

John 3:1-21 "What a Good Person Needs Most: A Second Birthday"—part one**

Main Idea: According to Jesus in John 3:1-21, what a good person needs most (and everyone else for that matter) is a second birthday. More specifically, according to Jesus a good person needs to come to grips with three truths regarding the new birth.

- I. We need to come to grips with the necessity of the new birth (1-3).
 - A. Unsaved believers need it (2:23-25).
 - B. Good people like Nicodemus need it (1-2).
 1. He is religious.
 2. He has a good reputation.
 3. He is a public servant.
 4. He respects Jesus.
 5. He says true things about Jesus.
 6. He believes in Jesus' miracles.
 - C. Anybody who wants to see God's kingdom needs it (3).
 1. You can't see God's kingdom if you have been born only once.
 2. You can't see God's kingdom until the Spirit of God does something for you that you can't do for yourself.
 3. You can't see God's kingdom until you come to know and treasure the King.
- II. We need to come to grips with the nature of the new birth (4-8).
- III. We need to come to grips with the evidence of the new birth (9-21).

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following...

1. Have I admitted my need to be born again?
2. Have I experienced the reality of being born again?
3. Is there clear evidence in my life that I've been born again?

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

That's an amazing verse, isn't it? So familiar, yes, but oh so amazing. It sums up the good news of what God Almighty did so that sinners could enjoy non-ending, joy-filled life with Him.

But what sinner first heard that announcement? A tax collector? A prostitute? A sinner who'd lived a wild life and hit bottom? Is that who first heard the good news of what the God who so loved the world did? No. Ironically, a good man heard it first, a man who was convinced he was on the path to heaven.

As you turn in your Bibles to John 3 you'll notice that the context of John 3:16 is the story of Nicodemus. I recognize that Bible scholars disagree on where the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus actually ends, but I see no reason to cut it off before verse 21. Which means that Nicodemus was the first sinner to hear the proclamation of what today is the most famous verse in the Bible.

That in itself says tons to us, especially when you begin to ponder who Nicodemus was and the kind of life he lived. If Nicodemus was alive today, he'd be in church this morning. He just finished teaching Sunday School, in fact, and just dropped a generous offering in the plate.

What Jesus told Nicodemus ought to grip the heart of every church-goer today. Which is why we're going to take three weeks to investigate carefully, line by line, the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-21.

I'm convinced that one of the great mission fields in America today is *the American church itself*. On the membership rolls of thousands of churches across this land are people just like Nicodemus. And that burdens me. They're like Nicodemus in three ways. One, they're good people. Two, they're convinced they're heading for heaven. And yet three, according to Jesus, if they don't have a second birthday they will perish eternally.

A second birthday? That's what Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The words stunned upstanding Nicodemus.

"How can that be?" he asked in verse 4. "How can a man be born when he is old?"

To which Jesus repeated His charge in John 3:5, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." If you want to enjoy the eternal blessings of God's kingdom, Nicodemus, you must be born again.

Those words turned Nicodemus's world upside down, as we'll see. Thankfully, he got the point, for apparently, based on what we're told in the other two passages that mention Nicodemus (John 7:50 and John 19:39), this "good man" stopped clinging to his self-righteous pedigree and then by the grace of God experienced the Holy Spirit produced second birthday he so desperately needed.

Yet we've got another problem in the American church. Not only is the visible church filled with people who *need* a second birthday, but it's also filled with people who *wrongly* think they've already had it.

According to his research, in 2007 pollster George Barna said there were 95 million born again adults in America by their own profession. Let that sink in. 95 million people say they've got what Jesus said they need. That's consistent with earlier studies, such as a Gallup survey in 2003 in which 42% of the Americans interviewed called themselves "born again."

That would be great news if it were true, for if it were true, if nearly half of the American adult population were indeed born again Christians, there would be turn-this-country-upside-down evidence of it. Right? We'd be seeing pornography sales decreasing, and divorce rates declining, and abortion statistics dropping, at least by those who say they're born again. The Bible is clear. If a person has truly been born of the Spirit, then there will be undeniable evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in that person's life. We'll be able to see the evidence of Christ-resembling, Christ-honoring, Christ-promoting lives. "The fruit of the Spirit is...love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)."

