

**Find Life in the Son:
Born of the Spirit
John 2:23-3:8**

Introduction

When Jesus cleansed the temple of those who were making it a house of trade rather than a house of worship, the Jewish leaders challenged Him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"

Show us a miracle to prove you have the right to exercise this kind of authority.

Sounds reasonable enough until we read the verses that follow. Turns out they were not lacking for miracles from Jesus. Their demand was dishonest and insulting, as if Jesus had given no evidence of His divine credentials.

But there was another group present on whom His miracles had a huge impact. In time this group would grow into significant crowds. Jesus would become very popular. And they would follow Him, at least for a while.

There have always been people intrigued by power, by gifted teachers and preachers, by persons who shake up a community. But we will learn today that a person needs much more than that in his or her life.

23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. **24** But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people **25** and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." **3** Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." **4** Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" **5** Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

1. Jesus knows the sincerity of your faith (2:23-25).

2. Jesus perceives the kingdom you seek (3:1-3).
3. Jesus gives the life you most need (3:4-8).

1. Jesus knows the sincerity of your faith (2:23-25).

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When they saw the signs—the miracles with a message—Jesus was doing, many believed in his name.

That is the language John normally uses to describe saving faith in Jesus, but it's clear from what follows that this faith was shallow. Impressed with Jesus' miracles, but failed to understand the need for repentance and faith that relied on Jesus as Savior, not just as a miracle worker or political deliverer.

We know they trusted in Him only superficially, because He did not entrust himself to them. He did not trust them. Why? Because he knew what was in man. Nobody had to tell Him. He could see who they were at heart. He knew the depth, the sincerity of their faith. And it was not the real deal.

Jesus knew all people. He knows you. He knows me. And at a level no other human being can see. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

On one hand, that Jesus knows the sincerity of your faith can be a comfort. Part of the pain we suffer in our relationships with others is their misjudging who we really are. Sometimes that's because we do or say things that distort or confuse others about our real motives and attitudes. We don't always communicate or act in ways consistent with what's actually going on inside. We can desire to do the right thing and do it poorly.

Jesus knows us deeply. That is also convicting. We can't fool Him about the true state of our hearts. We can impress others in ways that make them think we are better than we are. Jesus knows us as we really are.

In this case, these believers were impressed by Jesus, but not really committed to Him as their Savior and Lord. People often see Jesus and Christianity as useful, but not the One to whom they should bow the knee and trust completely with their eternal souls.

Simon Magus trusted in Jesus and was baptized, but turned out he wanted to use the power of the Spirit to increase his own following for financial gain. His tribe lives on.

Many use religion as a money maker and a career, with little interest in denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Jesus wherever He leads them.

James tells us the demons believe in God and tremble at His power, but they do not trust Him with an obedient faith. It's mere theological facts they hold to, not trustingly bowing their will to the Lord.

Applications

- What is it that attracts you to Jesus Christ?
- What are you hoping to gain by your connection with Christianity or a church family?
- How would you describe the depth of your faith in Jesus, and what are you relying on Him to do for you?
- What evidence do you see in your life that He has entrusted Himself to you?

2. Jesus perceives the kingdom you seek (3:1-3).

^{3:1} Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you,

unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The Pharisees usually play the villains in the Gospels, so even those who hold exactly the same doctrines today bristle at the term. The group came into being in the 400 years between the OT and NT. According to Josephus the Jewish historian, there were only about 6,000 of them in Christ’s day. In Christ’s day the common people highly respected them, even though the Pharisees looked down on the common people as ignorant and unclean.

They had a high view of Scripture, so many of them served as scribes, who copied and taught the Scriptures. They believed in miracles, angels, and the resurrection. Their name, Separatists, speaks of their zeal to stay unspotted from the surrounding Greek culture in order to preserve the historic faith of their fathers.

The more liberal Sadducees dominated the priesthood and temple worship, so after the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Sadducees largely died out, but the Pharisaic religion became dominant among the Jews, so much so that what is known as Judaism today is largely a continuation of the Pharisaic tradition that focused on external ceremony and a disciplined system of good works.

Jesus warns against the prevailing hypocrisy that grew from such a mindset. Their teaching and practice were far apart, and they ignored the weightier matters of God's law like justice, mercy, and faithfulness while obsessing about minutia of tithing and fasting. They strained out gnats and swallowed camels. They were blind guides of the blind. Cleaning the outside of the cup, while leaving the inside filthy. Like whitewashed tombs containing rotting bones. That's why they could maintain fastidious attention to ceremonial hand washing and a thousand other refinements while actively conspiring to murder Jesus.

In the NT narrative the Pharisees are so often the bad guys that it surprises us for Nicodemus to respond to Jesus so positively. Verse one can read, "But there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus." He was unlike those who challenged authority of Jesus after He cleansed the temple, and unlike those who superficially believed in Jesus because of His miraculous signs.

