

## YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

John 3:1-13

Key Verse 3:5

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

**First, "You must be born again" (1-5).** Today's passage is the conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. Who was Nicodemus? Verse 1 is Nicodemus' profile. It reads: "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council." He was a Pharisee. Usually, Christians have a kind of an allergic reaction to the term, "Pharisees." Whenever they hear this title, they are reminded of bad guys - enemies. But objectively speaking, they were really not bad. Instead, they were the ones who had exceptional zeal for the worship of God. The word, "Pharisee" means "separated" or "elite." The Pharisees separated themselves from ordinary people and pursued the highest form of dedication to God by keeping the Laws of Moses strictly. They started memorizing the five books of Moses at the age of six, and practiced tough rituals such as fasting two days a week, and bathing three times a day. While other kids were messing up their lives with all kinds of mischief such as stealing candies or getting into fights, they kept themselves pure. Even dating a girl or watching PG-13 movies was totally out of the question. Nicodemus lived that kind of life. He denied all his youthful passion and put his fleshly desires under his full control. He was very religious, completely moralistic and self-disciplined. He was clean in every aspect of his life; simply, he was elite.

He was also a member of the Jewish ruling council. This ruling council, called the Sanhedrin, was like the US congress, Supreme Court, and Executive branch all in one. The Council's 70 members were the most revered men of all Israel. To be admitted to the council was the dream of every prominent man, but it was not easy. Any hopeful candidate had to qualify in three ways. 1) One must come from a distinguished family. So, if your last name was Smith or Plumber, you had no hope! 2) One must master the seven subjects of mathematics, politics, oratory, philosophy, history, medicine, and astronomy. The Jewish ruling council represented the most influential intellectual circle of the time. 3) One must be rich. Nicodemus met all these criteria. He was rich. He was brilliant. And his family background was outstanding. In modern terms, he was like a man, coming from the Kennedys, graduating Harvard university at the age 20 with triple majors, then, getting PhDs in three areas - Law, medicine, and theology, at the age of 25; then, becoming a billionaire at the age of 30, through his internet business, and then, becoming a Congress man at the age of 33, but still living so clean and moralistic life, being so

faithful to church every week. What would his next step be except being the President of the USA? Nicodemus acquired everything a man could want—power, money, respect, and intellect; on top of this, he lived a clean, moralistic life. There was nothing left that he could want. His name Nicodemus means, "Victorious among his people" or simply, "Conqueror" and indeed he had conquered life. It seemed that he must be the happiest person in the world!

But this man visited Jesus at night. Here, 'night' refers to the last segment of the day, which was about 11 PM to dawn. It was really an odd and shocking time for a man like Nicodemus to visit someone like Jesus. For what reason would anyone come to your house and knock on the door at midnight unless it was an absolute emergency? Nicodemus had something that had really bothered him. When he came to Jesus, Nicodemus did not talk about his problem at all, but just flattered Jesus saying, "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." How did Jesus respond? Let's read verse 3:

<sup>3</sup>In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Jesus was not fooled by him; instead, he pointed out his problem directly. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Many people think of seeing the kingdom of God as something that is available only after death. But that's not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus was not discussing with Nicodemus about some theological matter, but he was talking about Nicodemus' problem. His problem was that, despite all his achievements, Nicodemus could not see the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to see the kingdom of God? Let's say that today, by God's marvelous grace, you are invited to the kingdom of God, maybe, in your dream. How will it be? "Marvelous! Wonderful!" It will be beautiful and glorious that you will be so amazed and happy, and say, "Wow! This is the kingdom of God! I have heard about it, but now I see it!" You will be so overjoyed and satisfied; you will never want to leave, but stay there forever. That joy, happiness, fulfillment - that's what Nicodemus wanted to see; that kind of a truly happy and glorious life was what Nicodemus wanted to have. By struggling hard to keep the laws and become a Pharisee, that's what he had expected to have - such joy, happiness and fulfillment. But acquiring the title, "Pharisee" did not give him such joy and happiness; his morally clean life did not make his life truly fulfilling; even his completely religious life, or his great Bible knowledge could not make him see the kingdom of God. Then, he expected that if he became a member of the Jewish ruling council, he would be really happy. But no achievement he had acquired thus far could make him see

the kingdom of God. Maybe, he married Miss Israel and had 5 sons and 3 daughters, and lived in a Beverly Hill's mansion, driving a BMW. But despite all these achievements, still he could not see the kingdom of God - he could not say that he was really happy. Now he was lost on top of the world, without knowing what to do and how to solve the problem. Outwardly, as a well seasoned politician, he had an attractive smile on his face and waved his hand to those who cheered at him. But inwardly, he was agonized.

Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Jesus is proclaiming one absolute truth that no one can be truly happy unless he is born again. If you want to be happy in your life, you must be born again. No one can be happy however way they try - maybe, religiously, intellectually, morally; no matter what success they may have in the world - money, family, fame or power, people cannot be happy unless they are born again. It is all peoples' struggle to live a truly happy, fulfilling and meaningful life - some people in noble-looking ways like Nicodemus, and some others in ignoble ways like the Samaritan woman who had married five times or like the woman who was caught in the act of adultery in John chapter 8. Since mankind was disconnected from God, the source of life, people struggle hard to find the meaning and purpose of their life in things of this world or in achieving something remarkable in the world - that's the lifestyle of Cain's descendants. But with this proclamation, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again," Jesus shows that no matter how hard they try, all of them fail to find it; all these people fail to find that truly meaningful, fulfilling and happy life, because they are not born again. Nicodemus is the representative of all these people - he is the best case, and this best scenario did not work at all. Hollywood stars testify to this truth very clearly with their endless scandals. People must be born again.

The solution Jesus suggested was being born again. "You must be born again." This expression implies a total, fundamental and essential change must be there if anyone wants to see the kingdom of God. Just some improvement such as being a little more moralistic than before, or living a little more cleaner life than before, or having a little more Bible knowledge does not help them at all; fundamentally, the way they live their life, or what they live for, is wrong; there must be a fundamental change in their life. You must be born again. This means that you must start your life newly from its scratch.

How did Nicodemus respond? Look at verse 4: "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" When Jesus diagnosed that he was there because he could not see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus did not raise any question about it; he admitted it. But the solution Jesus suggested was not what he could accept. He said that being born again after getting old was

technically impossible. So Jesus explained how people could be born twice. Look at verse 5. Let's read this verse together:

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

"...Unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Here we see that we need two components to be born again – water and the Spirit. If you want to be born again, you need both water and the Spirit. The Spirit, of course, refers to the Holy Spirit, showing that there is a role the Holy Spirit plays for people to be born again. We cannot control the Holy Spirit, but when we do what we ought to do, the Holy Spirit does his part and we come to experience being born again. So, the only thing we are to do to be born again is water. Here, water refers to the water baptism of John the Baptist, which means, "repentance." John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:11, "I baptize you with water for repentance." The apostle Paul says, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance." (Acts 19:4) There is only one thing that is required for people to be born again, that is, repentance. Being born again is not so complicated; coming to God really is not so complicated. When you repent and God sees that your repentance is real, the Holy Spirit gives birth to your spirit. This is really an amazing secret that, through repentance, people come to be born again; through repentance, people come to see the kingdom of God; through repentance people can enter the kingdom of God where they will enjoy all beautiful things of God's kingdom.

This is the secret. We all want to experience the kingdom of God - that beautiful life, so fulfilling, meaningful and happy - nothing in the world could help us see the kingdom of God - money could not, fame could not, and even faithful religious life or Bible knowledge could not make us see the kingdom of God; but when you really repent, when you really turn to God in repentance in Jesus, you will be born again and you can see the kingdom of God. That's why all people must repent! All people must be born again through water and the Spirit, through repentance and the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist's first message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Mt 3:2) Jesus' first message was this: "The time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." (Mk 1:15) Jesus sent out his 12 apostles two by two on their mission journey. At that time, their message was that people should repent. (Mk 6:12) It means that if you think you are a human, you must repent.

It is very interesting to notice that Jesus used this kind of spiritual or theological expression to Nicodemus - seeing the kingdom of God and being born again - because Nicodemus was a Bible scholar familiar with those terms. To the Samaritan woman, he didn't use this kind of expression; instead, he used the term, "thirst," which the Samaritan woman could understand very

well. "Whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again, but he who drinks the water I give him, will never thirst." (Jn 4) When people were looking for bread as the means of their security, Jesus used the term, "hunger." After saving a condemned woman who had lived in a secret sin Jesus used the terms, "darkness" and "light," saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In this way, Jesus used various terms to various people to show their spiritual condition, and invited them to himself for a truly fulfilling life - "see the kingdom of God," "will never thirst," "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus invited them to have a real life, beautiful and fulfilling, which they had all been looking for, "zoe." Then, how? By repentance, by really turning to him and pursuing him. To Nicodemus he said, "You must be born again of water and the Spirit." To Samaritan woman, he said, "Go, call your husband and come back!" To the condemned woman, he said, "Go now, and leave your life of sin." He said to the rich young man, "Sell everything you have, give to the poor, and then, come, follow me." Nicodemus lived a clean life, believing in the God of Abraham, believing in the Bible, attending worship service all the time, but ultimately, he had been pursuing his own life for his own happiness; he did it in a moralistic way; he did it in a religious way; he did it by pursuing great success in the world; it was a self-seeking life, not life for God. Now he had to repent of his self-seeking life, turn to God in repentance and live for God alone - that would be the expression of his repentance. Fundamentally, people must turn from their own way of life, from their own self-seeking life to the life of living for God. God should be the goal of their life, the source of their happiness and joy, not some achievement in the world or their family. People must repent!

