

## **John 15 – You Must Be Born Again**

**06/02/2024**

### **Scripture 1: (Deut. 30:6 ESV)**

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

### **Scripture 2: (Jn. 3:1-8 ESV)**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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."

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

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?"

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

## Sermon:

The first two chapters of John's Gospel {the first chapter is often considered as a Prelude or Preamble} together describe and define who Jesus is: God the Son, the Word, the Lamb of God, the *Logos* who is *Theos* and *Andros*; and they also broadly describe the content and effect of His ministry: declaring that Jesus performed many different signs and wonders which in turn led people to believe in Him as God, the LORD.

Now, as we move into the third chapter and the more narrative portions of this Gospel, John begins to recount certain specific events, occasions, and conversations from across the breadth of Jesus' three year ministry. Some of these events are recorded by the other Gospel writers, but many are unique to this Gospel. Perhaps the most famous {and popular} is Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus, an important conversation that is only recorded here. However, despite being so well known, there is a lot that we commonly misunderstand about or miss from it {both intentionally (because of preferred theological or humanistic biases) and unintentionally (because of our contextual ignorance or because of contextual removal via "prooftexting")}.

John begins this story, "*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*" and within this initial sentence, he provides a lot of information about Nicodemus; giving us a lot of subtext.

First, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the three principal social, political, and religious sects or "philosophies" (Josephus; Antiquities 18:11), of Judaism within the First Century: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes {the "Zealots" may or may not have been considered as a united group, but the term was most likely a pejorative used for the disparate dissident groups which appeared and disappeared with great regularity}. Although each of the three shared a common faith in the LORD and many common religious practices as Jews, each group had their own particular theological distinctions which caused their divisions.

- The Sadducees {of whom less is known because no favorable writings of theirs have been preserved; our entire understanding of them is generated from comments and arguments against them by their detractors (the Pharisees and later, the Christians)} consisted primarily of the social elite. They were a dominant philosophy among the Temple leadership: the priests, Levites, and especially within the family of Ananias/Annas (Luke 3:2; Josephus Antiquities 20:198), many of whom held the High Priestly appointment {appointed by the governing authorities rather than being restricted to those of Aaronic/Zadokite descent} during the life and death of Jesus. Scripture tells us that they did not believe in any resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6) with Josephus adding their belief in the annihilation of the soul upon death and noting that they limited the authority of Scripture to **only** the Law of Moses (the Pentateuch) and not the Prophets (Antiquities 18:16<sup>1</sup>). He also explains that they denied the applicability of "fate" (predestination or perhaps determinism) to life by affirming human "free will" and our moral goodness (Antiquities 13:173) {similar to the Christian heresies of Pelagianism and Arminianism, as one affirms a present natural goodness within man and the other promotes the freedom of human moral will}.
- The Essenes are best known because of their community at Qumran, the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were recovered, as well as for being among the last Jewish rebels at Masada during Vespasian's and Titus' campaign in 70 AD. Although they are not mentioned in the New Testament, some interpreters suggest they influenced John the Baptist {and also possibly Jesus, but the last assumption is pure speculation} because of their extreme aesthetic (rigid) practices. They believed themselves to be the "true" keepers of God's covenant: the "true" Israel. They directly opposed the Temple leadership, even

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1 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/who-were-the-sadducees-in-the-bible.html#:~:text=The%20Sadducees%20did%20not%20believe,Torah%20were%20to%20be%20followed.>

holding to a different religious calendar. {They even wrote a letter to the Temple leadership (recovered as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls) explaining what they believed was being done wrong to explain their position.} Josephus speaks very unfavorably about them, perhaps too harshly and with a greater bias against them than the truth would suggest, based upon evidence from Qumran. However, what both the Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus affirm is that they were “extreme (social and religious) separatists” concerned with ritual purity, obedience to God, and faithfulness to His covenant on account of their eschatological expectation and hopes. One particular note of interest in this regard {based upon the Damascus Document and the War Scroll} was their expectation of two distinct, yet parallel, Messiahs: one, an Aaronic/Zadokite High Priest and the second, a Davidic king who would rule under the influence of the priest (Covenant Theology anthology; Covenant and Second Temple Judaism); this is of comparative interest to us as Christians because we believe Jesus satisfies both roles as our King and our High Priest {of the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7)}. Their perspective regarding Scriptural authority is unclear because many of the practical documents recovered at Qumran seem to be revised, compiled, or grossly edited versions of the accepted Scriptures.

- Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees considered the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures (the TaNaK; Torah, Navim, Ketuvim) to be authoritative Scripture. Unfortunately, they also elevated “Tradition” (the “oral Torah”) to an equal position with the Scriptures for practice {much as the Roman Catholics elevate their tradition to equality with (or even superiority to) the Bible.} in life. Thus they greatly emphasized personal holiness and ritual purity as evidence of a person's faith and standing before the LORD. {This “oral Torah” was eventually compiled and edited as the *Mishnah* (Hebrew meaning “to study”) at the end of the second century, by Judah *Nasi*, becoming the foundational text for the rise of Rabbinic Judaism and making Modern Orthodox Judaism the spiritual successor to Biblical Pharisee-ism.} They also believed that all things should be ascribed to {“fate” or} the “Providence of God”. They affirmed that humanity was a moral people (able to know and to do good) but without qualifying an initial disposition towards either good or evil. They also believed that the souls of the righteous would be resurrected to a new, physical life while the souls of the wicked would be subjected to eternal punishment (Josephus; Jewish War 2:162-1632).

Josephus described the theology of the Pharisees as appealing to the general populace, whereas the theology of the Sadducees was more popular among the rich (Antiquities 13:298) and there are many diverse reasons which can explain this. Most “upper class” Jews of the time achieved their position by virtue of their social and political relationships to the Hasmoneans and the succeeding Herodian dynasty. {After the sons of Mattathias, a Levite, repelled their Selucid overlords, Simon Thassi became the first Ethnarch and High Priest of the Hasmonean dynasty to rule Judea. He united the roles of both king and priest in one person however, according to Scripture, he and his descendants were not eligible for either (as they were neither descended from King David as Levites, nor were they descended from either Solomon's High Priest Zadok or Moses' brother, Aaron). This, in part, led to the separateness of the Essenes who viewed them as being illegitimate.} Thus the present, continuing prosperity of the nobility was closely tied to the stability and security of the political status quo, which removed or reduced any desire for a revolutionary or eschatological *messiah* {being Sadducees, this also helps to further explain why the High Priest and other Temple officials were so opposed to Jesus: His message and His Person}; whereas the theology of the Pharisees offered people hope for positive social change through works of righteousness and hope for the restoration of Israel's fortunes in the person of a coming Messiah drawn from the Prophets and Psalms.

The rules and strictures of the Pharisees, through their “Traditions”, also seemed to offer the people an eternal hope before the LORD through their practiced righteousness {similar to the Essenes who took this to an even

greater extreme} and good works which made people feel as if or believe that they could earn a heavenly reward. Furthermore, there was no familial requirements or restrictions defining who could or could not be a Pharisee; any Jew, from any tribe could join this group with enough study, knowledge, and understanding {the Apostle Paul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin}.

However, the most important thing to understand concerning the Pharisees at this time, is the fact that they were religious scholars. They were dedicated to knowing and understanding the Word of God and then applying it to life {ostensibly for His glory}. The Pharisees knew their Bible. They knew that they should be looking for a divine Messiah and, unlike most others, they best should have understood the signs to identify Him {following the resurrection of Jesus, many Pharisees (like the Apostle Paul) came to believe in Him, but before Jesus' death we only have this mention of Nicodemus (and probably Joseph of Arimathea) as believing Pharisees}.

Today, similar divisions continue to exist within our modern Christian environment because of our differing views on the Sacraments, the Authority of Scripture, and our Ecclesiology:

- Presbyterians (or Roman Catholics) can be viewed as similar to the Pharisees because of our commitments to Biblical and theological study and the inspired authority of Scripture, as well as our reliance upon the grace of Providence and divine election;
- Baptists are like the Sadducees because of their lower view of the Sacraments and their strong affirmation of free will (Arminian as regards salvation [a decision for Christ], semi-Pelagian as regards our initial moral state [an initial, default state of being “good”]); and,
- Anabaptists (like the Amish, Mennonite, or Brethren) because of their extreme social and cultural separateness, their particular views as regards the sacraments (especially baptism), and the rigidity and legalistic nature of their social and religious practices along with their unwillingness to affirm the Christianity of other orthodox believers.

