

# You Must Be Born Again

John 3:1-15

**Introduction:** If God Himself established a religion, complete with a priesthood, offerings, rituals and its own Authoritative Scripture wouldn't that be the right one to belong to? Wouldn't it be a given that this would be the religion that would guarantee your entrance into heaven when you died?

What if you go even further and decide to become a leader and teacher within this one true religion? You get a doctorate in its teachings and are completely familiar with all its rituals and writings. In fact, suppose you rise to the pinnacle of your vocation and become one of its foremost and most recognized teacher? Oh yes...one more thing. You become a scrupulous observer of all its tenants and rituals. That would make you a Pharisee in Jesus' day.

The Scripture today tells the story of such a man. His religion was the true one as was his Bible. He was living at the time Jesus began His earthly ministry and he had seen some of Christ's signs. At this point in the life of Christ, he would have seen the cleansing of the temple and Jesus' response to those who questioned Him. He might have even approved of what Jesus did in the temple, because being a Pharisee he was concerned about the spiritual and the ritual and not the mundane. The Pharisees had an intense dislike for the Sadducees who ran the temple exclusively and would have been responsible for the selling and thievery going on there. The whole incident might have caused this man to want to hear more from this young upstart of a teacher with such boldness. Let's read the account then together:

**John 3:1-15** Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; <sup>2</sup> this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of

Man. <sup>14</sup> "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

**Why am I preaching this sermon:** The three players in this event combine to teach us three things about how to get to heaven. No matter how much our present culture denigrates this idea of heaven in favor of fulfillment here and now, it still remains the most important issue of the human soul. BECAUSE...everyone dies! Some die unexpectedly when they still think they have plenty of time and plenty of living to do. Others age and see the remaining days slipping away on this earth. Either way all living humans will transition into the next life and there is nothing you can do to stop it. You can only prepare for it. So...what are the three things:

- The Impossibility of obtaining it by earthly human means [1-3]
- The Impossibility of understanding it by earthly human reasoning [4-7]
- The Necessity of complete trust in Jesus to give it to earthly human beings [8-15]

### **The Impossibility of obtaining it by earthly human means [1-3]**

**John 3:1-3** Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; <sup>2</sup> this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Let's start where John starts..."There was a man." But...he was in some ways an exceptional man. He was a man that everyone would expect to know the way to heaven. He was a religious big shot!

**Nicodemus:** Even his name means "victor or ruler over the people." And he is because he was a "**ruler of the Jews**" which means he had ascended to a position of authority and leadership that only 70 other men in all of Israel had obtained. It was roughly equivalent to being a US Senator. There are only 50 of them and so they are very exclusively important.

**This man came to Jesus by night:** There are a couple of thoughts about why. He could have come unobserved and hidden by the cover of darkness. It is still early in Christ's ministry at this point. Jesus has just driven the rascally Sadducees out of the temple and scolded them soundly and then confounded them with some strange promise to rebuild the temple in three days. So coming at night might have been a way to get some time alone with Christ and to be unobserved in the process. A win, win as we would say today.

**"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.":** This is a gracious remark. He elevates Jesus by calling Him teacher. He expresses interest by affirming a certain belief

that He has come from God and that God is helping Him to do these signs. What He has done here is interesting. He has elevated Jesus to the status of a Pharisee which is the highest compliment that can be given. But....as we will see is the greatest snare of man.

**Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.":** Nicodemus is all about the kingdom of heaven. He has invested his life and energy into getting to heaven. Into doing everything a man can possibly do to please God and be justified before God. He dresses, speaks, eats, prays according to precise formulas. He knows the Scripture from front to back....I mean these guys really knew what the Bible said.

But Jesus ignores all of this and responds to the gracious compliment and elevation with a seemingly absurd statement. God's response to everything Nicodemus brought to the discussion is to call for something that no man can do. Let me illustrate:

How many of you were consulted before you were born? Did you ask to be born? Did you offer to do something in exchange for being born? No, of course not. Everyone knows instinctively that this is something completely out of our control. How the church in our day every got to the place where we think we can "DO SOMETHING" in order to be born again is amazing story. Peter says that God causes men to be born again just as surely as your own human parents caused you to be born the first time.

