“YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN”

John 3:1–8

Key Verse: 3:3

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

Have you ever received an invitation to something very special? Like a birthday party, a prestigious school, or a high-leveled meeting? Didn’t it make you feel so good? On the other hand, have you ever gotten a rejection letter? Maybe you weren’t old enough, or smart enough, or strong enough. Maybe your credit score was too low. Maybe your driver’s license expired, or you forgot your admission ticket! Worst of all, maybe you were the wrong race or ethnicity. In any case, didn’t that rejection letter make you feel so bad? In today’s passage Jesus has an in-depth conversation with a person, and the topic is about “getting in.” But it’s not to a party or a school; it’s to God’s kingdom. Being a member of God’s kingdom has to be the most important privilege there is. But Jesus says only certain people get in. Who are those people? Only those who’ve been born again. What does that mean? How can that happen? Why is it so important? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Look at verse 1. Here the author introduces us to a man named Nicodemus. Who was he? It says he was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. Among people he was one of the most privileged. The ruling council was a national body that had only 71 members. They were the elite, wealthy, most educated people. The Pharisees were a conservative religious group who memorized the Bible, strived for purity and kept the most rigorous rules and rituals. We don’t know whether Nicodemus worked really hard to get where he was, or whether he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. In any case, he was now the crème de la crème. He was at the top of society. He had wealth, power and privilege. He was the object of envy.

Look at verse 2. We find several intriguing things here. First of all, he came to Jesus; Jesus didn’t go to him. Why would such a man feel the need to come to Jesus? He doesn’t seem to have any problem. We also notice what he says. He calls Jesus “Rabbi” which means “Teacher” and says he has come from God. It gives the impression that he wants to learn from Jesus. But who was more educated than Nicodemus? Certainly Jesus wasn’t. Jesus didn’t go to any exclusive Jewish schools. He was just a carpenter from a lowly small town called Nazareth in Galilee.

But when we look further at what Nicodemus says, we notice that he’s impressed with the “signs” Jesus was doing. Let’s look back at 2:23: “Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.” The “signs” refers to miracles. Jesus had been performing miracles in Jerusalem. John doesn’t tell us anything about what these miracles were; he just calls them “signs,” emphasizing that they were not an end, but were pointing to something, just like a sign points somewhere. But many people when they saw these signs started believing in Jesus. That seems really good, right? But look at 2:24,25: “But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.” What does this mean? First of all, it means their believing in Jesus was superficial. They didn’t reflect on the meaning of the signs; they just liked the fact that Jesus could perform miracles. It also means that faith based on miracles left them unchanged inside.

So, what is “in each person”? It’s referring to sin. Sin is in each of us, no matter who we are or how good we may seem. David was known as the best king Israel ever had. He was a courageous fighter, poet, musician, singer and shepherd of people. But even David was a sinner. He wrote in Psalm 51:5, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” The sin in us all is like a germ waiting to break out into a full-blown disease. It can make us irrational and scary. As long as the sin in us is not dealt with, we can’t really be trusted. Worst of all, it separates us from God. Isaiah 59:2 says, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Miracles can never solve our inner problem. Jesus performed signs not so that people could believe from afar and be satisfied, but so that they would come to him and have a real, inner change.

But the good thing here is that Nicodemus did come to Jesus. That’s a start. Surely it wasn’t easy for him to do that. In chapter 1 we saw how Pharisees came to John the Baptist to ask him who he was. But they came just to take an answer back to those who sent them. They had to do it. Nicodemus, on the other hand, came personally. He wanted to know for himself. And because his fellow Pharisees and ruling council members didn’t like Jesus, it was risky for him to come to Jesus. So he came at night, so that he wouldn’t be seen.

“At night” seems to symbolize his spiritual condition. Despite his high position and education, Nicodemus was in inner darkness. What is this “inner darkness”? Romans 1:21 says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” This describes not just Nicodemus but all human beings. Ephesians 4:18 says, “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.” Putting these two verses together, when we don’t glorify God as God and give thanks to him, we become proud, foolish, spiritually ignorant and hard-hearted. We can’t fix our inner spiritual problem on our own. No amount of education or religious training or discipline can fix it. We all need to come to Jesus personally.

Nicodemus, a high-ranking person, came at night to Jesus and said some flattering words, praising him. It seemed like a promising situation in many ways. But how did Jesus respond? Read verse 3. Jesus was being hard on him. He was saying Nicodemus couldn’t see the kingdom of God because he wasn’t born again. To a person like Nicodemus it was a humiliating rebuke.

