

TO SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

John 3:1-15

Key Verse: 3:3

“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’”

Today’s passage is a serious conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus regarding new birth into the kingdom of God. Nicodemus had climbed up the ladder of success and attained everything the world has to offer. But he came to Jesus at night seeking something from Jesus. With great compassion, Jesus introduced him to the kingdom of God. In John’s gospel we can find two kinds of kingdoms: earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of God. Earthly kingdoms are held by the prince of this world, Satan (Jn 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). So they are characterized by darkness, hatred, lying, murder, deception and death (Jn 3:19, 8:44, 15:18-25). However, the kingdom of God is different. Standing on trial before Pilate, Jesus said, **“My kingdom is not of this world ... my kingdom is from another place ... You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”** (Jn 18:36-37). Jesus is the King and his kingdom characterized by love, light, truth and peace (Jn 1:4, 3:16, 14:27). Which kingdom do you want to belong to? How can we belong to the kingdom of God? In today’s passage, let’s learn the secret of becoming children of God who inherit his kingdom.

First, unless one is born again (1-8).

In this part we learn why one needs to be born again, how to be born again and the evidence of being born again.

First of all, why one needs to be born again (1-3). Verse 1 gives us Nicodemus’ resume: he was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. In our time the word “Pharisee” has the bad connotation of a hypocritical person. But originally, as they arose in the time of Ezra, they were deeply concerned about maintaining the spiritual life of their nation and their identity as God’s chosen people. They were the Bible teachers for their nation, and were highly respected and influential. As time passed, however, they fell into legalism and established their own elite group based on strict standards and rules that even they could not keep. They became proud, judgmental and hypocritical. In Jesus’ time they were the main opponents of the gospel. When we review church history, we find that

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this cycle is repeated again and again. It is easy for us to repeat this cycle. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but he was different from others. Though there was tension between the Jewish leaders and Jesus, Nicodemus did not blindly side with the Pharisees but came to Jesus personally to talk with him. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus as a rabbi, and that he had been sent from God, based on the miracles he performed (2). Later, when Jewish religious leaders tried to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus opposed them (7:51). After Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus publically identified himself as one of Jesus' disciples by claiming his body and anointed him with a huge amount of myrrh and aloes (19:39). To sum up, Nicodemus was a truth-seeker among the Pharisees.

Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish ruling council, known as the Sanhedrin and composed of the top 70 leaders in the nation Israel. It can be compared to the U.S. Senate. His name means, "the conqueror of the people." He was one of the most successful people in the nation, and the one whom Jewish mothers told their sons to imitate. But inwardly he had a very serious life problem. He had not conquered himself. One night he came to Jesus. Why did he come at night? Most likely, he wanted to avoid being seen. But in fact, it reflects the darkness of his heart. As a young man, he might have thought that he would be happy if only he attained his position. So he worked hard and sacrificed a lot without complaint. But after obtaining all that he wanted, he found himself suffering from emptiness and despair. George Bernard Shaw, who received both a Nobel Prize and an Oscar, said, "Man has two kinds of despair. One comes from failure. The other comes after success." He reminds us of the caterpillar in the story, "Hope for the flower." After climbing over many other caterpillars to get to the top of the column, thinking there was something there, he found that there was nothing, and the only place left to go was down to the ground. That is the reality of all earthly kingdoms. So I want to say to young people, "Be ambitious! Work hard and make a great success! But know that it is not your final destination; it is only the beginning of knowing the truth about life."

What did Jesus say to Nicodemus? Let's read verse 3. **"Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'"** Jesus knew what was in each person (2:25). As soon as Jesus saw Nicodemus, he understood his deep agony and knew what he really needed. It was to see the kingdom of God. Here the verb "see" has the meaning of "experience." There is a huge difference between a person who has the kingdom of God in his heart and one who does not. One who does not have the kingdom of God is always confined to the limits of this world and is never satisfied. They are always driven

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by something, such as greed or lust or desire for power and honor. In order to get what they want, they compete with each other and hurt each other. They try to forget about their agonies by enjoying bits of fun and pleasure, but always feel empty, lonely and meaningless. They have no peace and no lasting joy. But those who have the kingdom of God in their hearts can rejoice always. Their joy is not rooted in temporal things, but in God and his kingdom. They are thankful to God in all circumstances. They have peace that passes understanding. They work hard for the glory of God without complaining and sleep well at night. This is why we need to see the kingdom of God. In order to see the kingdom of God we must be born again.