**1 Peter 1:3-4** <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has **caused us to be born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

The Greek phrase "**born again**" also carries the strong sense of "born from above." Nicodemus certainly knew that Jesus was asking something beyond anything he had thought of or would have known how to do.

### **The Impossibility of understanding it by earthly human reason [4-7]**

**John 3:4-7** <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?": Now there is certainly some sarcasm here to be sure. It is a knee jerk response to something that seems ridiculous or impossible. But...it also reveals the fact that Nicodemus seemed to have no idea about the concept. He did not pause to ask himself what in his vast Biblical knowledge Jesus

might be referring to. He simply responds with incredulity and a bit of scorn. Bible knowledge does not mean that you know God or understand His Word. There is a lot of Bible Study for the sake of Bible knowledge. This was the fatal error of the Pharisee.

**John 5:39-40** <sup>39</sup> "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; <sup>40</sup> and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.

The Bible is given for one purpose alone. To exalt Christ as Lord and God and to reveal Him to men that they might know Him, be saved by Him and worship Him. Undeterred by his disdain, Jesus said to him....

**"Truly, truly, I say to you,:** "Truly, truly" means you can count on this. Only John records its use by Christ but it is always before a profound statement of spiritual reality.

**Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God:** There are a lot of theories about the phrase "born of water and the Spirit." Some say it is the water of physical child birth. Many think it is baptism, but neither Jesus nor Paul made it a point to baptized anyone?

So...let's talk about grammar for just a minute. This is the restatement of what Jesus had just said to Nicodemus. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Grammatically this is a restatement of "born again" with a further explanation. In Greek it goes like this, "born of water, even the Spirit" or "water also the Spirit." In all likelihood the water and the Spirit refer to the same thing. NOW....is there anything in the Old Testament Scripture that an Old Testament Scholar and teacher should have been able to think of when Jesus made such a statement?

**Ezekiel 36:24-28** <sup>24</sup> "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. <sup>28</sup> "You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

**"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit:** Jesus now refines the statement further. We are talking about physical life and spiritual life. You can do a lot with your physical life but you cannot get to heaven. You can enter in to religion, ritual, study, morality, pleasure, joy and even service for others but you cannot get to heaven.

**1 Corinthians 15:47-50** <sup>47</sup> The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we

will also bear the image of the heavenly. <sup>50</sup> Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

**"Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.':** Jesus tells him to stop acting like He is saying something that amazing. Jesus thinks Nicodemus should remember this....that he should know this and as we will see that he should already be teaching this. This is not new revelation it is forgotten in the fog of religion and self-effort and a very high opinion of oneself. And that brings us to our final point.

### **The Necessity of complete confidence in Jesus alone to give it to earthly human beings [8-15]**

**John 3:8-15** <sup>8</sup> "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?" <sup>11</sup> "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

**"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going":** We are 20 centuries now away from this moment and yet know one has yet figured out how to control the wind. We have some understanding of why it blows. We can go to the moon and split the atom but we cannot make the wind blow or stop it from blowing.

**"So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.":** I have never seen the wind and neither have you. You can see it push over houses and trees but you cannot see it! It can also be gentle....drying the clothes in the afternoon sun or swishing peacefully through the tall trees. We see the results of it but never the wind itself.

Why do men think they can do things to get to heaven? Because like Nicodemus, they believe that it is a straight up bargain between God and men. God wants something from men and it is within our power to give it to Him. God will accept your good works, morality, religion or prayers in exchange for heaven. Nicodemus certainly believed that when he came to Jesus that night. Or the evangelical notion of our day....that God will trade you faith for heaven. If you will just believe in Him that is all he wants. If you will say a certain prayer or confess a certain doctrinal creed....God will give you heaven. Once that issue is settled you can get back to life as usual. BUT...Jesus is saying that entering the Kingdom of God is a total work of the Spirit of God....and like the wind, The Spirit strikes with invisible and uncontrollable force. The Spirit cannot be confined

to rote prayers or creeds...hand raising or confessions of doctrine. A man must seek God with this knowledge. If he comes in any other way he comes offering something to God in exchange for salvation.