Second, calling Nicodemus a “*ruler of the Jews*” implies that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. This was a deliberative body comprised of seventy men who decided cases concerning issues of Jewish law, practice, and faith. So, we are talking about an important and influential man coming to see Jesus, a “nobody” carpenter from the “no where” of the Galilean backwoods.

Next, “*This man came to Jesus by night...*”, but why would he come to Jesus at night? Elsewhere in John (chapter 12), Jesus has an encounter during dinner, which was presumably during the evening or night, so clearly this is something different.

- “*Night*” suggests that it was late.
- “*Night*” suggests that most people would have been asleep.
- “*Night*” suggests that this was a secretive rendezvous happening under the cover of darkness; a fact which will prove quite ironic before their conversation is over.

Thus far and this early in Jesus' ministry, John has given us no reason to suspect that Jesus was ever too busy to meet with someone like Nicodemus, one on one. Even moreso, socially, if someone like Nicodemus wanted to have a meeting with Jesus, then Jesus should/would go to Nicodemus.

So, why did Nicodemus go to visit Jesus at night? What does going then tell us about him? It tells us two things:

1. Nicodemus was (probably) afraid to be seen going to see Jesus {but by whom?}.

- Nicodemus was also humbling himself by going to visit Jesus. Reasonably, because he could have summoned Jesus for this conversation, he was not using or abusing his station. Instead, this “*ruler of the Jews*” humbled himself by going to meet a carpenter turned teacher and miracle-worker. Even if no one else knew about this visit apart from Nicodemus and Jesus, this remained a costly transfer of “face” (of personal honor and respectability) from Nicodemus to Jesus. Going in this manner, he was submitting himself to the lesser role in a Master/servant or a Teacher/student relationship with Jesus; he was implicitly recognizing and affirming Jesus as the greater authority.

Nicodemus “...said to him, ‘*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God...*’”. Notice that he says, “We know...”; “We *oida*...”; meaning “We **understand**...”; but, we are left to wonder, “Who is this ‘We’?”. John only offers us two possible options: Nicodemus and the other “rulers” comprising the Sanhedrin, or Nicodemus and some other unnamed Pharisees whom he represented {certainly not the whole body of Pharisees, since many tested Jesus and some joined in the conspiracy against Him}. However, the first is unreasonable because if it were true, then surely he would have come in an “official capacity” (as in, not at night) or he might have summoned Jesus to visit him; but the second is most reasonable because, as dedicated students of Scripture, the Pharisees should be best qualified to recognize Jesus as a prophet and perhaps recognize Him as being Someone more.

How did they come to know this? What helped them understand and recognize this truth about Jesus? “...for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” They merely applied their knowledge of the Scriptures and the understanding and wisdom that they had gained from it to Jesus' signs.

Men like Nicodemus, those with the eyes to see, saw that Scripture, the Old Testament, pointed to Jesus. They knew, they *oida'd*, and they understood that Jesus was sent from God because of the signs that Jesus did: turning the water into wine, zealously driving out the money changers, and by prophesying. Nicodemus testifies here that these signs confirmed, affirmed, and proved who Jesus is. Nicodemus' testimony reaffirms John's earlier declaration that, “...many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.” (Jn. 2:23 ESV).

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

*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?"*”.

Much has been said about this exchange and much will be said about it, yet it is far more than just a humorous exchange to emphasize Nicodemus' lack of understanding. That is an important part of it because, as a Pharisee discerning that Jesus has come from God, he likely would feel pride in his understanding and wisdom. So yes, this exchange does serve to further humble Nicodemus, showing him to be a student requiring instruction and explanation from the Teacher; but it is also emphasizing the gracious and merciful work of God by explaining how He does for us what we cannot.

