

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST?"

John 3:1-10 - "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." [9] Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" [10] Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

One of the advantages of working through a whole book of the Bible is you are forced to deal with connections between passages. You can't look at texts as though they were just floating, suspended, unconnected from the verses and incidents that preceded and followed. You get to see the whole story, not just a part. To study only isolated texts is like watching only one inning of a World Series.

In our text today a man comes to Jesus with questions. Good questions to be sure. But to understand the account of Nicodemus in chapter three you need to remember the last three verses of chapter two - John 2:23-25 - "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."

In the account of Nicodemus the Apostle John zeros in on *one* of those people who were impressed with Jesus because of the "signs that he was doing" (2:24). John makes this very clear - John 3:2 - "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."

And the reason this insight is important is John is going to unpack the subject of *belief* - "faith," if you would like - in this third chapter like it's unpacked nowhere else in the New Testament. The whole chapter creaks under the weight of references to "belief" and "believe".

John 3:12 - "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

John 3:15 - "...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:18 - "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

John 3:36 - "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.”

Well, what does it *mean* to believe in Jesus Christ, God the Son? John already said there were *many* who “...believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing”(2:23). And yet Jesus wasn’t very impressed with their faith - John 2:24 - “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people....”

This is where our text comes in. Jesus is going to *tell* one of these people - *Nicodemus* - what needs to change in his thinking if he’s going to “see the kingdom of God”(3:3). In other words, we all *need* to know this.

1) THE JUDAIC FAITH REPRESENTED BY NICODEMUS IS INADEQUATE FOR ENTRANCE INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

John 3:1-3 - “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.”

Nicodemus and Jesus aren’t on the same page here. Nicodemus, like many religious leaders before him, recognizes there are some teachers who truly give God’s truth to His people. He, a leading member of the Sanhedrin (that’s what “...*a ruler of the Jews*” means in 3:1), he knew all about teachers and prophets genuinely coming from God to bring revelation to His people. Nicodemus has spent his life studying the miracles and teachings of the prophets in Israel.

The heart of the issue is found in that phrase in John 3:2 - “...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.” And what Nicodemus means by “*come from God*” and what the Apostle John means when he tells us, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....”(John 1:14), are worlds apart. A lot of voices have “*come from God*” in the sense Nicodemus meant. Only *one* came the way the Apostle John meant when the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

So this is the first issue, not just in *sequence* in this passage, but also of *prominence* in this passage. Nicodemus simply must be made aware - he must *get right* - in what sense Jesus has *come* from God. And the issue is, Jesus, the Lamb of God, didn’t just come to bring additional miracles and information.

Remember, we’re investigating what the apostle John means when he presents the importance of *belief* in his gospel. And the first point is, belief, or believing, if it’s to carry one into the kingdom of God, must begin with coming to Christ, God’s only Son, as the *sin-bearer*. Jesus will paint more details for Nicodemus in just a few verses.

2) **BELIEF IN JESUS BRINGS WITH IT A MOMENT OF CONFRONTATION AND DISCONTINUITY WITH EVERYTHING ELSE THAT CONSTRUCTED LIFE UP TO THE POINT OF CONVERSION**

The key words in that point are **confrontation**. The life you have lived independently of Christ or before serious discipleship following Christ is jarred and shaken and stabbed through the heart. You are called **away** from a lot of what you used to be. The other key word is **discontinuity**. There is nothing from your old life that any longer **forms** your ongoing existence in Christ. You are not working with the **old clay** as you shape your daily life in Christ Jesus.

**John 3:3-7** - "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.'"

Just one textual issue first. Scholars debate the exact meaning of Jesus' words in **verse 5** - **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."** And the issue is with the reference to **"water."** To what is Jesus referring?

Many, particularly in Reformed, and some Presbyterian background, consider this a reference to water baptism. Those of a covenant background think of **infant baptism**, and others - even heavyweights like **Karl Barth** - see a reference to **believer's baptism**.