This does not mean you cannot come to Christ. Christ's entire ministry was one of calling and seeking men. It means that you must not bring anything when you come. You must cease thinking of yourself as a contributor to your salvation. As someone worthy to be saved. Why? Well Jesus has explained this to Nicodemus and to us:

We are not alive spiritually and we need something that only God can give. God gives it freely and you should seek the gift and forsake your own opinions of yourself. There is nothing to do or trade for it anymore than an unborn baby has anything to trade for their life.

**Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?:** Jesus thinks that Nicodemus should have known this truth from the Word of God. The Bible has always made it clear that Salvation belongs to the Lord and we receive it by trusting God with our lives and eternal souls. We give ourselves to Him with abandon. Like a little child does to their own parents.

Humanity is so far from this that it seems like nonsense to preach the gospel today. Even in American evangelicalism it is greeted with disbelief and even scorn. We buzz the words to one another, but when we really stop to consider them we don't like what they mean. Only Jesus can save and only Jesus can satisfy the heart of men.

**John 7:37-39** Now on the last day, the great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony:** With these words Jesus begins to bring his discourse with Nicodemus to a close. Jesus is making startling claims here. I would never say anything like this. If I did you should have me committed right away. Jesus is saying, "I have first hand visual knowledge about heaven and God. When I tell you these things I have experienced them myself. I am an eyewitness to God's one and only way to heaven."

**"If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?:** Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus. He knew the hearts of all men. This is why Jesus launched immediately into how a man gets to heaven. And...he explains it with the earthly metaphor of birth. Nicodemus did not believe that what Jesus was saying was true. He did not trust Christ's take on it, but Jesus was repeating what God had always said in the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus is asking the question, "If

you don't trust me to tell you how to get into the Kingdom of God how would you ever trust me to tell you anything else about the kingdom of God?" AND...there are countless nominal Christians like this today. They want Christ to help them with their careers, marriages and finances. They want and even think that Christ has teachings that can help with those things, but they do not have any understanding of the actual beginning of the Christian Life. I make it a point to explain the gospel to people who tell me they are Christians and many say to me that they have never heard anything like it before. To quote Nicodemus, "how can these things be?"

**No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man:** Listen Nicodemus, No one has ever gone up to heaven from earth. We are confined to Earth. No religious person has ever figured out God through their own wisdom or insight. You need God to tell you how it works. God alone knows the plan not men. I have been in heaven with the Father. I am telling you now, how it works.

**John 1:18** No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.

**John 6:46** "Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.

Yes there have been a few rare occasions where men have gone into heaven, but the overwhelmingly common experience of humanity is this one; If you want to know about God...then God is going to have to tell you. If you want to know how to get to heaven then God is the one who will tell you how. You can imagine all you want and learn all you can and be as moral as possible, but I am telling you, Jesus said, that the only way to get to heaven is 100% out of your control. You are going to have to trust Me to get you there. And that brings us to this completely narrow, non inclusive, non universal assertion by Christ about Himself....

**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life:** In the desert the Jews were being killed by poisonous snakes because of their rebellion, defiance and complete distrust of God. There was nowhere to go to escape. The situation, like yours and mine in this world, was absolutely hopeless. They tried, like all men to save themselves, but could not.

**Numbers 21:4-7** <sup>4</sup> Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. <sup>5</sup> The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." <sup>6</sup> The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

At the height of the despair, God tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole and tell people to look at it and He will save them. What is this? Is it faith in a snake or a pole? Of course not! It is faith in God! It is believing and trusting God and not yourself. Nicodemus knew this story.

**Numbers 21:8-9** <sup>8</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." <sup>9</sup> And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Now Jesus is telling him something else that will require trust in God and not in yourself. What is it? "You cannot save yourself." Religion was never intended to save you. God will save you by Himself and with no help from you at all. However improbable that seems to you it is the truth Jesus said. I came down from heaven to tell you. God will give you life through The Holy Spirit and no other way. Trust in God...Trust in me and you will live.

Don't trust in yourselves. God hides himself from men who trust in themselves, their morality, their religion, their intrinsic goodness. He delights to reveal Himself to the humble. Those who know they don't know. Those who have little faith and little strength. God reveals Himself most fully to those who come with childlike faith... So consider once more these words of Jesus when He prayed....

**Matthew 11:25-30** <sup>25</sup> ....., "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. <sup>26</sup> "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. <sup>27</sup> "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*. <sup>28</sup> "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. <sup>30</sup> "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."