When we read them in English, his questions are clear and reasonable, but the translation loses an important element, a double meaning which was evident and intentional in the original Greek. The word translated here as “again”, *anōthen*, was often used in one of two senses depending upon the context: “again”, as Nicodemus obviously understood it and “above”, as James will use it when he writes “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above (anōthen), coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” (Jas. 1:17 ESV). Yet Jesus {as mediated through John} is using it here both ways, at once, but Nicodemus is thinking of our physical birth, of the physical world, and our temporal existence, and presumes a

restored, earthly Davidic Kingdom. His questions demonstrate that he was thinking about the physical “here and now” instead of the spiritual, eschatological future.

“Jesus answered, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 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.'*” Jesus' dual use of *anōthen* becomes clear as He explains, “... *unless one is born of water and the Spirit...*”; where by “water” Jesus speaks of our physical reality {interestingly, the human body is comprised of ~70+% water} and natural birth, while by “Spirit” He is speaking about our spiritual birth; of our regeneration unto spiritual and eternal life. Regeneration is the whole point of this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

- We **must be** “born again”, born a second time.
- We **must be** “born from above” by God the Holy Spirit.

But what does it actually mean for us to be “born again”?

First, I will tell you what it is not. It is not a human decision. Our becoming “born again” is not decided by either us or our parents when or if they choose to have us baptized as children or infants. Both the decision and the action are solely held within the sovereign provenance of God because it is His monergistic work of salvation.

Some people {Arminians} will insist upon our own active and “free-willed” involvement to receive this salvation; for us to be regenerated; for our being “born again”; by suggesting that there is some dependence upon or requirement for our human agency in deciding, but that is Biblically and demonstrably false, logically.

How many of us here today were born?

All of us, I hope.

What input did you give your parents in regards to your birth? Did you ask to be born? Did you consent to being born? Did you even consent to being conceived? {It sounds silly but it is relevant, considering the way modern culture thinks.}

None, no, no, and of course not! That would be total and utter nonsense!

The extent of your involvement in your own birth consisted entirely in (beginning and ending in) your **being born**. This is perhaps the best example of a passive activity. You were born, you gave no help to birth yourself. Your mother monergistically gave birth to you; certainly, your father may think that he helped some and perhaps the birthing process was medically induced or a C-Section performed, but truly, on the day of your birth it was your Mom who actually did all the work. {Thank you, Moms!}

**That** is the emphasis which Jesus had in view during this part of their conversation. Just as our mothers birthed us, birthing us “*of water*”, so too God alone, through the work of His Holy Spirit, births us of “*the Spirit*”. This spiritual birthing is the fruit and consequence of Him circumcising our hearts as He promised to us through Moses and the Prophets (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; Eze 11:19, 36:26, 44:7-9). Moses wrote, “*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*”. Circumcision of the heart is regeneration. It is the replacement of our dead, stony heart with a living heart of flesh (Eze 11:19). The LORD promised to do this work upon our hearts so that we will love Him and so that we will live. Thus we are “born again” (born a second time, in a second way) and are thus regenerated; but, regenerated from what to what?

When we were created, back when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, they were given life by the LORD and continuing in that life was declared to be contingent upon their obedience (Gen 2:16-17; WSC #12). Then, our first ancestors had access to the Tree of Life to begin with and they had a free moral will in our original state<sup>2</sup>: they could choose to obey God or to not obey Him; but then, after they sinned and transgressed the LORD's Law by eating the forbidden fruit, they died. They died spiritually and so they lost their communion with God. They lost their desire to commune with the true God and tried to hide behind clothing made of sewn leaves (Gen 3:7). Later that day, the LORD showed them mercy by sparing their physical lives, but He also cast them out of the Garden into Exile. He sent them, He sent us, away from His Holy presence because we had become spiritually dead and Death cannot exist in the presence of the source of Life; in the presence of the Three Persons who possess and are Life itself (John 1:4).

