesus. Jesus further told Nicodemus that a new birth is just the beginning of many good things to come. He said, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (12) Earthly things here refer to a new birth and the beginning of salvation work in this world, and heavenly things the ultimate salvation and the kingdom of God. Jesus is uniquely qualified to talk about the heavenly things, because he is the only one who is from heaven (13).

Look at verses 14-15. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus continued to teach Nicodemus the upcoming, wonderful salvation work that he himself would complete. The event of Moses’ bronze snake in the desert teaches us about faith and salvation. By his great mercy, God brought the Israelites out from their slavery life in Egypt. They were on the way to the promised land and they had to pass through the wilderness. They were free but they still had a slave mentality. They would complain against God and Moses for many inconveniences which they had plenty. At this time, God punished them by sending venomous snakes. When they were bitten by the snakes, the poison spread throughout their body and they died. In this situation,

they pleaded Moses to ask God's salvation. What was God's answer? He did not provide an antidote. Nor did he tell them a way to destroy the snakes. Instead, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and hang it on top of a pole. Anyone who looks up the snake would live, God promised. This was God's way of salvation for them. This did not sound logical or reasonable at all. When one is bitten by a venomous snake, you must suck out the blood immediately and call the poison center that can provide you with an antidote. You have to look around so that you may not be bitten again by the live snakes hissing about you. Looking up a bronze snake on a pole did not make sense. However, whoever looked up the bronze snake lived, while those who looked down the live snakes perished. The difference was the promise of God. It is very easy to look up the bronze snake. Anyone can do it. It does not take a great physical effort. But it takes faith to look up the bronze snake. We must have faith that believes the promise of God. To have faith in God may not be logical, but it results in wonderful healing and salvation.

The bronze snake on the pole symbolizes Jesus who was hung on a cross. Jesus was crucified on the cross, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And God promised that anyone who looks up this Jesus would be saved. This world is filled with venomous snakes. People are bitten by a snake of pride, a snake of lust, a snake of greed, a snake of jealousy, and many other snakes. They are dying of the poison from the snakes. Jesus was hung on a wooden cross to save this world. Whoever is bitten by snakes can look up Jesus and be saved. He or she can have eternal life. Only the love of Jesus who gave himself on the cross can heal the deep wound of sinful people. May the Holy Spirit help us to look up Jesus on the cross! May the Holy Spirit help us to accept God's word so that we may be born again and see the kingdom of God!