

John 3 v 1 to 16: “You must be born again...”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy men who ran the religious affairs of the nation and who had religious authority over any Jew anywhere in the world. That council was almost entirely made up of Pharisees. It is amazing that he would come to Jesus at all, because the Pharisees regarded themselves as superior to other men due to their total dedication to obeying the law of God. But not only did this Pharisee come to Jesus, he asked questions about the kingdom of God. Jesus sensed in Nicodemus a deep hunger and emptiness. Here was a man who was doing his best to obey what he thought God wanted, yet he had an unsatisfied heart that led him to seek out Jesus by night, at the risk of the displeasure of his peers. Jesus immediately put him on the right track, saying to him, in effect, “You cannot enter the kingdom of God the way you are. You must be born again...”

The famous eighteenth century preacher John Wesley’s favourite text, which he preached all through England, Wales and Scotland, was this: “You must be born again.” Someone asked him, “Why do you preach so often on ‘you must be born again?’” Wesley’s answer was, simply, “Because – you *must* be born again!”

Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3 v 1 to 21)

“Unless one is born *again* he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v 3) – new birth is essential to enter God’s kingdom. John uses the Greek word, ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*), which has three meanings: ‘again’, a second time; it also means to begin completely, a new beginning; it also means ‘from above’, signifying that God must do this. The word used here includes all three meanings. It speaks of something radical, a new beginning; it is a second birth, but it comes from above; it is God who does this, not man; and it results in a ‘new creation’...

- What was right, and what was lacking in Nicodemus’ approach? How did Jesus correct him?
- What is involved in being ‘born of the Spirit’, and why is this necessary? See Matthew 18 v 2, 3; John 1 v 12 to 13; 2 Corinthians 5 v 17; Romans 8 v 9 to 11.
- For the story of Moses lifting up the snake in the desert, read Numbers 21 v 4 to 9. Why was the lifting up of the Son of Man necessary (v 14)?
- Learn (by heart) John 3 v 16. Why do you think this is the best loved verse in the whole Bible?
- On what grounds are people condemned? On what grounds are they saved? Where do you stand in relation to these truths?

Throughout the New Testament this idea of a new birth, or new creation occurs:

- Paul writes of newness of life (Romans 6 v 4); that we are a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6 v 15); that the new self is created after the likeness of God in righteousness (Ephesians 4 v 22 to 24); Titus 3 v 5 speaks of regeneration and renewal through the Holy Spirit.
- Peter speaks of being born again by God’s great mercy (1 Peter 1 v 3), and from an imperishable seed (1 Peter 1 v 22, 23); Hebrews 5 v 12 to 14 says that we start the Christian life as children; James speaks of God bringing us forth by the word of truth (James 1 v 18).

“How can a man be born when he is old?” (v 4) – in speaking about being born again, Jesus recalled a familiar theme from the Old Testament promises of the New Covenant (Deuteronomy 30 v 1 to 6; Jeremiah 31 v 31 to 34; Jeremiah 32 v 37 to 41; Ezekiel 11 v 16 to 20; Ezekiel 36 v 25 to 27; Ezekiel 37 v 11 to 14; 21 to 28). These passages made three promises in the New Covenant: (i) the gathering of Israel; (ii) the cleansing and spiritual transformation of God’s people; (iii) the reign of the Messiah over Israel and the whole world.

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In Jesus' day, the common teaching among the Jews was that the first two aspects had been fulfilled. They saw Israel gathered, at least in part, after the Babylonian exile. They saw strong spiritual movements like the Pharisees, which they believed fulfilled the promise of spiritual transformation. All they waited for was the reign of the Messiah. This is why Jesus' statement about the new birth was so strange to Nicodemus: he thought the Jewish people already had this – they only looked for a triumphant Messiah.

““Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”” (v 5) – ‘born of water’ may mean to receive the water of cleansing prophesied in Ezekiel 36 v 25 to 27 as part of the New Covenant.

““The wind blows where it wishes”” (v 8) – Jesus is saying, ‘You don’t understand everything about the wind, but you see its effects. That is just how it is when you are born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus did not need to understand everything about the new birth before he experienced it.

““Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”” (v 10) – Jesus chided Nicodemus for not being aware of the need and promise of the new birth, because these ideas were plainly laid out in the Old Testament. Nicodemus knew these passages, but believed they had already been fulfilled.

““As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness”” (v 14) – Jesus made a remarkable statement, explaining that the serpent of Numbers 21 v 4 to 9 was a picture of the Messiah and his work. In the Numbers account, people were saved not by doing anything, but by simply looking to the bronze serpent. They had to trust that something seemingly foolish would be sufficient to save them.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (v 16)

– this verse has long been celebrated as a powerful, succinct, declaration of the gospel...

“For God so loved *the world*” – God did not wait for the world to turn to him. He loved and gave his only Son to the world, when it was still the world. The Jews of that day rarely thought that God loved the world. Many of them thought that God only loved Israel. The universal offer of salvation and life in Jesus was revolutionary...

“He *gave his only Son*” – this describes both *the expression and the gift* of God’s love. God didn’t just feel for the plight of a fallen world: he gave the most precious thing to give: his only Son.

“Whoever *believes in him*” – this describes *the recipients or beneficiaries* of God’s love. God loves the world, but the world’s people do not benefit from that love until they believe in Jesus, the Father’s gift. To ‘believe in’ means much more than intellectual awareness or agreement: it means to trust in, to rely on, and to cling to...

“Should *not perish*” – this describes *the intention* of God’s love. God’s love actually saves people from eternal destruction. God looks at fallen people, does not want them to perish, and so in his love he extends the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

“But *have eternal life*” – this describes *the duration* of God’s love. The love we receive among people may fade or turn, but God’s love will never change. He will never stop loving his people, even unto the furthest distance of eternity.

The idea behind ‘eternal life’ means much more than a long or never ending life. Eternal life has the idea of an amazing, incredible, overwhelming quality of life, God’s kind of life. It is this kind of life that will be enjoyed for eternity...