But where's the evidence? It's not there. Why not? It's obvious, isn't it?

I find it indicative that, as Kent Hughes points out, only six in ten of the people who claim to be "born again" know where the verse is or who said it.^[1]

We need to come to John 3 with a teachable heart. I don't your heart, but the reality is you may not know it either, for the Bible says the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9).

The question is, have you experienced what Jesus said you must experience if you want to spend eternity with your Maker? Have you truly been *born again*?

What does that mean, and how does it happen, and what are the results when it does? We're going to find out as we place ourselves under Jesus' words in John 3:1-21. We're going to learn that we need to come to grips with three truths regarding the new birth—the necessity of it (1-3), the nature of it (4-8), and the evidence of it (9-21). We'll look at the first this week, and the next two in the weeks to come, the Lord willing.

I. We need to come to grips with the necessity of the new birth (1-3).

Who needs to be born again? In this gospel account the apostle John answers that question by putting the spotlight on three parties.

A. Unsaved believers need it (2:23-25). An unsaved believer? What's that? It's what we see back in 2:23 where we're told that many people who saw Jesus' miracles "believed in his name." But the very next verse indicates, "But Jesus would not entrust [that's the same Greek word translated 'believed' in verse 23] himself to them, for he knew all men."

The unfortunate chapter break keeps us from seeing the connection between what just happened at the end of chapter two and the story we find at the beginning of chapter three. In chapter three John gives us a concrete, flesh and blood example of an *unsaved believer*, a person who seemed to believe in Jesus yet to whom Jesus did not entrust Himself because his faith was deficient.

Who needs a second birth? Unsaved believers do. Oh, they have a faith of sorts in Jesus, but not a saving faith. Sure, they believe Jesus can fix their body, or their business, or their family, but they've never trusted Him to fix what they need most, a sin-stained soul.

Case in point, Nicodemus. Who needs the new birth?

B. Good people like Nicodemus need it (1-2). "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, '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.'"

This was a good man. You would have liked Nicodemus. He'd make a good neighbor. He'd be elected a deacon (or pastor) in many churches. We learn some things about this man in the text.

1. *He is religious.* John tells us that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. By definition, that means he was "a separated one." That's what the Pharisees sought to do, separate themselves from sin and live lives that honor God. Barclay points out, "In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country."^[2]

The Pharisees were the middle class religious party in Israel, numbering about 6,000 at the time. They were zealous Bible students, but they didn't just study the Bible. They lived it 24/7.

That's Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee and as such, he is a religious man.

2. *He has a good reputation.* A 24/7 reputation as a man of God, and that's not an exaggeration. Nicodemus took the law of God seriously in his life.

Let's explore for a few moments what that looked like, and to do that we need some background. The Lord gave Israel the Torah fourteen centuries B.C. In the Torah He revealed His standard with commands that were to govern the lives of His people.

But some of those commands require some interpretation. For instance, the third command said to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy by not working on it. But what qualifies as work? To answer that question, the Jews over the course of time developed some extra-biblical guidelines in a book called *The Mishnah*. "The *Mishnah*," explains Barclay, "is the codified scribal law."

Remember the Sabbath day. That was God's law. But to clarify what that command meant, the *Mishnah* devoted twenty-four chapters to give concrete details.

Then came the *Talmud*. The *Talmud* is the Jewish commentary that explains the *Mishnah*, and as Barclay points out, "In the Jerusalem *Talmud* the section explaining the Sabbath law runs to sixty-four and a half columns."^[3]

Here's an example. The scribes taught that you couldn't tie a knot on the Sabbath, for that was work. But what qualifies as a knot? That's what these man-made laws clarified, in great detail. The knot of a camel driver was out. So was the knot of a sailor. On the other hand, a knot you could tie with one hand was legal. So was a knot that woman tied on her girdle. Here's where thing got interesting, as Barclay explains:

"Suppose a man wished to let down a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath day. He could not tie a rope to it, for a knot on a rope was illegal on the Sabbath; but he could tie it to a woman's girdle and let it down, for a knot on a girdle was quite legal. That was the kind of thing which to the scribes and Pharisees was a matter of life and death; that was religion; that to them was pleasing and serving God."^[4]

By the way, how do you define what pleases God? Do you point to what God has said in the Bible, or do you go outside the Bible to standards developed by men?

