

Bible Study May 17, 2023

JOHN 3 (ESV) – From Teacher to Teacher

You Must Be Born Again

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

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling council (called the high council, or the Sanhedrin).

The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders whom Jesus and John the Baptist often criticized for being hypocrites (see the note on Matthew 3:7 for more on the Pharisees). Most Pharisees were intensely jealous of Jesus because he undermined their authority and challenged their views. But Nicodemus was searching, and he believed that Jesus had some answers. A learned teacher himself, he came to Jesus to be taught. No matter how intelligent and well educated you are, you must come to Jesus with an open mind and heart so he can teach you the truth about God.

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

Jesus revealed to this devout Pharisee that the Kingdom would come to the whole world (3:16), not just the Jews, and that Nicodemus wouldn't be a part of it unless he was personally born again (3:5). This was a revolutionary concept: Jesus' Kingdom is personal, not national or ethnic, and his entrance requirements are repentance and spiritual rebirth.

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.

Ezekiel uses the language of cleansing water and inner renewal.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 (ESV)

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, 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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

“Being born of water and the Spirit” could refer to (1) the contrast between physical birth (water) and spiritual birth (Spirit) or (2) being regenerated by the Spirit, a rebirth signified through Christian baptism. Jesus was explaining the importance of a spiritual rebirth, saying that people enter the Kingdom not by living a better life but by receiving a new life from God.

Who is the Holy Spirit? God is three persons in one—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God became a human in Jesus so that Jesus could die for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead to offer salvation to all people through spiritual renewal and rebirth. When Jesus ascended into heaven, his physical presence left the earth, but he promised to send the Holy Spirit so that his spiritual presence would still be among humankind (see Luke 24:49). (For more on the Holy Spirit, see John 14:16-28; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; and 2 Corinthians 1:22.)

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.”

Jesus explained that we cannot control the work of the Holy Spirit. He works in ways we cannot predict or understand. Just as you did not control your physical birth, you cannot control your spiritual birth. It is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 2:10-12; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6).

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? 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.

This Jewish teacher of the Bible knew the Old Testament thoroughly, but he didn’t understand what it said about the Messiah. Intellectual knowledge does not guarantee true understanding or salvation. You should know the Bible, but even more important, you need a relationship with the God whom the Bible reveals so you can receive the salvation that he offers.

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.

Numbers 21:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, God sent a plague of snakes to punish them for their rebellious attitudes. Those doomed to die from snake bites could be healed by obeying God’s command to look up at the elevated bronze snake and believing that God would heal them if they did (see Numbers 21:8-9). Similarly, our salvation happens when we look up to Jesus, believing he will save us. God has provided this way for us to be healed of sin’s deadly bite.

For God So Loved the World

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The message of the Good News comes to a focus in this verse. God's love is not static or self-centered; it reaches out and draws others in. Here God sets the pattern of true love, the basis for all love relationships—when you love someone dearly, you are willing to give to them freely, to the point of self-sacrifice. God paid dearly with the life of his Son, the highest price he could pay. Jesus accepted our punishment, paid the price for our sins, and then offered us the new life that he had bought for us. When we share the Good News with others, our love must be like Jesus'—willing to give up our own comfort and security so that others might join us in receiving God's love.

To believe is more than to give intellectual agreement that Jesus is God. It means to put our trust and confidence in him that he alone can save us. It is to put Jesus in charge of our present plans and eternal destiny. Believing is both trusting his words as reliable and relying on him for the power to change. If you have never trusted Jesus with your whole life, let this promise of everlasting life be yours—believe.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

When Jesus talks about unbelievers, he means those who reject or ignore him completely, not those who have momentary doubts.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Nicodemus came to Jesus personally, although he could have sent one of his assistants. He wanted to examine Jesus for himself to separate fact from rumor. Perhaps Nicodemus was afraid of what his peers, the Pharisees, would say about his visit, so he came after dark. Later, when he understood that Jesus was truly the Messiah, he spoke up boldly in his defense (7:50-51). Like Nicodemus, we must examine Jesus' life and teachings for ourselves—others cannot do it for us. No one has improved upon his teachings in 2,000 years.

Many people don't want their lives exposed to God's light because they are afraid of what will be revealed. They don't want to change their ways. Don't be surprised when these same people are threatened by your desire to obey God and do what is right, because they are afraid that the light in you may expose some of the darkness in their lives. Rather than giving in to discouragement, keep praying that they will come to see how much better it is to live in light than in darkness.

John the Baptist Exalts Christ

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison).

²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.

²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."

John the Baptist's disciples were disturbed because people were following Jesus instead of John. It is easy to grow jealous of the popularity of another person's ministry. But we must remember that our true mission is to influence people to follow Jesus, not us.

²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

Why did John the Baptist continue to baptize after Jesus came onto the scene? Why didn't he become a disciple too? John explained that because God had given him his work, he had to continue it until God called him to do something else. John's main purpose was to point people to Jesus. Even with Jesus beginning his own ministry, John could still point people to him.

²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

Some people look for points of disagreement so they can sow seeds of discord, discontent, and doubt in order to make themselves feel better. John the Baptist ended this theological argument by focusing on his devotion to Jesus. To try to force others to believe our way is divisive. Instead, let's witness about what Jesus has done for us. How can anyone argue with us about that?

John's willingness to decrease in importance shows unusual humility. Pastors and other Christian leaders can be tempted to focus more on the success of their ministries than on Jesus. Beware of those who put more emphasis on their own achievements than on God's Kingdom.

³¹ He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

God gives the Spirit without measure or limit. Jesus was always filled, empowered, and totally connected to the heart and mind of God. Thus, Jesus was the highest revelation of God to humanity (Hebrews 1:2). He always spoke the words of God.

³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

The heartbeat of John's Gospel is the dynamic truth that Jesus Christ is God's Son, the Messiah and the Savior, who existed from the beginning and will continue to live forever. Jesus' testimony was trustworthy because he had come from heaven and was speaking of what he had seen there. His words were the very words of God. This same Jesus has invited us to accept him and live with him eternally. When we understand who Jesus is, we are compelled to believe what he said.

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Jesus says that those who believe in him have (not will have) eternal life. To receive eternal life is to join in God's life, which by nature is eternal. Thus, eternal life begins at the moment of spiritual rebirth.

John, the author of this Gospel, wrote to demonstrate that Jesus is the true Son of God. Jesus sets before us the greatest choice in life. We are responsible for deciding today whom we will obey (Joshua 24:15), and God wants us to choose him and life (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). To put off the choice means choosing not to follow Jesus. Indecision is a fatal decision.