YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

John 2:23-3:21
Key Verse 3:3

“In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”’

Last week, we studied 2 Timothy 3 with the title, “All Scripture is God-Breathed.” It was St. Paul’s earnest plea that Timothy and all of God’s people receive teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness through the word of God in order to grow as men and women of God. Unless we grow as men and women of God in this way, we are destined to participate in the vicious cycle of the world, deceiving and being deceived by others. On the other hand, those who do receive this training are thoroughly equipped for every good work. Today’s passage is the story of how Jesus did his best to help one person escape the darkness of the world, and come into the light of God’s truth. Jesus’ shepherd heart for one rebellious sinner is so amazing! In particular, we learn that we must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. May God bless us through faith in Jesus’ word to experience the work of the Holy Spirit that gives us new life!

I. Jesus knows what’s in a man (2:23-25)

As John records, Jesus went into Jerusalem soon after he had called his first disciples, in the days before the Jewish Passover. There, he challenged the religious leaders for turning the temple into a marketplace. Jesus’ disciples were shocked to see Jesus acting so aggressively. So they turned to the Scriptures to understand what Jesus was doing and what it meant. They learned, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” It meant that Jesus was the Messiah, the one appointed by God to restore God’s house and God’s people. They put their faith in his word, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days,” until they could fully understand it after his resurrection. The religious leaders were deeply offended by Jesus’ words, and questioned his authority to challenge them. But they had not yet
organized any opposition to him or his ministry. During the remainder of the Passover Feast, Jesus continued to reveal his glory as the Son of God through many miraculous signs. Look at verse 2:23. “Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.” Jesus was full of compassion for the crowds at the Passover Feast. He helped them one by one through his miraculous power. When they crowds saw Jesus’ power to heal the sick and drive out demons, they believed in his name.

Look at verses 24-25. “But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.” In these verses, John contrasts the fickle faith of the crowds, who “believed in Jesus’ name”, with the disciples who had “put their faith in Jesus”. Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem must be have been so beautiful and heart-moving. Many people who had suffered under the power of sin and death were set free, and the power of God to give hope and peace to restless hearts was fully revealed. But their confessions of faith in Jesus, based on what they had seen and heard, had no foundation in the word of God. So their testimony about him was just man’s testimony, which depended on the situation and the circumstances. It was not reliable, and could change at any moment. Faith that pleases God is faith that stands on God’s word of promise.

II. Jesus talks with Nicodemus (1-15).

First, A man named Nicodemus (1-2). Among those who heard of what Jesus had been doing, was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus. Look at verses 1 and 2. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘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.’” Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. This was not an official visit to Jesus. Rather, Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly, and talked with him one on one. However, Nicodemus’ introductory remarks were more suited for a speech before the Jewish ruling council than as an informal and sincere attempt to meet Jesus
and know him personally. In this way, Nicodemus reveals himself as a man with a divided heart. Nicodemus could not deny that what Jesus was doing was from God. But Nicodemus was too sophisticated to come to Jesus as anything less than an equal.

Nicodemus was a man of standing in the Jewish community. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus had received rigorous training in the Scriptures, as well as in the Jewish commentaries and the traditions of the elders. He began memorizing Scriptures from the age of 6, and engaged in religious debates and analysis of Scripture soon after. He wore distinguished and elegant robes, and sported a long beard that signified deep and thoughtful meditation for the sake of gaining wisdom. The Jewish ruling council, also known as the Sanhedrin, was the highest national ruling body, and served as the advisory council to the High Priest, and the organization that brought national concerns and issues to the Roman Governors. Nicodemus, as a member of this body, had to be a man of many political connections. He needed to be adept at dealing with both the Jews and the Romans. He needed to know how to compromise, and how to speak with others so as to make his point in a way that soothed their egos while convincing them to change their minds. Of course, he was also a wealthy man. Nicodemus was a man at the top of Jewish society in Jesus’ time, and a man that others looked to for leadership.