Ever since then, our moral will is made no longer free. We fell from the state of innocence and became sinners; our human nature was corrupted by their first sin and thus our will became always inclined to sin. We became morally constrained, unable to choose to not sin, except for whenever God acted within a person and circumcised their heart, regenerating them. {We do interpret and expect that this was the primary cause of faith and obedience in men like: Enoch, Noah, Job, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; just as it was for ancient Israel and just as it is for us.}

All of those whom the LORD regenerates: whom He births again by giving them a living spirit (His living Spirit); while still inclined to sin, they may also now choose to not sin. These whom the LORD regenerates become His children of adoption (John 1:12-13) and according to the faith in Christ which they are also given, they have the hope and promise that one day, through their union into Him, they will become unable to sin; becoming like Jesus, Him who “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21).

Although we were all born physically alive, we were also born spiritually dead. We are born at enmity with God and by nature, friends of the world (Rom, 5:10; James 4:4). It is not that God is against us, but that we each begin at a default position in abhorring the LORD as “*children of wrath*” (Eph 2:3). So truly, it does require an “Act of God” to change our hearts and bring us to repentance and faith.

That is what Jesus was helping Nicodemus to understand. People are not naturally born whole: physically alive, but spiritually dead. We need to be “born again”, to be born a second time: to be born spiritually, as well as physically; so that then, we may enjoy the life that God gives us as He intends, as complete persons.

Then regenerated, we become restored so that we become able to enjoy communion with the LORD; to enjoy fellowship with Him. This is what John wrote about in his first letter, “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us-- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” (1 Jn. 1:1-3 ESV), the Gospel promise of life in Christ Jesus and fellowship, friendship, with God our Father.

Once we are regenerated, we can actually “...see the kingdom of God.”, just as Jesus told Nicodemus. The sense of this “seeing” {as per the Greek, *orao*} is “perceiving” or “having an awareness of”. So, once regenerated, we can now perceive the Kingdom of God, as it is in and behind the world surrounding us. We can perceive His authoritative hand upon all things, sovereignly governing His creation even as it persists in active rebellion. We

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2 <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/four-fold.html>

can see the Kingdom of God as it is and as it will be: the tension of “now” and “not yet”; because we have been given faith, *pisteo*, in the only One who has conquered Death: the *Logos* who is *Theos* and *Andros*.

So, have you been “born again”? Perhaps you sometimes wonder or worry that maybe you have not? That is why the writings of John are such a blessing and source of encouragement for Christians, because he reminds us and he tells us so that we may surely know (1 John 5:13).

Consider Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee. He knew and understood the Scriptures and he was drawn to Jesus Christ. He heard, felt, and answered the Holy Spirit's call, even when he did not yet understand or recognize it. He believed, but he did not know what, why, or how because, **regeneration precedes faith**.

- He saw the signs that Jesus performed.
- He had the Scriptures which told him what they meant.
- He understood and confessed that Jesus was sent from God.
- He came to Jesus; he was brought to Jesus, against all reason, and he humbled himself before Christ as a student and servant.
- And, as will become quite clear, before the end, Nicodemus came to have a confident faith in Christ.

So, take comfort and be encouraged even if you feel like your faith is weak or if you have questions, doubts and uncertainties; because if an “expert” like Nicodemus felt that way, someone who should have **known**, then it is OK for you as well.

- Pick up your Bible and read it. Let Jesus' signs strengthen your faith. Let God's Word fill you and draw you to Him in love.
- Come talk with me, or our Elders, or some of your other friends and family in the faith. Let us pray with you, for you, and share in your struggles and help carry your burden.
- Pray yourself. Open your heart to God and ask Him to fill it with His Holy Spirit. Ask Him for greater understanding. Ask Him for more faith and ask Him to help your unbelief.

If you feel Him working in you; if you feel Him drawing you to Himself, calling you; then do not fight against it. Do not quench the Spirit, but instead fan and feed the flames. Ask Him to feed you, to water you, to grow you, to transform you and conform you closer to the Image of Christ. That is just the consequence of being “born again”. These are just the struggles of our sanctification: the life and the way of growing up in faith; until we are one day “perfected” and “mature”, until we are “adults” raised in glory with Jesus.

*“You must be born again.”*

*“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”*

**AMEN**