

Answering Jesus: Have you been born from above?
John 3:1-16

This morning we begin a six-week sermon series in the Gospel of John (chapters 3 through 9). In John 1 John makes the statement that no one has seen God at any time (speaking of God the Father), but Jesus the Son has explained Him. So if you want to know about the Father, look at His Son, Jesus. If you want to know how God thinks, examine the words and the logic of Jesus. If you want to know how God feels, notice the emotions of Jesus (whether anger or tears of grief). If you want to know what God might say to you, notice what Jesus says to specific people in specific circumstances.

So this is what we are going to do: we will examine six conversations Jesus had with people or groups of people. We have entitled this series “Answering Jesus” because each of these accounts either implicitly or explicitly asks questions that each of us really needs to answer if we are going to experience God in every area of our lives.

If you’ve never heard these passages, I hope you are amazed at Jesus’ words, just as His original hearers were. If these passages are familiar to you, I would urge you to enter in as if you are hearing them for the first time. As I’ve studied these passages lately, I’ve realized that there is much in these passages that I’ve not experienced as I should. Wherever you are in terms of your walk with God, we trust that God will do a deep work in your life throughout this series.

Today we begin with John 3, Jesus’ conversation with a man named Nicodemus.

1 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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

The portrait that’s painted of Nicodemus is that of a man who is conscientious spiritually (a Pharisee, the strictest sect in Judaism), intelligent and well-educated (he was “the teacher in Israel”), influential (a ruler of the Jews), and probably very wealthy. In his day, people would look at him as the type of person who was automatically in God’s kingdom; he checked every box in relation to Jewish spirituality.

John mentions that he came to Jesus “by night.” Perhaps he came by night because he didn’t want anybody to see him talking with Jesus; perhaps he came by night because that’s when Jesus didn’t have crowds of people around him (he could have a private conversation). As well, the gospel of John uses the imagery of “night” and darkness as a metaphor for spiritual darkness (see 11:10 and 13:30). John may be signaling Nicodemus’ spiritual darkness.

Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus by making an observation: “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Later in the gospel of John we read that the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by their questions and their observations. But we don’t get that sense

at all with Nicodemus here in John 3. He is very sincere and honest and respectful (“Rabbi”). He saw the miraculous “signs” Jesus was doing as evidence that He had come **from** God and that God was **with** Him. Turning water into wine, for example, wasn’t the type of thing that a person could do independent of God.

Jesus doesn’t comment on Nicodemus’ observation; rather, He redirects the conversation. Instead of talking about what is true of Himself, Jesus speaks about what must be true of Nicodemus (or anybody else) who wants to see the kingdom of God.

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

Devout Jews in the first century wanted to see (or enter) the kingdom of God. But their vision of the kingdom of God was largely nationalistic; they understood the kingdom as God reestablishing the kingdom that was promised to David. This would happen at the end of the age. But Jesus was talking about God reigning over the entire world by a radical transformation that would happen one person at a time; and people could enter and experience this kingdom here and now.

Jesus shocked Nicodemus when He said that entering the kingdom of God involves something that is completely and utterly outside of your control: being born. You don’t birth yourself; you **are born**. By using the metaphor of **birth**, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he was completely dependent upon Another; you cannot birth yourself.

The word translated “again” (in “unless one is born again”) can also be translated as “from above.” We will see by his reply that Nicodemus understands Jesus to be saying that “unless one is born **again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus isn’t wrong; Jesus is talking about a second birth (in addition to your physical birth). But we will also see by Jesus’ reply that He was saying that “unless one is born **from above** he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus’ comment about being born again was so far beyond his categories and his experience that it sounded ludicrous.

4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

That was his way of saying, “Jesus, the idea of being born again is crazy talk!” [As an aside, in our culture the designation “born again Christian” has all sorts of connotations (usually negative). For some the term refers to overly zealous and emotional Christians; others seem to use the term to refer to Christians who are politically conservative. Jesus didn’t have any of those things in mind. For Jesus, being born again was **the essential experience** for every single person who enters the kingdom of God.]

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

Some have suggested that Jesus was speaking about natural/physical birth when He spoke of being “born of water” (water representing the amniotic fluid) and the second birth when He spoke of being born of “the Spirit.” But literature of that day never uses “being born of water” as an image for childbirth. Others have suggested that the water refers to baptism (either John’s baptism for repentance or Christian baptism); but neither John’s baptism nor Christian baptism would have been relevant to Nicodemus.