What does it mean to be born again? It means to be born of God (1:13). As babies are born into the world with physical life, so God's children are born into a new world with spiritual life. It is not the mere improvement of our condition, but the beginning of a new life as a new creation in a new world. That is why Paul says, **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone! The new is here”** (2 Cor 5:17) As natural people in Adam, we were alive physically, but dead in sin spiritually, and objects of God's wrath. We could not escape God's judgment. People think that death is the end of everything. But the Bible says that man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment (Heb 9:27). Judgment is unbearable. Many people take God's judgment lightly and even joke about it. But with it is time to actually face it, they are terrified. Recently, one woman on trial for the murder of her boyfriend claimed she did not mind receiving the death sentence. But at the time of sentencing, she was afraid and asked not to receive the death sentence. The good news is that those who are born again cross over from eternal condemnation to eternal life (Jn 5:24). To be born again is a matter of eternal consequence. It is the most important thing for each person. This is why Jesus said, **“You must be born again”** (7).

Secondly, how to be born again (4-8). How did Nicodemus respond? He said, **“How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!”** (4) Nicodemus could not understand Jesus' words at all. It is because he tried to figure it out by reason. But spiritual truth can be understood only by the help of the Holy Spirit. Paul said, **“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit”** (1 Cor 2:14). Though Nicodemus was resistant due to his surprise, Jesus was very patient and kind and gave a clear explanation out of his compassion. In verse 5, Jesus answered, **“Very**

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truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” Here we need to understand what “water and the Spirit” means. We should not try to interpret each word separately. Together they describe what God does to give new birth. The background for “water and the Spirit” is Ezekiel 36:25-27, which says, **“I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...I will put my Spirit in you....”** In Titus 3:5b Paul says, **“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit....”** When God works in us in this way we are transported into a new world, the kingdom of God. God rescues us from the dominion of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col 1:13-14).

In verse 6 Jesus explains in more detail that just as there is physical birth, there is also spiritual birth, saying, **“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit”** (6). When we are born of the Spirit, the seed of God’s life is planted in us (1 Jn 3:9). This life is different from physical life, which is perishable; it is from an imperishable seed which leads to eternal life (1 Pe 1:23). This seed grows in us, purifying us from sin, and developing the holiness of God in us until we become like Jesus (1 Jn 5:18).

Nicodemus was surprised at Jesus’ words, **“You must be born again”** (7). He needed to understand the work of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus explained using the metaphor of wind in order to help him. Verse 8 says, **“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.”** The words for “wind” and “spirit” are the same in Greek “pnyoo’-mah.” But the meaning is different; they are homonyms. The wind blows wherever it pleases. No one knows where it comes from or where it is going. Modern science tries to figure it out, but cannot really. Whenever I check the weather forecast on my i-phone, I find that it has changed, even from two hours before. The wind is mysterious. We cannot see the wind, but we can feel it and see the evidences of it. In the same way, the Holy Spirit works as he wishes. Just as the wind may blow gently or violently, so the Holy Spirit may work gently like a dove or powerfully, like a hurricane. In some people the Holy Spirit works so quietly and gently that it is hard to notice. But in other people the Holy Spirit works so dramatically that everyone notices it. One thing is clear: he always leaves the evidence of change. Though we cannot see it with our own eyes, or analyze it by our reason, or know the process, we can recognize the work of the Holy Spirit through changed people - through their

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words, behavior and lifestyle. John Newton was a merciless slave trader. But he was changed into a man of mercy, who shed tears for one soul. There are innumerable examples down through the generations, including me and you.

