

A New Birth is the Only Way into God's Kingdom

John 3:1-17 • 2021-05-30 • Trinity Sunday



That was an amazing picture that we read earlier in Isaiah, wasn't it? Isaiah saw the throne room of God. Seraphs, fiery angels, were covering their eyes and covering their feet as they flew above his throne. They were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." The place shook as they spoke. Isaiah's response? "I don't belong here! Woe to me I am altogether unclean and unfit to be here!" We all have the goal of being a part of God's kingdom. But how will we ever stand in the presence of a Holy God? This Sunday, which is often celebrated as Trinity Sunday, we read about what it takes to stand in the presence of our Triune God. Jesus explains in John 3 how the only way to into God's kingdom is through a new birth.

In Jerusalem there was a man named Nicodemus. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he was a bigwig among the people. As a scribe he knew the Scriptures and was a prominent teacher of Israel. As a Pharisee he was very sincere in his religious devotion. He was 'heavenly-minded' and took religious matters most seriously. After all, he didn't want to miss out on his chance to enter into the glorious kingdom of God. He wanted to see the same Triune God which men like Moses and Isaiah saw. So, he studied the law and prophets like Isaiah. He paid careful attention.

Nicodemus thought he was on the right track. I'm sure that a lot of us can recall as a child tracing our way through a maze puzzle. I think there was more than one morning where I'd sit there eating my cereal as I stared at the back of the cereal box trying to find the route through the maze on the back of the box. It's a fun challenge because there is only one possible path in the end that will get you through the entire maze. It gives you a small feeling of accomplishment when you met the challenge and find that route. Isn't this the way that people can begin to picture the way to God's kingdom? They believe that if you just work hard enough down the right route, you'll come up on the other side just where you want. This is the mindset of every non-Christian religion –and mindset of Nicodemus.

But Nicodemus was about to discover how he was tracing the wrong route to God's kingdom. It started when he heard about Jesus. Like many others, he heard and saw the miraculous signs and things taught and done by Jesus. After Jesus cleared the temple, Nicodemus had to have been astounded by the boldness and authority of this teacher from Galilee. Add to that the reports of miracles done by him. Nicodemus had to learn more about this man Jesus. *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him."*

But before Jesus tells Nicodemus who he is, he has to tear down some false notions of who Nicodemus is. Jesus first points out that Nicodemus is missing something. Nicodemus had kept God's commands to the absolute best of his ability. He was a Jew and clearly wanted to live like a Jew. But none of that met the requirements for God's kingdom. He was lacking what is crucial. Jesus takes all the ideas of this world and crushes them. He shuts out every other possibility as he tells us that they will not work. *"Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* In one sweeping statement he excludes all routes to heaven and indicates the only door to heaven.

Nicodemus was surprised to hear this statement and wants Jesus to explain. *"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?"* Jesus repeats, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God!" But Jesus has elaborated. And don't think Nicodemus had to scratch his head to get what Jesus meant by *"born of water and Spirit."* Nicodemus finds this young back-water Rabbi from Galilee telling him he will never enter God's kingdom if he refuses to be baptized!

At this point some try to change Jesus' words. They wrongly speculate that the words 'water and' were added later. They have no evidence for this claim to change Scripture. Others try to explain water as a natural birth and say Jesus is speaking about two births. But the Greek grammar doesn't speak of two things here. Nor could it have escaped the notice of Nicodemus what the big controversy was at this time: John and Jesus' disciples were baptizing the people. They were teaching a baptism that works repentance for forgiveness of sins. We read earlier in John saying, *"the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."* As for those who try to argue Jesus doesn't mean baptism miss out on the fact that all of the gospels including John start with the teaching of baptism. They also ignore how the rest of this chapter deals with both John and Jesus' disciples baptizing the people!

There simply is no replacement for baptism. Everyone needs it in order to stand before God in his kingdom. You can't say good deeds will have someone covered. Without baptism they cannot stand before God. Did this cross Nicodemus' mind as he pondered what he considered to be a lifetime of service to God? *"Doesn't God owe me one by now?"* Then Jesus speaks: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and Spirit." Without that, even the purest, most seemingly loving, do-gooder is out. Even the most seemingly innocent of children is still out. No number of good deeds are enough. Childhood innocence doesn't stand. No one will see God's kingdom without baptism.