Perhaps Nicodemus thought that he could offer Jesus something through his political contacts and personal savvy. But the fact was that Nicodemus had come to Jesus in need of something from Jesus. He needed to know if Jesus really was a man from God. He needed to know if what Jesus was doing was really the work of God. In all his years as religious leader and political operator, Nicodemus had never once experienced the work of God in his own life. His religious life was a matter of personal discipline and struggle. He knew the Scriptures forwards and backwards. But they were just stories to him. They couldn’t help him find the meaning of his hard struggle to succeed in life. And now, after having made it to the top, what else was there for him? Other ambitious young men were waiting to take his place. He himself had begun to face the fact that he was not forever young. He was stuck, like Jacob was stuck between his uncle Laban and his
brother Esau. When Jacob heard that Esau, who had threatened to kill him, was coming to meet him with 400 of his men, Jacob turned to God in prayer to ask in great fear, “Are you really there? Are your promises true? I need your help!” So Nicodemus came to Jesus to see for himself whether God had really sent his servant to help his struggling creature, man. Nicodemus came to Jesus to knock on the door leading to spiritual life, to see if anyone or anything was there, on the other side.

Second, You must be born again (3-8). Jesus heard Nicodemus’ introduction and kind words. But Jesus did not respond in kind. Look at verse 3. “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”’ Out of his Messianic compassion, Jesus paid no attention to Nicodemus’ niceties, and responded directly to Nicodemus’ inner plea to see the spiritual world. Jesus calls this, “seeing the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God is where God rules. The kingdom of God is where God is present and active. The kingdom of God is eternal and everlasting. The kingdom of God is where man’s physical and sinful natures are fully under the control of God’s Spirit and Life. Jesus urges Nicodemus that he needs to see the Kingdom of God, so that he might begin to experience God’s presence and God’s reign in his life.

“No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Through this verse, Jesus gives Nicodemus and all Nicodemus-like people hope to see the kingdom of God through being “born again.” There are a lot of ideas about what it means to be born again. But to be born again is not complicated or confusing. To be born again means to begin a new life. Nicodemus was already well acquainted with what he had to do in order to be successful in his life in the world. But he came to Jesus because he had no idea how to live as a man of God. Jesus instructed him, “you must be born again.” Nicodemus needed to start over again, like a little baby, and learn from Jesus what he should do and why, as his disciple. Nicodemus needed to humble himself like a little child, and let himself be led by the Holy Spirit. Most of all, Nicodemus needed to hear God’s voice to him through the Bible, until he could believe the Scriptures as the word of God. Life in the Spirit begins from the moment we hear God’s voice to us through the word of God. Paul
reminded the Galatian believers of this fact in Galatians 3:2, “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” Peter told the scattered church of God, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” As we studied last week, one word of God that penetrates our hearts can be the starting point of a life of faith and a life of experiencing the kingdom of God growing within us.

Nicodemus was shocked by Jesus’ simple and clear direction. He had no idea that he should start all over again in order to experience God’s kingdom. He dreaded a life of repeating all the same mistakes. So he answered Jesus rather cynically: “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely, he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!” Nicodemus was a man of despair. It was too late for him to be changed. He stubbornly held on to his fixed ideas about the Bible and the spiritual world. But Jesus did not give up on Nicodemus. He understood Nicodemus’ rebellious mind. So he patiently explained to him that being born again is not living your life over again. It is being born of the Spirit. Look at verses 5-8. “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. 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.” This passage is not about baptism. It is about being born of the Spirit.

Here we can learn two things about being born of the Spirit. First of all, being born again means submitting to the sovereignty and authority of God. Just as our flesh did not choose when and where we would be born, so we cannot choose when and where we might be born of the Spirit. It is the Spirit's choice and prerogative to come and touch each person and give that person new life. Of course, it follows a person's decision to believe the Scriptures and to receive Jesus as Lord. But his coming is as mysterious and as powerful as that of the wind. Simply speaking, to be born of the Spirit, we cannot remain as we are. We must submit in our minds and hearts to the transforming
power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul stated in 1st Corinthians 15:50, “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” We must be changed. We must invite the Holy Spirit in to give birth in us to a new and spiritual life in submission to God’s will and purpose for us. Second of all, being born again is not a fantasy or made-up story. Jesus says, “So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Jesus is not referring to a fantastic or out of this world experience. It is very common and ordinary for everyone who receives the Spirit through faith in God’s word. There are many false teachers and con artists who portray being born again as something very unique and special which only they can help bring about. But Jesus speaks of being born again as something that anyone can do, if only they have faith and are humble enough to listen to God's word.