**Second, "So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (6-13).** Look at verse 6. Jesus says, "Flesh give birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Here, Jesus explains what it means to be born again. To be born again means to be born of body and spirit. We were born of our mothers; for me, it was about 45 years ago. That was the birth of our flesh, and this flesh has been growing for forty five years, now a little worn out. Then, when we repent and accept Jesus as our Savior, the Holy Spirit gives birth to our spirit, so we experience the second birth. That is called 'born again.' "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Natural man has only one birth, the birth of their flesh from his mother, and this natural man cannot see the kingdom of God no matter what because his spirit is not born yet, and thereby, there cannot be any relationship with God who is Spirit. Simply, a natural person is disconnected from God, the source of life; they are like branches cut off from the original tree; no matter what they do and have achieved, they are simply withering moment by moment; it is impossible for this natural man to see the kingdom of God; it is impossible for him to find true fulfillment of life while he is withering and perishing. Like Cain and his descendants, all these people live as endless wanderers on earth, looking for something or someone to

fill their void.

But when we are born again of water and the Spirit, when the Holy Spirit gives birth to our spirit, we can have spiritual relationship with God who is the source of life; there, we come to enjoy true fulfillment and happiness, and we can see that the void that has been there in our heart so long has been finally filled. The Bible says that God set eternity in humans, and only God can fill it. When you are born again, now you have an access to God for beautiful fellowship with Him. So, pursue Him and enjoy Him all the way, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Jesus says, "You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." Being born again or being born of the Holy Spirit is really a great mystery. But Jesus tells us not to be bewildered about it. He illustrates the mystery of being born again through the example of the wind. We cannot see the wind, but as we see the leaves of trees trembling, by hearing the sound of the wind, we can tell that the wind is blowing. In the same way, we don't know precisely how or when people are born again; however, there are evidences of people being born again such as their changed life – a selfish man becomes sacrificial; a persecutor suddenly begins to preach that Jesus is the Lord; a sinful man struggles to be holy. "The wind blows,... 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."

Look at verses 9 through 13. Let's read these verses responsively:

<sup>9</sup>"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. <sup>10</sup>"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Nicodemus rejected Jesus' message of being born again continuously by saying, "How come?" or "How can this be?" It seemed like he was not accepting Jesus' message because he could not understand it. But actually, it was because of his pride and unwilling heart to repent. Whenever Jesus said something, Nicodemus talked back, saying, "How come? I don't get it." This proud attitude made Jesus angry. So Jesus rebuked him, saying, "You are Israel's teacher. And do you not understand these things?" Jesus also pointed out his problem saying, "You do not accept our testimony." In verse 12, "earthly things" refer to the beginning stage of God's redemption work that occurs here on earth such as being born again, and "heavenly things" refer to the

completion of God's redemption work such as complete sanctification or glorification, which will be done in heaven. So far, Jesus taught Nicodemus the beginning stage of God's redemption work, which happens here on earth, but Nicodemus refused to believe; then, how could he believe if Jesus talked about more mysterious and glorious things, like the completion of God's salvation work, which will happen in heaven? Jesus really wanted him to bend his pride and accept his message so that he might be born again and live a truly happy and beautiful life. Jesus must have felt a great burden and pain in his heart for Nicodemus! Jesus said to him in verse 13, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man." Jesus is the only person who knows about the things of heaven because he came from heaven. Things about heaven are mysterious. No one knows what the people in heaven do during each day of their life. No one knows what kind of language you are supposed to use in heaven, nor do they know what it is like to shake hands with holy angels; or how happy they feel when they see God's face and have dinner together with our Lord Jesus. But Jesus knew about all these things because he was the only person who had ever come from heaven. Only he can tell people the things of heaven for he came from heaven. How badly he wanted Nicodemus to bend his pride and accept his words so that he would see the kingdom of God and be truly happy!

In this passage, we learn the universal truth that man must be born again. Being born again is not something vague or metaphysical, but it is the matter of the true joy and happiness of our life. If you are not born again, you cannot experience true happiness. If you are not born again, your life cannot have any meaning despite your success or worldwide fame. But if you are born again, now you can see the kingdom of God; so pursue it wholeheartedly, secure it and you will be overjoyed in the fellowship with God; if you are born again, now rejoice because you are children of God and you will inherit his kingdom. God is your Father. Let's humble ourselves and remove all undesirable things from our hearts and life so that we can live for God and pursue Him alone. That's how we can enjoy true happiness in this life, and enter the kingdom of God in the age to come.

One Word: You Must Be Born Again