And I have no bone to pick here. But I don't think it's very likely that Jesus intended **any** reference to water baptism in this verse. I find it highly unlikely that Jesus would refer to a sacrament that wasn't even established in the New Testament church in any way at this point. No one, at the time Jesus spoke these words, would have had the concept of baptism as initiation into the Christian church in his or her mind.

I think when Jesus referred to being **"born of water and the Spirit"** He was merely describing the **effects** of the work of the Holy Spirit in the **cleansing, refreshing power** in our inward experience. This is much like the way John the Baptist described the way Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit - **Matthew 3:11** - **"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."**

But the Holy Spirit and fire aren't **two different things**. They're **one** thing - the **Holy Spirit** - and **His effects**. He comes like

fire. That this is what Jesus means in John three is fleshed out in the very next chapter in Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well - **John 4:13-14** - "Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, [14] but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

In all likelihood when Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born of water and the Spirit He is pointing this Jewish scholar back to his own prophetic writings - **Ezekiel 36:25-27** - "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."

So the term "***Spirit***" is what the Holy Spirit *is*. He's not a physical being. And "***water***" is what the Spirit is *like*. He refreshes like water. He satisfies like water. He purified like water - especially that ceremonial water used to cleanse and wash in the courts of the Temple.

But enough of that. It's striking to note that these are the only two times in John's whole gospel that he mentions "***the kingdom of God***." He does so in **verse 3** and **verse 5**. And we're meant to notice that it is just on those two verses that Jesus begins his comments with the telling words, "***Truly, truly, I say to you....***"

What that means is Jesus wants to ***arrest Nicodemus' attention before He delivers the truth***. Jesus knows if Nicodemus misses this idea he will miss everything more important. So it's not enough just to blurt out the facts. He has to get Nicodemus' mind ***ready*** for them.

And here's what Jesus wants to brace Nicodemus to hear. Belief or believing in Jesus as the ***Lamb of God***, and not just another ***teacher*** from God, means embracing a ***spiritual force - a transformation*** - that's as confronting and challenging and radical and as large as a baby being forced through the confining space of the opening of a mother's womb.

This is worlds apart from the faith described in **John 2:23** - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, ***many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing***." This is little more than ***admiration*** of Jesus, or ***momentary excitement*** with Jesus. Belief in Jesus as the ***Lamb of God*** means placing trust in Him that begins a brand new life from that moment on as surely as ***physical birth*** means a whole beginning of your physical life from ***that*** moment on.

Conversion is **new birth** in the sense that there is no longer anything from your **past life** with which you are building your **present life** in Christ Jesus. The past is no longer the clay out of which your converted life is formed. In the same sense that before your **conception** in your mother's womb there was nothing with which your life was being built, so **belief** in Christ results in **another birth** - a **new birth**. And there is nothing from the old life that can be used to build your new life in Christ. Everything is reset to zero.

I have found the book, ***"The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert"*** to be incredibly soul-searching. Remember, I told you I don't agree with everything in this book. There are copies in the Resource Room. You can read it for yourself. But the parts of the book I loved were **so** good they outweighed the parts with which I had questions. I'm quoting what I consider some of the best words on conversion I've read in a very long while:

***"When I became a Christian, I had to change everything - my life, my friends, my writing, my teaching, my advising, my clothes, my speech, my thoughts. I was tenured to a field that I could no longer work in. I was the faculty advisor to all the gay and lesbian and feminist groups on campus. I was writing a book that I no longer believed in....Conversion put me in a complicated and comprehensive chaos....I wondered: If my life was the only evidence that Christ was alive, would anyone be convinced?"***

***"...Conversion is a heart-affair. Before we can come to Christ, ["believe" in Christ] we must empty ourselves of the false pride, blame-shifting, excuse making, and self-deception that preoccupies our days and our relationships....After conversion, every day and every part of the routine of my life was a faith test....Each day brought a deluge of moral choices couched in the daily routine of a radical professor...."***