It’s much more likely that Jesus is speaking of one event, the second birth, using the two images - “water” and “spirit.” He was saying that one needs to be born of water, that is of the Spirit.

An intriguing clue as to what Jesus means is found down in verse 10 where Jesus says to Nicodemus that as a teacher who studied the Scriptures and taught other Jews, he should understand **from the Hebrew Scriptures** the things Jesus was saying. If we look back in the Hebrew Scriptures, the primary passage that uses the imagery of “water and the spirit” is Ezekiel 36 (esp. verses 25-27).

We don’t have time to look at that chapter in detail. But it’s one of the classic promises about the new covenant God would make with His people. He promises to “sprinkle clean water” on them to cleanse their sin; He promises to replace their hearts of stone (unresponsive to Him) with hearts of flesh (alive and sensitive to Him); He promises to put his very Spirit within them. Jesus is probably referring to this passage in John 3:5 when He says that you must be born “of the water and the Spirit” to enter the Kingdom of God.

Just as water washes your body clean, God washes away your sin. And He gives you a new heart, one with new desires - including the desire to obey and please God. Just as you were born with a human spirit, you will be given God’s Spirit to empower and teach and lead you. That’s what is necessary to be born into God’s Kingdom and family.

In verses 6 and 7 Jesus points out that “like generates like” (Carson, p. 196). Flesh and blood humans give birth to other flesh and blood human. And the Spirit of God gives birth to people who are alive in the spiritual realm.

6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’

In verse 8 Jesus points out that those who have been “born of the Spirit” have a type of life that cannot really be understood by those who have only been born of the flesh. The wind provides an apt analogy for Nicodemus (and us) to ponder:

8 “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus is pointing out that Nicodemus could see the **effects** of the wind; he could hear the sound of the wind in the trees, for example. But he could not understand or control the wind (which “blows where it wishes”). In the same way, people would be able to see

the **effects** of the Spirit in the lives of those who have been born of the Spirit; they would do the same types of works Jesus did and they would have spiritual qualities like love, joy, peace, and patience. But others won't be able to understand or control them. Something far beyond human understanding is involved.

This is all very bewildering to Nicodemus:

9 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?

Jesus' point is that someone who was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures should have known that God had promised to do a work involving "water and Spirit," a work that would involve cleansing, a new heart, and receiving the Spirit of God. Nicodemus' lack of understanding prompts this comment by Jesus:

11 "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. 12 "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Again, Jesus makes a contrast between earthly/fleshly things and heavenly/spiritual things (things from above). Beginning in verse 13 Jesus shifts the focus to Himself and His role in bringing eternal life to people.

13 "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Verse 14 is a reference to an incident recorded in Numbers 21. In response to their rebellion a plague of snakes had been sent into the encampment of Israel in the wilderness. In response to Moses' petition, God told him to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole; if those who had been bitten looked up at the bronze serpent, they would be healed. In the same way, Jesus says that He, "the Son of Man" would be lifted up (a reference to being crucified; everyone who "believes" (i.e., looks up to Him in faith) "will in Him have eternal life." Eternal life is life of the age to come" - resurrection life found only in Him. [Significantly, John mentions Nicodemus at the cross in chapter 19. There we read that he came with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus for burial.]

Here we have a very succinct statement of the gospel: Jesus was lifted up on the cross as our substitute so that everyone who believes will in Him have eternal life. "Believing in Him/Jesus" is the only thing that Nicodemus is told to do. A response of faith is necessary if he wants to be born from above, enter the kingdom, and have eternal life. This brings us to the famous "John 3:16":

16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

God didn't love only Israel (i.e., the Jewish people); He loved the entire world (Jews and Gentiles alike). Numerous Scriptures warn against "loving the world" in the sense of loving the ways of the world and participating in them; here God's love is the desire to redeem people in the world. His love was so intense that He gave His "only begotten Son." A better translation would be His "one and only Son" (as in the NIV); God gave His unique Son to be lifted up on the cross "that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." God longs for each of us to enter the Kingdom, to have eternal life, to be born from above.

Based on this passage, the core question Jesus asks us is, "Have you been born from above?" But I want to unpack that core question with these three questions raised by this passage. How you answer these questions will affect whether you experience the new birth or not.

First, ***Do I desire to live as God's daughter or son?***

This is a basic way of describing your life when you are born from above. As we discussed earlier, the imagery of being born means being birthed into a new family, God's family. In John 1:11-12 John uses this very imagery:

11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

If you "receive Him" you are given ***the right*** to become children of God. . . you are born "of God" into His family. If you are born from above, you now relate to God as your Father. In Galatians 4:6 Paul wrote that "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

Jesus isn't primarily asking whether you want to go be with God after you die (although that is promised too!). He is mainly asking whether or not you want to become a child of God so that you can experience Him as your Father. This means allowing Him to protect you, discipline you, and teach you. You will have the privilege of addressing Him as Father when you pray.

