

# You must be born **Again**

John 3:1-17

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Pastor Jim Rademaker

"Snakes! They were loose in the camp of Israel. Deadly snakes! Slithering, all over the place. People were being bitten, and falling ill, and dying, all over the camp of Israel! Where did all these snakes come from? The Lord sent them. They were His judgment over the grumbling of His faithless, ungrateful people.

Moses prayed that the snakes would be taken away. But what good would that do those who had already been bitten and were dying? Instead, what does God do. He says, *"Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."* How's that going help? What good is that going to do? Look, and live? How does that work?

Suppose you were one the Israelites who had been bitten and were dying. *"Behold the serpent of the Lord. Look on it and live."* What would you do? Would you turn and look up? Or would you complain how this makes no sense at all and you're not going to fall for such silly superstition?

God is asking his people what? Not to make *sense* of what he said, but to *trust* what He said. To trust Him. Take Him at His Word. "Look and live!" And as they looked, what happens? From every part of the camp, came exuberant cries of great joy, as dying people, in faith, turning and looking up at the serpent, find themselves completely healed!

Nicodemus silently creeps through the dark streets of Jerusalem, vigilant, lest anyone sees him. He's on a mission. The teacher, Jesus, is in Jerusalem. Wonderful things are said of Him. He's amazed the people with miraculous signs. Astounded them with the authority of His teaching. He's stirred Nicodemus' curiosity and enlivened his hope. "Surely," he thinks to himself, "this man is from God. I've got to meet him."

But how? Official opposition to this Rabbi from Galilee is well-known. Association with Jesus would be risky! But Nicodemus must know more about this man and His teaching. Therefore, he approaches Jesus at night, under cover of darkness.

*"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."* Jesus interrupts his flattery by saying, *"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Could it be that Nicodemus was going to ask, what so many asked Jesus ... "What must I do to see the kingdom of God?" "How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?" A question we all must wrestle with ourselves. THE question that must be answered! What must I do?

And Jesus says what? *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God - unless he is born again."* How's that going to happen! Good luck with that one! A pointed conversation follows about second birth, water, Spirit, and the wind. And poor Nicodemus is clueless. He has no idea what Jesus is talking about, and asks, *"How can this be?"* "It's impossible. No one can be born from his mother again! Jesus, what are you talking about!"

Ever feel that way reading Scripture? There are things that just don't seem to make any sense to you? What do you do with them? How can they be? You and I are right there with poor, clueless Nicodemus.

Jesus answers, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit ..."* Not in the normal, physical, common, earthly way of birth. But something different. Something of God. A spiritual thing from above.

"How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?" That's really the wrong question. There's nothing you can do. The only way is to be morally perfect. To never have sinned - ever! Not even thought about it. Not even had a desire to sin. How do I get to heaven? What can I do? You can't get there. It's impossible. There's nothing you can do. Hell is your only option; your only destination. Sinners can never get to heaven.

The question isn't "How do I get to heaven? What do I have to do?" You're doomed! The only question is, "Is there any hope from somewhere else?" Like someone going under and about to hopelessly drown, is there anyone who can help me? Anyone who can save me? Or someone hopelessly lost in the wilderness, is there anyone out there who's coming to rescue me from certain death?

There is One. Unless *God* does something for you, it doesn't matter *what* you do. There's no hope you're going to heaven. Jesus illustrates. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 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.*"

You're first birth won't do you any good. That was a hopeless birth into sin and eternal condemnation. What you need is a second birth. A hopeful birth. A birth out of sin, unto eternal life! How are you going to do that! You're not. You can't. Not anymore than you could bring about your first birth.

Your only hope is a rescuer. A Savior. You need God above to do something. A new creation. Something completely beyond your doing. A new beginning. A new birth! Born again, from above. From God.