He belonged to the highly respected sect of the Jews, the Pharisees. He was a ruler of the Jews, that is, a member of the ruling Sanhedrin, the 71 elders who carried civil, criminal, and religious authority in Israel. Rome reserved the right to conduct

executions, but the Sanhedrin had the right to arrest people and hold trials. We learn in verse 10 that Nicodemus is also a respected teacher of the law of God.

But Nicodemus was not satisfied with his religious and civil attainment. Many others in his position were. As long as they received glory from man, they desired nothing more. Jesus confronted them in John 5:44
How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Nicodemus is coming by night in part because of the way the other Pharisees would respond to his seeking out Jesus. In John 9 we learn that they kicked anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah out of the synagogue. Nicodemus may also be coming by night in order to have uninterrupted conversation.

He sees in Jesus someone highly unusual. He is impressed by Jesus' miracles, but knows they point to an even more significant truth. God must be with this man Jesus, or He could not do what He does. But that realization leads Nicodemus to an even greater unspoken question. Could it possibly be that Jesus is the promised Messiah who would bring about the kingdom of God?

Jesus sees to the core of this man, as He did all people. Nicodemus makes a statement of observation, but Jesus knows that Nicodemus is seeking for much more. Jesus answers Nicodemus's unspoken question with a startling answer: John 3:3

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

To see the kingdom of God is to experience it. John 3:36 uses the same expression:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

All the training, self-discipline, Biblical knowledge, community respect, political and religious power, and even the earnest seeking was insufficient. Nicodemus senses it. But Jesus knows it for sure. And Jesus is going to unveil what Nicodemus is missing.

Applications

- If you have paid attention to Jesus' powerful words and miraculous works, how does He compare with any other human being?
- What have you done to explore further who He is?
- What do you value most, pursue most, and fear to lose most? That will reveal

whether you are pursuing the kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world.

- What of your standing or attainments make you feel secure, accomplished, or satisfied? All of it put together is not enough if you want to experience the kingdom of God.

Don't desire less. Desire more. Something permanent, infinite, God-sized, eternal.

3. Jesus gives the life you most need (3:4-8).

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus is looking for clarity on what being "born again" or "born from above" means. He knows it's a ridiculous idea that you could be physically born again.

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus shifts from "see"—or experience—"the kingdom of God" to "enter" the kingdom. You can't even get started on this experience unless you are born of water and the Spirit.

Some see water as reference to physical birth, born of the flesh—of human origin.

Others think it refers to baptism in its symbolic significance of the Spirit's regenerating.

Titus 3:5-6

⁵ He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Judging from the OT, this Spiritual renewal and cleansing seems to be the main focus.

Ezekiel 36:24-27

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Ephesians 5:25-27 uses similar language to describe what Christ has done for His church.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to

himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

John 3:6-7

⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

The way into the kingdom of God is not by physical birth or physical deeds. There must be new life that comes from the Spirit of God.

John 1:12-13

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

How do you know if a person is born again—born of the Spirit? Jesus answers with a comparison to the wind. Wind, breath, spirit—all the same word in the language He's speaking, so it makes a really helpful comparison.

John 3:8

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

How do you know there's wind? You can't see it. You don't know where it comes from or where it's going. The hit-and-miss nature of even modern-day weather reporting shows that.

So if you can't even see the wind, how do you know it's there? By its effect. It makes the leaves rustle, it blows clouds across the sky. You feel the breeze on your cheek, or see the rain slanting sideways, or the water of the lake churned up into waves.

How do you know someone is born of the Spirit? You see the effect of the Spirit in his or her life. Love, joy, peace, gentleness, longsuffering, goodness, faith, self-control. Truthing in love. Loving God with heart, soul, mind, strength. Loving one's neighbor as one's self. Honesty. Humility. Repentance. Trust. Compassion. Self-sacrifice.

Lost people can do ceremony. They can modify their dress and grooming. They can add to their to-do list. They can put money in the offering. They can keep their distance from bad people. They can go to a Christian school or even teach there. They can be influential and powerful in the community. But is there any evidence of life from God?

To enter and experience the kingdom of God is to trust and love the King of the Kingdom, Jesus Christ. To bow before Him with humble repentance, to rely on Him to rescue you from yourself, to yield to His control and leadership. To trust Him as the Good Shepherd of the sheep who will lead His flock safely through the trials and dangers of life all the way to His heavenly home. The Spirit of God guides your heart to Jesus and glorifies Him.

Applications

- When did the Spirit of God give you life to experience God's rule in your life?
- What evidence of the life of Spirit are you experiencing in your everyday life?
- What would those who know you best say they see in your life that shows the Spirit's effect?

Conclusion

So what happened to Nicodemus? Next week the conversation with Jesus continues.

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Song: Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God

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- If you have paid attention to Jesus' powerful words and miraculous works, how does He compare with any other human being?
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