Why was Jesus saying this? He wasn’t condemning him; he was trying to help him. He was cutting through all the pleasantries to get to the heart of the matter. Jesus could see right into him, that Nicodemus couldn’t see the kingdom of God. What does it mean to “see” God’s kingdom? Simply, God’s kingdom is where God rules. But isn’t God ruling the whole earth? Yes he is, but most people can’t see it. All they can see is the darkness and the sin and the hypocrisy and the meaninglessness. Ironically, Nicodemus the ruler couldn’t see God’s rule. Why not? Because he was spiritually blind. As a ruling council member all Nicodemus could see was people’s rule. He saw all the political scheming and manipulation and power struggles, but he couldn’t see what God was doing. What was God doing? God had sent Jesus. But Nicodemus knew that. God was working miracles through Jesus. Nicodemus knew that, too. But Nicodemus didn’t understand what it all meant. He couldn’t see that God had sent the promised Messiah, his one and only Son, to be the Savior of the world. All he could see that Jesus was a great rabbi, an intriguing teacher.

How could Nicodemus open his eyes to see what God was doing? Jesus said he needed to be born again. In our culture “born again Christians” tends to have a very negative connotation. It calls to mind obnoxious people preaching to and judging others, not understanding or loving. What did Jesus mean by being born again? He meant something beautiful. Back in chapter 1 the author said that those who believe in Jesus receive the right to become children of God. 1:13 says, “…children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” It meant being born Jewish was no guarantee. It also meant that human effort or willpower doesn’t cut it, either. Born again means born of God. In brief, it means spiritual rebirth. In verse 3, the word “again” in Greek can also be translated “from above.” It emphasizes not repetition, but something that only God can do. And he can do it in anyone’s life.

How did Nicodemus respond? Look at verse 4. He’s objecting, saying he’s too old to be born again. He’s even making fun of Jesus’ words, as if he had to climb back up into his mother’s womb. He’s resisting not because what Jesus is saying is ridiculous, but because he’s too proud to accept it. Like him, we all tend to be so skilled at evading the truth. It’s especially hard to accept the truth that our whole life foundation is wrong and that we have to start all over again. It’s really challenging.

But Jesus didn’t back down. Why? He wasn’t just trying to win an argument; he believed that even Nicodemus could change. What did he say? Read verse 5. Here he switches from “see” to “enter.” It’s an even stronger warning. If he wasn’t born again, not only would Nicodemus not be able to see God’s kingdom now, he wouldn’t be able to enter it after this life is over. Despite all his Bible knowledge and his high position, Nicodemus would find himself left out of God’s kingdom if he were not born again. It’s a sobering truth he really needed to accept.

Jesus adds here, “born of water and the Spirit.” What does it mean? It explains what “born again” or “born from above” mean. Simply, both water and the Spirit come from above, from heaven, from God. Water comes down like rain on the dry earth, and the Spirit gives life to the dead. Water symbolizes cleansing and the Spirit has power to give new life, to change anyone from deep within.

But how can anyone be born of water and the Spirit? John the Baptist said that Jesus had come to baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:33). Jesus is the only One who can make that happen. He alone baptizes a person with the Holy Spirit. But when? In Acts 2 we see how Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the first believers. In his first sermon Peter explained how anyone can experience spiritual rebirth. He said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Ac2:38). It’s a gift. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit only when we repent and believe in him. There’s nothing else we can do or need to do.

Jesus goes on. Read verse 6. Here he’s is speaking to Nicodemus’ complaint that he couldn’t climb back into his mother’s womb. Jesus is saying that being born again isn’t about flesh but about the Spirit’s work. He’s not being negative about flesh; he’s just saying that flesh has a limitation. Flesh can only give birth to flesh. Flesh cannot give birth to spirit. He’s emphasizing again that our race, family background or efforts have nothing to do with spiritual rebirth. It’s good to be born into a Christian family, to be sure. But it’s no guarantee that we’ll be born again. That’s something only the Spirit can do in us very personally.

Jesus then explains further. Read verses 7,8. Jesus compared the Spirit’s work to the wind. Like the wind, the Spirit is real, and powerful, but also invisible and uncontrollable. The Spirit is God’s power to change even the most hardened, fixed, stubborn sinner. But no one can control the Spirit. We can only humbly yield to and submit to him. That’s exactly what Nicodemus needed to hear.

So what does all this mean to us? First of all, we all need to take Jesus’ words here very seriously, or one day we may find out too late that we’re excluded. We should examine ourselves and ask: have I really been born again? We shouldn’t be depending on anything or anyone else except Jesus for my spiritual rebirth. Also, this passage is speaking to what we’re pursuing in life. Are we looking to climb up in the world? But even those at the top, when they’re not born again, are in darkness. For those who’ve experienced new birth, the passage also has something to say. In Galatians 3:3 Apostle Paul rebuked believers who were reverting to some form of legalism: “Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” When we start depending on our own efforts in Christian life and ministry, on a system of rules or outward activities, we’re in spiritual danger. It’s humbling to depend only on the Holy Spirit, but it’s the best spiritual place to be in. Finally, this passage is telling us the gospel, the good news that anyone can be born again, really changed from within by the Holy Spirit, if only they repent and come to Jesus. Instead of feeling discouraged, despaired or disillusioned, we need to have hope for any kind of person because of what the Spirit can do. Let’s read verse 3 again. May God help us experience new birth so that we can see his glorious kingdom working even in our world, even in our midst.