Second, ***Do I understand that my past neither qualifies nor disqualifies me to be in God's family?***

Nicodemus needed to understand that his religious pedigree (Pharisee, ruling council, teacher, etc.) didn't ***qualify*** him to enter the kingdom of God. You may be in the same situation. . . Perhaps you were raised in a devout family; perhaps you've studied the Bible a lot; perhaps you are an honest, compassionate person. Those things, generally speaking, are a good foundation. But they don't qualify you to enter the kingdom of God. Unless you are born from above - unless God washes clean from your sins, gives you a new heart, and puts His very Spirit within you - you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Next week we will discuss Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4); she was basically the opposite of Nicodemus. She didn't check any spiritual boxes. We will see that her past didn't **disqualify** her. The same is true for you. Perhaps you've done some things that fill you with guilt and shame. You need to understand that your past doesn't disqualify you. Jesus Christ came into the world to save **sinners**!

Third, ***Do I believe in Jesus, God's one and only Son who died in my place?***

If you genuinely want to be born from above and live as a child of God, and if you understand that your past neither qualifies you to be in God's family nor disqualifies you from being in God's family, believe in Jesus and experience the new birth.

You might be thinking, "Well, either you believe or you don't. . . there's really nothing you can do. . ." That's actually not true. You can seek God in such a way that you put yourself in a position to have faith.

This past week I reached out to a friend, Sara Roach, who came to Christ here at Faith when she was a student at KSU. I asked her to write up her story as an example of how you can put yourself in a position to believe in Jesus.

I was raised in a Reform Jewish home and part of a very small Jewish community in the Denver area. We only had services once a month and eventually started a weekly Sunday school program for the kids in our congregation. I always believed in God, but didn't go much deeper than the preparation I did for my Bat Mitzvah at age 13.

Growing up in the minority in my neighborhood and schools, a few people would "witness" to me over the years. The same held true when I started attending college at KSU in 1996. Then I met the man who would become my husband, Keenan. He witnessed to me in a way I'd never experienced. Out of his true love for Jesus, he would read me verses from the Bible and patiently explain them. He would ask why I believed what I believed and why I didn't believe Jesus is the Messiah. I began to think more and dig deeper myself.

I started attending a "New Believers" Sunday school class with him at Faith Evangelical Free Church in Manhattan, KS in 1999. Everyone in the class was just as patient, kind and loving as Keenan. [Next she talks about how she discovered that what she read in the "Christian Bible" was exactly the same as when she read in her Jewish bible (TNAK). As well, she took a trip to Israel where she continued to study the Jewish faith.]

At one point [while in Israel] we were encouraged to take time to meditate on what we had learned. I sat on a park bench, looked up at the sky and prayed to God to show me what was true and what he wanted me to do. I closed my prayer, lowered my head and there in front of me was a church! (which she took as something of a sign]

I continued to search and pray when I returned home and then back at KSU that fall. While sitting in a worship service at Faith E Free one Sunday morning in October of 2000, it all “clicked” and I knew that Jesus was the Messiah, he had saved me from my sins and I believed in Him.

I love Sara’s story because it illustrates that you if you desire to believe and enter the Kingdom you aren’t passive. You seek God like you would seek a pearl of great price or a buried treasure. You listen to His Word, you talk with people who believe, you pray to God and ask Him to open your heart and give you faith.

If you talk with followers of Christ, you will find that their experience varies in terms of believing in Jesus and the new birth. Some can tell you the exact time they first believed; others aren’t certain about the exact moment they believed, but they would say, “I do believe” (currently, present tense). An illustration might help. . .

Imagine two people taking a bus from Columbia, Missouri to Manhattan, Kansas. One person is awake and looking out the window the entire time. That person can tell you the exact moment she entered Kansas (because she saw the “Welcome to Kansas” sign on I70). The other person fell asleep right after getting on the bus and didn’t wake up until the bus stopped in Manhattan. He can’t tell you the exact time he crossed the state line. But that doesn’t really matter; he knows he’s in Kansas. In the same way it doesn’t really matter whether or not you know the exact time you crossed the line spiritually. What matters is that you believe in Jesus (present tense): “I believe that Jesus died for my sins and has given me eternal life.”