

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

John 3:1-8

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."

In this passage, Jesus tells a religious leader named Nicodemus that he must be born again. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he or she is born again. What does this mean? How can we be born again? May God help us to learn the spiritual secret from Jesus!

One evening, a Jewish official named Nicodemus came to Jesus for a private visit. Who was Nicodemus? Verse 1 says that he was a member of Jewish ruling council, called Sanhedrin. This 71-member, political and religious council consisted of high priests, elders, scribes and other elite members of the society. Nicodemus was also a Pharisee, a special class of religious leaders at that time. To become a Pharisee, one had to undergo rigorous training from his childhood. He had to memorize not only the five books of Moses (Pentateuch or Torah) by heart, but also many other oral laws. He had to fast twice a week. In verse 10, Jesus called him Israel's teacher. Nicodemus was well educated; in today's terms, he would have earned a Ph.D. from the top university in Jerusalem. He was also very wealthy. Later, upon Jesus' death, he brought 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes, worth about \$200,000, to anoint the Lord's body (Jn 19:39). In summary, Nicodemus was a very successful man. Many women must have dreamed of marrying this man. He seemed to have achieved everything that an ambitious man would like to achieve in a lifetime. But something was missing in his life. Despite his success, he had big emptiness in his heart.



Nicodemus could not understand why he was unhappy. Every morning, he would put on his designer purple robe and walk down the main streets of Jerusalem, and people would look at him with the eyes of envy. When he came home, his servants would serve him with gourmet food. He would talk to himself: "I must be happy. Don't I have everything that people want?" Still, all his accomplishments did not make him happy. Nothing could fill the emptiness in his heart. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), the English playwright who won a Nobel Prize in 1925, said that there are two kinds of despair. One comes after a failure and the other after a success. He said that the despair that follows a success is more serious, because a failure can be overcome but the despair after a success has no cure. Nicodemus reached a prime of his life after years of hard work. But he knew that from then on, his life was a downhill. He asked himself: "Did I struggle so hard only for this?" He was getting old, grey hair popping up here and there on his head. Sooner or later, his life would end. What was nagging him inside was more than what we call a midlife crisis.

One day he heard an extraordinary 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 instantly cured a paralytic. They said that Jesus opened the eyes of a man born blind. Nicodemus was fascinated by this rabbi. He knew that there was growing jealousy toward Jesus among his Sanhedrin colleagues, but decided to pay him a visit. "Maybe I could learn a couple of tricks that might relieve my empty feelings," he said to himself. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night when it was dark. 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 told Jesus that he had come to him because of his miracles. Based on the miraculous signs he was doing, Nicodemus had concluded that Jesus came from God and that God was with Jesus. Nicodemus hoped Jesus would share with him some inside information about his miracles.

What was Jesus' reply to Nicodemus? 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). Right away, Jesus told him what his real problem was. Nicodemus had no spiritual life. He did not know God personally. He could not see the kingdom of God. As far as spiritual life was concerned, Nicodemus was not even born yet, even though he was a religious leader of the nation. What a surprise! Nicodemus never expected this. His face turned red. He almost uttered, "How dare you young rabbi from Galilee speak like that to a distinguished Pharisee!" Instead, he decided to get back at Jesus intellectually, using his knowledge from Human Biology 101. With a hint of sarcasm in his voice, he asked Jesus: "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) What he said revealed his inner way of thinking. Nicodemus was a logical man. He won many debates with his colleagues by his sharp logic. But the problem was that he was less than an infant when it came to spiritual matters. His eyes were blinded by his stubbornness and insistence on applying his own logic to everything. As a result, he could not see God's world. He could not see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus reminds me of many intellectual people today who cannot see the beautiful love of God shown to us through his son Jesus.

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 only Jesus can give. Even when they suffer in this world, they know that the Almighty God is always with them. They rejoice in God and 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.

So now the important question: **What does it mean to be born again?** It means to receive a new life from God. It means to receive a new heart from God through faith in Christ Jesus. It means to be born into God's family as a child of God by believing in Jesus (Jn 1:12-13). God said of his people, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jer 24:7). When a person is born again in Christ, he becomes a new creation (2Co 5:17). This does not mean a mere improvement of his human life. We may look the same as before outwardly, but there is a fundamental change in our heart and in our life. It means for us to experience a new life in Christ with new hope, new direction, and a new value system.



The next important question is: **How can we be born again?** Jesus teaches us the secret in verses 5-8. The key point of his teaching is that spiritual rebirth is **the work of the Holy Spirit**.

First, unless he is born of water and the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 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). A person is born again in Christ when he repents his sins and comes to Jesus who baptizes him with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:33). It is clear that spiritual birth can happen only through Christ. It is the work of God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. No one can be born again through human means (Jn 1:12-13).

Some people are mistaken to think that they are born again just because they were born into Christian parents or because they are very religious. However, if birthright or religiosity were what causes spiritual rebirth, Nicodemus would be the first one who can claim it. No one was more religious than a Pharisee. But Jesus told him, "You must be born again."

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 living word of God, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to change us into new creation. No medical doctor can heal our sin-sickness. No shrink can change our sinful nature. But the Holy Spirit can help us to become new men and women in Jesus!

Second, only the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 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 us 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. You can upgrade your computer operating system to a new version. But you cannot upgrade your life from flesh to spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Flesh cannot give birth to spirit. Only the Spirit can do that.



Therefore, we must come to God to be born again. We must repent our sins and let the Holy Spirit change us into new persons. Some people might say, “Why do I have to come to God? Why can’t I just be a good person? I don’t hurt anyone. I help those who are less fortunate. I am better than most Christians!” Well, it is admirable to be a morally upstanding citizen of society. But Jesus said, “Flesh give birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” We should all be good citizens of our society. But we cannot expect to be citizens of the kingdom of God by being good citizens of this world without God. You cannot earn your salvation by donating a lot of money to charity. Only the Spirit can give birth to spirit.

Third, the Holy Spirit is like the wind. How can we be sure that the Holy Spirit works in us? How do we know that we are born again in Christ? 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. (Do you remember a poem by Christina Rossetti called “Who Has Seen the Wind”? Who has seen the wind? / Neither I nor you. / But when the leaves hang trembling, / The wind is passing through....) We don’t know where the wind begins and where it ends. Yet no one can deny the existence of the wind. When a breeze passes by, tree branches dance gently. When a hurricane plows through an area, we see its destructive force. Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit works in the same way. We cannot see the Holy Spirit with our physical eyes. The work of the Spirit seems mysterious. Yet, we cannot deny the work of the Spirit, because we can see the result of the Spirit’s working. Terrible sinners are changed into men and women of God by the Spirit. A sorrowful woman becomes a new person 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.



Verse 8 also teaches us that to be born again in Christ is experience rather than knowledge. We may not know how the Spirit works. But we can personally experience the work of the Holy Spirit. We experience the change in our relationship with God. Before the spiritual rebirth, God was a distant figure who seemed to have nothing to do

with our life. But after we are born again, we are aware of his love, his grace, and his purpose for our lives. We want to love him and serve him. We want to praise him for his amazing grace. This is a fundamental change in our relationship with him. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In today's passage, we learn that even a very religious person like Nicodemus has to be born again to see the kingdom of God. This is possible only by God. When we come to him with true repentance, the Spirit changes us from useless sinners to blessed children of God. May God help us to come to Jesus as Nicodemus did!