Second, the Son of Man must be lifted up (9-15).

In this part Jesus teaches us what we should do in order to see the kingdom of God: accept Jesus' testimony, and primarily, look at Jesus, lifted up on the cross.

First of all, accept the testimony of Jesus (9-13). Nicodemus should have said "Amen," to Jesus' teaching. But to our surprise, he exposed his pride as a learned Pharisee and retorted, "**How can this be?**" (9) Jesus said three times, "**Very truly I tell you,**" which means "I am telling you the truth of God." But Nicodemus did not seriously consider Jesus' words. So he kept repeating, "How! How!" This time Jesus challenged him: "**You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?**" (10) It is not easy to teach a teacher, for they have a habit of learning in order to teach others. Jesus pointed out his real problem. Verse 11 says, "**Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.**" Nicodemus' lack of spiritual understanding was not an intellectual problem, but due to his pride. Nicodemus needed to humbly accept Jesus' words, for Jesus testified to what he knew and had seen.

In verse 12 Jesus taught Nicodemus that he needed to first believe what Jesus had told him, and then he could begin to grow more. But since he did not believe what Jesus had said, he had not even begun to grow. Spiritually speaking, he was like a pre-kindergarten child who did not know how to add or subtract. How could he know algebra or calculus? Jesus really wanted to reveal heavenly things to Nicodemus. But he was too proud to accept Jesus' word. He needed to curb his pride and realize that Jesus was uniquely qualified to teach about heavenly things. So Jesus said in verse 13, "**No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of man.**"

Why was Nicodemus so stubborn in resisting Jesus' testimony? Of course, he was proud. But it was more than this. Even though he came to Jesus seeking some kind of help, he was afraid of being changed. He worried that he might lose everything that he had achieved. It was a misconception. Being born again is not losing, but gaining. If he was born again, he would become a glorious child of God

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with a new life, new identity, and new hope. That is why Jesus earnestly taught about the kingdom of God.

Secondly, look at Jesus lifted up on the cross (14-15). Jesus did not give up helping Nicodemus. Jesus told him the most beautiful story of love and truth regarding his sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. Let's read verses 14-15. **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”** Jesus taught Nicodemus the way of salvation by telling a famous Bible story that he could understand. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them into the wilderness, they should have been thankful always. But whenever they faced troubles they revealed their slave mentality and grumbled, and complained against both God and Moses. Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people, especially on their complaining lips, and many Israelites died. Then they acknowledged their sin and asked Moses' prayer to take the snakes away from them. What was God's answer? Instead of taking the snakes away, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole and promised that anyone who was bitten could look up at the bronze snake and live. Usually, people who are bitten by a venomous snake take immediate steps to deal with the attack. They use a tourniquet to stop the blood flow, make an incision above the bite and try to suck the poison out of their bloodstream. At the same time, they have to watch out for other snakes which might be about to strike them. Dealing with these snakes required their full attention and concentration. It was unthinkable to turn away from the problem and look at a bronze snake on a pole. God's way of dealing with this problem was unreasonable and beyond understanding. It required their full trust, as a matter of life and death. Only those who fully trusted God more than their own ideas and thinking could look up at the bronze snake.

Jesus used the bronze snake as a symbol for himself. Jesus said, **“The Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him”** (14-15). The phrase “must be lifted up” means it was the only way of salvation that God provided. In this story, venomous snakes symbolize our sins. There are many snakes, darting around here and there: snakes of pride, lust, greed, jealousy, bitterness, hatred, and complaining. These venomous snakes attack people, and people are dying from snake bites. Their poison spreads very quickly. There is no medicine that can heal us from the poison of sin, though we have thousands of medicines that cure all other kinds of diseases. We cannot make an antidote, but God did. In his great mercy and love, God sent his one and only Son

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Jesus to be lifted up on the cross - to die and shed his blood for our sins. God promised that everyone who believes in Jesus may have eternal life in him. Let's look up at Jesus on the cross with full trust in God.