It's not something you do, but something done to you. Like natural birth, this spiritual birth, this birth from above, is all gift. A gift, given by God. Given for you to fully understand? To fully make sense of? To fully explain? No. What do you do with a gift. You have two options. To reject it, or to receive it.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "*How can these things be?*" We could imagine astonishment written all over Nicodemus' face. It all sounded so very strange to this old Pharisee, who all his life, his focus was on works – works – works, and was admired by the bulk of the nation for this very fact, to hear from Jesus: birth – birth – birth by the Spirit, an entirely new nature and creation. (Lenski)

And Jesus says, "*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*" There are two perspectives to this life and to this world. One from below and one from above. There are also two religions in this world. The religion from below and the religion from above. (William Cwirla)

The religion "from below" is a religion of the law. A religion of principles. Of methods. Of exercises. Of things you **do** to get to God. To gain God's favor. To gain access to the world beyond. You've got to **do** something. Meditate. Look inward. Be nice. Help others. Go on a pilgrimage. Pledge to try harder. To do better. To do your best. The religion "from below" is all about doing something. It's all we know. What else is there?

(James Douthwaite)

Poor, clueless Nicodemus. Even though he's a "teacher of Israel," a credentialed rabbi, he fails to grasp this most basic truth. Nicodemus was thinking of how man can get to God. Jesus is talking about God coming to man. The kingdom of God is not something *earned* from below, but a gift *received* from above.

And so, in the beginning, after Adam and Eve fell into sin and were afraid of God, God did what? He came to them. He called out to them. He made a promise to them, of a Savior who would come to them.

And then, this coming, and calling, and promise, were repeated throughout the Old Testament. As we heard earlier, how God came to a man named Abram, who did not know Him, but worshiped false gods. And God calls him, and makes a promise to him, of a land and of a Savior. And then down through the generations, to Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon, God kept coming and calling and promising. Not that they *do*, but that they *believe*. There *is* doing. But first, comes *believing*.

"And", Jesus says, "one of the best examples of God's coming and calling and promising, Nicodemus, which surely you, a teacher of Israel, remember, is the bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness." They pleaded to Moses to intercede. Moses prayed that the snakes would be taken away. But what good would that do those who had already been bitten and were dying? Instead, what does God do. He says, "*Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.*" How's *that* gonna help? What good is *that* going to do? Look, and live? How does that work?

God's asking his people what? Not to make *sense* of what he said, but to *trust* what He said. To trust Him. Take Him at His Word. "Look and live!" And as they looked, what happens? From every part of the camp, came exuberant cries of great joy, as dying people, in faith, turning and looking up at the serpent, found themselves completely healed! (Douthwaite)

"Well that's what's happening *now*, Nicodemus! Because *just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so now a man is going to be lifted up - *the Son of Man* - *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*.

This, is the fulfillment. The fulfillment of all that coming, and all that calling, and all that promising of God. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal*

*life.” So that man, who will be lifted up for the life of the world, Nicodemus, that Son of Man, is the Son of God. God, coming, and calling, and fulfilling His promise. Look to Him and not to yourself for your life.*

For that is the temptation we have and the problem we face. To look to ourselves and not to God for our life. Sin has curved us in on ourselves and away from God, even as we seek Him. Satan doesn't mind you having religion or spirituality, *as long as* you're trying to do it with your own strength, and relying on what you can do, instead of what God has done for you in Christ. As Israel looked to the snake on the pole and lived, so look to the man on the cross and live eternally.

How does this happen? How are we born again? Born from above? *“for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.”* (1 Peter 1:23-25)

Rev. Patrick Thurmer puts it this way, *“When I hear God's Word proclaimed ... both the law which shows me my need and drives me to despair and the gospel which meets my need and gives me life, I find myself believing it. It isn't a decision on my part, it simply happens. In other words, I didn't believe, then I found myself believing after the hearing of the message of Christ. ... I'm told that there is an old word or expression in Norwegian that means just that: “I heard myself saved”.*

*“For you have been born again ... through the living and abiding word of God.”* God's Word is not just an informative Word, giving us information, but a *performative* Word, an active Word, a Spirit-filled Word, giving birth to faith in our hearts.

You, born into sin. You, drowning in your sin. You, lost in your sin. You, needing to be rescued. Do you hear it? Jesus, drowning in your place. Jesus, lost in your sin. Jesus, on the cross, condemned in your place. And you, rescued from sin. Rescued from yourself. Rescued unto eternal life. *Look, and live!*

**John 6:63** *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” ... After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

**John 1:11-13** *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

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