

The New Birth – *John 3:1-8*

Introduction – Many believed in Jesus because of the signs He did, but Jesus did not entrust Himself to them because He knew what was in a man (2:23-25). We now enter in to one of several conversations illustrating just what John meant at the end of chapter 2. While full of grace, Jesus pulls back the veils of sophistication, self-made justification, and gets to the heart of the matter for each and every one of us. There was the new wine and then there was the new temple. And now there is the new birth. We are moving from descriptions of salvation, from incredible to unlikely to ridiculous. This is the ridiculous gospel of Jesus Christ.

An Upstanding Man – Nicodemus appeared, coming to Jesus by night (and we should remember 1:4-5), representing the leadership of Israel and in one sense all of Israel (“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher...”). He was a Pharisee, a brotherhood of about 6,000 men in Jesus’ day who had pledged to spend all their lives observing every detail of scribal law (not just the Torah, but the Mishnah and the Talmud, writings from the intertestamental period with chapters and chapters of interpretations on how to keep the law in excruciating detail). He was also a ruler (archon) of the Jews, which means he was on the council of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal and judicial body of the Jews. One of their duties was to examine anyone suspected of being a false teacher. But Nicodemus doesn’t do that. He calls Jesus “Rabbi,” and acknowledges that he (they) believes he is a teacher sent from God because of His signs. Maybe they thought He was a prophet like Moses or Elijah. This could be Jesus’ moment. The highest authorities were willing to enter into a conversation with Him. This could really launch Jesus’ ministry and give it public approval. And Jesus “blows” it.

You (all) Must be Born Again – Jesus says that Nicodemus (and all old Israel) needs to be born again. In the context of first century Judaism this is not an entirely alien idea. In rabbinic teachings, Israel had been set apart as a clean people and all the Gentiles were deemed unclean. They began applying this to table fellowship – a Jew would become unclean if he ate with a Gentile (this is not an OT law, but a tradition that developed). In addition, Gentiles were considered spiritually dead and so Num 19 was interpreted to mean that you couldn’t touch a Gentile without becoming unclean. But a Gentile could convert and become a Jew of sorts. He would be circumcised but also would go through a ceremonial cleansing, a baptism, to be declared clean. A Gentile was “born again” when he became a full proselyte, converted into the covenant people of God.

But Jesus said that the covenant people of God, Nicodemus and Israel, had to be born again. This does not go over well with Nicodemus. It is accusatory. It is calling him, a Pharisee and a ruler of Israel, unclean and spiritually dead. Nicodemus claims that he can see something of who Jesus is. But Jesus insists that no one can see the kingdom of God “unless one is born again.” This is the exclusivity of the gospel. There is no other way.

Nicodemus represents all of us who respond to such a demand as ridiculous, even insulting. His curt, crass, and literalistic interpretation reveals his unwillingness to understand and not simply his misunderstanding. There is a failure to understand which comes from a refusal to understand. Jesus “*knew what was in a man*” (2:25). At the same time, Jesus’ hard words may be having their affect, producing soft hearts. Nicodemus later came to Jesus’ defense (7:50) and seems to be a disciple at His crucifixion (19:39).

Water and Spirit – Jesus doubles down with a vow (“Amen, Amen”) with teachings that Nicodemus should understand (v10). To be born again is to be born of water and the Spirit. I take this exegetically, meaning it could be translated, “*born of water, specifically the Spirit*” and not of two separate births or actions. Ezekiel 36:25-27 would be in mind, where water and spirit come together to signify cleansing and the transformation of the heart. We can look ahead as well to John 7:36-37 and see the connection of water and the Holy Spirit. This is the spiritual transformation of the individual from spiritual death to spiritual life. Without this transformation, “*he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*”

Flesh and Spirit – Jesus continues (v6). In context, “*flesh*” refers to our first birth, and while it is true that we are born in sin, the point here is our human birth bringing us into the earthly family. Paul would speak similarly of the “*natural man*” (1 Cor 2:13-14). We cannot perceive the things of the Spirit until we have been born of the Spirit – a second birth. It doesn’t matter how high your natural, fleshly person has risen. He cannot enter into true spiritual things until he has the Spirit residing in him, granting him spiritual life.

Wind and Spirit – Jesus tells Nicodemus that he should not be amazed that Jesus has said, “*you all must be born again.*” And then describes the sovereign work of the Spirit. He is like the wind (same word, *pneuma*, in Greek). You cannot control Him, He goes where He wishes, doing His work as He wishes. Nicodemus’ mind should turn to the next chapter of Ezekiel (37:1-14). Jesus concludes, “*So is everyone who is born of the Spirit*” (v8).

The New Birth and the Free Will of the Spirit – The conversation continues (v9ff) but let’s rest here. Nicodemus is the religious type that we should see as man’s best attempt to save himself. And Jesus has declared him as dead as a Gentile, in need of spiritual rebirth. He also has made clear that this can only happen if and when the Spirit blows in his favor. This is the free will of God the Father at work (John 6:44, 65). It is the free work of God’s election (“*...as many as were appointed to eternal life believed*” – Acts 13:48). The Spirit blows where it wills in the work of regeneration (Rom 9:15-16).

This should not be threatening to us, but it is because we still want to cling to our own autonomy. It takes the new birth out of our control and makes us feel helpless. Instead, as the Spirit blows and grants us understanding, we find it is thrilling to see the sovereign confidence of God, for we already had discovered that we are helpless. He can do something about our state, our spiritual death. Even church members, covenant members, should feel helpless – but for the grace of God, the love of God.

And John 3:16 looms on the horizon.