***"I changed my exercise routine from intense running to active walking. I cleaned my house and office the way God was cleaning my soul: I pitched things that weren't honoring to God. I got rid of whole libraries of books, CD's, movies, and pictures. I unsubscribed to magazines and professional journals. I suddenly had time in my life to reflect. I took up gardening. I enjoyed baking bread from scratch for my friends and neighbors. I relaxed. I grew in the strength of the Lord. I forgave my enemies and began to enjoy the daily solitude of prayer. I read and re-read the Bible, searching for examples for my life. Jesus was my teacher and the Apostle Paul was my brother. I started to develop real friendships from within my church family because nobody goes into battle alone. Sanctification - growing in Christ - is always both personal and communal.***

And the whole point - the one point you simply must not miss - the point that made Jesus shout, *"Truly, truth, I say to you"* about entering the kingdom of God is this: *"That's* what believing in Jesus is. It's like a *new birth*. It re-sets everything about your life and begins it over like *physical birth* started your life in the first place. That's what the Apostle Paul meant when he said *"If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation!"*

3) **WHY JESUS' SAVING WORK WAS OFFENSIVE THEN - AND NOW**

**John 3:6-10** - "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." [9] Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" [10] Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus makes it clear that these words are *personal* words. He is including *everyone*, but He is speaking specifically to *Nicodemus* - **John 3:7** - "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" And the problem with that is Nicodemus has been trained from birth to think of himself as *already* born into God's elect people, Israel.

Do you see what Jesus is addressing here? It's a huge issue. Are the Jews, then and now, already God's chosen people? Yes or no. And the answer is *yes*, if by that you mean they were the chosen ones through whom we received the revelation of most of the Scriptures. And the answer is *yes*, if by that you mean it is through this ethnic people group that God provided the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

But then Jesus gets suddenly uncomfortable and shocking. He tells this devout, sincere *"ruler of the Jews"* (3:1) that the answer is *no* in the sense of getting into the kingdom of God. This very orthodox, Jewish man standing in front of Him is told he needs to be *"born again"* by the power of the Holy Spirit or he *"won't see the kingdom of God"* (3), or *"enter the kingdom of God"* (5).

This is why Jesus takes the time to draw out this picture of the power of the work of the Holy Spirit. He knows He's dealing with divine truth and wants to make it as simple as He can. Jesus knows we can't *see* the Holy Spirit. And Jesus knows we doubt things we can't see and feel and smell and taste. That's why He draws out this picture of the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and likens it to the power of the wind that we can't see, smell, or taste, but all acknowledge in our *experience*.

And the point of it all is *Nicodemus* needs the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He needs the atoning work of the *Lamb of God* applied to his own very religious heart. And in pointing out how much this religious leader needs to deeply *commit and*

**trust - believe - in Jesus Christ**, Jesus is pointing out how much we **all** are never in a million years going to enter the kingdom of God on the merits of our own efforts. There is nothing in our **physical birth** that will take us there. We all need to be **born again**.

But we all need to know what Jesus was driving at when He likened conversion to a **birth** experience. You can't just drift into being **born again**. Birth isn't something **added** to your existence. It **is** your existence from that point on. Your birth started everything about your present life. Birth is **the** permanent game changer and definer. You went from **non-life** to **life**.

Nothing establishes your identity like your birth. It's your birth that becomes you. You have brown hair from our birth (at least naturally). You have blue eyes, and you got them from your birth. You're left handed because of your birth. Your French, or Italian, or Russian, or Canadian. And you always will be because of your birth.

And now we talk about being **"born again."** Billy Graham didn't invent that phrase. Jesus did. And He meant something by it. How does your new birth **form** you **besides** giving you forgiveness and a home in heaven? How are you **marked** by this other birth? What has **started over**? What has **new existence**? What life is in your daily choices from this birth?

Don't make it just words. Your physical birth wasn't just talk. Nor is your second.