Why? *“Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh.”* There was a woman who was in labor and gave birth thousands of years ago. Her name was Eve. She was the mother of all the living. But her children would be no different than her. They could never rise above the height from which she and Adam fell when they sinned. Her first child Cain clearly displayed his nature. As the world became populated with little Adams and little Eves it became populated with little images of their parents: sinners. Because of Adam and Eve, the human race can only give birth to children who are sinners; shut out from God’s kingdom, destined to perish, his enemies. This is just as David confessed, *“Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”* (Psalm 51) If we seek to gain entrance to God’s kingdom on the basis of anything we have done, we need to look at our hearts. The Pharisee could outwardly keep the law and things of the law, but not in his heart, not perfectly. The Pharisee couldn’t escape the fact that he was born sinful, and he would sin, and he would die a sinner, shut out from God’s kingdom. Jesus’ words amazed Nicodemus and as they strike the heart of proud sinners today: *“No one can ... unless he is born of water and Spirit.”*

This leaves a person with just two options: you can scamper to deny or distort what Jesus says, change the words, the grammar, the meaning. You can desperately hope that you will end up making it through on your own. That was the route Nicodemus was on. You can look at baptism, yourself, your family and think, “how can this be?” Or like Isaiah you can plead, “Woe is me!” And like Isaiah you can receive something greater than the burning coal which cleansed his mouth. Yours is a gift with water. Come to Jesus. Listen to Jesus. And discover something that changes everything. You cannot enter God’s kingdom without what his Spirit gives you in baptism.

Still today you can tell someone how important baptism is and even though they are zealous for God’s Word they will dismiss it. Nicodemus was surprised that Jesus spoke of the great importance of baptism. *“Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born again.”* Jesus compares the working of the Spirit in baptism to the wind we experience around us. He speaks of the wind coming and going. We know nothing of where it really ends up or where it really turns, you only hear and see its effect. So it is, he says, of everyone born of the Spirit. Those who were baptized by John were born again. You aren’t able to ask, “how can this be.” You aren’t able to question it saying, “But I don’t see anything in this baptizing with water and the Word.” Nor can you question, “How can this be? How can something like baptism work repentance and give forgiveness of sins?” You only see what it has done. You know yourself the confidence God has given you: faith in his Word. You see the effects of this new birth, but you can’t see the Spirit working it.

Jesus chided Israel’s teacher for looking at Scripture and continually rejecting the notion that God had to give a new birth to his people. He had spoken of earthly things of God’s kingdom. Baptism, repentance, faith, the working of the Spirit. How would Nicodemus ever believe the heavenly things like the Triune God’s eternal plan of salvation, not just for the Jews or the Pharisees, but the whole world?

Nicodemus had by this point heard who he was. Now it was time for Jesus to explain the Triune God is. That is what Jesus goes on to speak of next, starting with the working of the Spirit. The Spirit’s power behind baptism is giving us faith in the gospel. The Spirit gives us new birth. The Holy Spirit brings us into the sphere of God’s plan of salvation. The Spirit calls us into the kingdom of God and works faith in the heart of sin. A new birth takes place. And beyond a doubt the Spirit still uses baptism, just as he did in Jesus’ day, to give new birth. That is why the apostle Peter says, “Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins” and “you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” and why Peter writes twice in his epistle “baptism saves you” and why Paul can write, “All who are baptized are clothed with Christ and ... Heirs having the hope of eternal life.” That is why Jesus later says baptism is to be shared with all people “make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is part of the Triune God’s plan for our salvation.

Jesus continues with the working of the Son, *“No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.”* Jesus is the very Son of God who came down to earth and took on flesh to be like us. And he did that for a particularly important purpose. *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* Jesus came in the flesh to perish on the cross. He came to be lifted on the cross on the place of sinful flesh. That all who look to him would escape hell forever and have life eternal instead.

He concludes by speaking of this as the loving plan of God the Father for us all. God the Father carried out this perfect plan. And God’s plan of salvation wasn’t just for the Jew or the Pharisee. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*

Nicodemus did listen. He did get it. And yes, in the end, Nicodemus received his answer for “who Jesus was.” After Jesus was lifted up on the cross, he openly came with Joseph to take down his body and honor his God who came to die for him. And he who died now lives forever in glory with the Father and the Spirit. When we stand before his throne, enter his eternal kingdom, and see his glory, we will not have to cry, “Woe to me! I don’t belong here.” Rather we will cry “Praise to him, Father, Son, and Spirit, the Almighty Lord, who carried out his goal of having me with him forever. I’ve reached the end. I was born again by water and the Spirit.”