Third, The Son of Man must be lifted up (9-15). Nicodemus was even more shocked to hear that anyone can be born again! He stubbornly refused to believe, and asked Jesus, “How can this be?” Jesus rebuked Nicodemus’ stubborn unbelief. Look at verses 10-13. “You are Israel’s teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things? 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. I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven, except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.” Jesus was very sorry that Nicodemus was so stubborn in acknowledging the spiritual world. Not only was it a problem for himself, it was a problem for his nation. He had studied the Scriptures so well, so that he could be a teacher of the law. But he didn’t believe. So, the word of God was a terrible mystery to him, like a Shakespearean sonnet to a beagle. He needed to know that the word of God is the heavenly testimony that men need to see and enter the kingdom of God. He needed to stop looking at his present circumstances and needs, and look up to see the spiritual world by faith. He needed to plant faith in the word of God among his fellow Israelites.
So Jesus told Nicodemus the story of Moses and the bronze serpent. When the Israelites were making the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan, they had to travel through the desert. As a result, they faced hardships from time to time, including a lack of water and food. Then they would forget that it was God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They would begin to complain that they didn’t have food or water. One time, God trained the Israelites by sending poisonous snakes among them. The people acknowledged their sins against God and Moses for having complained. But when Moses prayed, God told Moses to prepare a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Whoever looked up at the snake on the pole would live, even though he had been bitten by a poisonous snake. God would not take the snakes away. The people had to believe that he would save them if only they obeyed his command. It was a hard training for the people not to look at the snakes, but look up at the bronze serpent. Look at verses 14 and 15. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” It was a hard training for Nicodemus not to look at the everyday reality, and look up at God instead and at his word. But the promise of God is that everyone who does so may have eternal life. Jesus had come into this world to give up his life as the Lamb of God, so that whoever believes in him and in his death for sins, can be saved and have eternal life.

III. Jesus invites sinners into the light (16-21)

First, God so loved the world (16-18). The most amazing thing is that Jesus had come to this world to die for proud and rebellious sinners like Nicodemus. Who could believe such a thing? But it is the truth of the Bible. It is a testimony to God’s love for this sinful world. Look at verse 16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God’s heart’s desire is not to condemn Nicodemus-like people who constantly rebuff God’s invitation to see and enter the kingdom of God. God’s desire is that they might believe and have eternal life. If only proud sinners believe the word of God and that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins, they can be born again and get out of their condemnation due to sins. Look at verses 17 and 18. “For God did
not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, for he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” God is the God of love. But if we reject God’s love to the end, what hope is there for us? There is only condemnation and darkness. We must receive God's love for us by believing that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross to take away our condemnation. Only by faith in Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead can we experience that God is our Father, and that we are living from now on under his mercy and grace. It is the beginning of eternal life in the kingdom of God. Let's receive God's gift of his Son by faith. Let's experience his love through the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of eternal life. Let's participate with him in his work of bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

Second, Light has come into the world (19-21). Jesus’ tender compassion for Nicodemus is beyond our comprehension. Still, there is an end to God’s mercy and compassion. God’s light has come. So men are without excuse. Look at verses 19-21. “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” To remain in the darkness is to condemn ourselves for the evil deeds we have done. No one has the power or the track record to justify themselves before God. So what can be our hope? We must come into the light. We must confess our sins and evil deeds before the holy God. It is painful to expose our shame. But what is God’s promise to us when we do so, out of love for the truth? Look again at verse 21. “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” When we come into the light, we find that God’s light does not condemn. It reveals the truth. We think that it is a great sacrifice to give up our own will and submit to God’s will for us. But we discover that we have always been under God’s sovereignty and directed by God’s divine purpose. We were fooling ourselves all along into believing that we
were the sovereign rulers of our lives. It is not the light that condemns us, but the darkness we chose as a cover to persist in following our own way in rebellion against God. So, we must come out of darkness, and into the light. We must humble ourselves, and begin to live for God’s glory and in God’s truth. We must be born again as the children of light, through faith in Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection from the dead.

Let’s read our key verse, 3:3. “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”