That's Nicodemus. He's a religious man who has a good, upstanding reputation.

3. *He is a public servant.* The text says he was "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (KJV and ESV, 'a ruler of the Jews'). That meant he belonged to the Sanhedrin, which was the governing body in Israel. The Sanhedrin was comprised of 71 members, with the high priest presiding. Included in their number were priests, scribes, elders, and former high priests. The Romans gave the Sanhedrin considerable power, not just in religious matters, but in civil and criminal matters too. It possessed authority to arrest a man and send him to trial, which of course it later did with Jesus.

So Nicodemus was a public figure. But he didn't just bask in the glory of the limelight. He was a servant of the public, a community man who did what he could to promote the standard of God in society. And notice this about our man...

4. *He respects Jesus.* He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi.' that is, *teacher*. That's interesting. Nicodemus is a teacher too, perhaps at the top of the tenured in Israel. In verse 10 Jesus calls him "Israel's teacher." And yet this teacher is willing to learn. So he comes respectfully to Jesus.

And when? At night. Why at night? Probably out of fear for he knows the rest of his religious associates aren't too keen on this non-traditional teacher from Nazareth. But maybe he came at night because he wanted some uninterrupted time with Jesus, a rare commodity in light of Jesus' growing popularity.

By the way, please notice that Nicodemus saw that Jesus had something he lacked. That's why he came to Jesus. I wonder what people see in us. Do your neighbors see in you that which makes them thirsty for what you have? Do they see love, joy, peace, and longsuffering? Do they see Jesus? They will if you've been born again.

Martin Lloyd-Jones who served as pastor of the Westminster Chapel in London from 1943 to 1968 had this to say in his book *Spiritual Depression*:

The greatest need of the hour is a revived and joyful Church... Nothing is more important...than that we

should be delivered from a condition which gives other people looking at us, the impression that to be a Christian means to be unhappy, to be sad, to be morbid.... Christian people too often seem to be perpetually in the doldrums and too often give the appearance of unhappiness and lack of freedom and of absence of joy. There is no question at all but that this is the main reason why large numbers of people have ceased to be interested in Christianity.^[5]

I repeat. Nicodemus came to Jesus because he saw in Jesus something compelling—truth and grace, life and joy. Do people see it in us? You say, “I want it. Where does it come from?” You can't manufacture it by cranking the music volume in church, or dimming the lights, or telling people to smile. You can generate excitement that way, but not joy. As Jesus will tell Nicodemus momentarily, it doesn't come from the outside. It comes when something happens on the inside.

5. *He says true things about Jesus.* “We know you are a teacher who has come from God.” That's quite a testimonial. When we meet other Pharisees in John's gospel they're challenging Jesus, questioning His authority (8:13), even accusing Him of being an illegitimate child (8:41). We read in John 10:16, “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God...’”

But not Nicodemus. *We know you have come from God.* Jesus, I admit that God sent you. You're legit. You have the approval of God Almighty Himself.

And what convinced Nicodemus that Jesus had indeed come from God? Notice the end of verse 2, “*For* [the preposition reveals that the grounds for his conclusion is what follows] no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Did you catch that? Not only is Nicodemus a religious man, a man with a solid reputation, a public servant, and a man who respects and says true things about Jesus, but here we're told that...

6. *He believes in Jesus' miracles.* He's not like the famous atheist I heard about on the news last week. Christopher Hitchens, the author of *God Is Not Great*, is dying of cancer, but he still refuses to acknowledge the supernatural. Interestingly, in a conversation with *The Atlantic Magazine*, Hitchens says he isn't offended when people say they're praying for him, as long as they're praying for his recovery. But he says he doesn't appreciate prayers that he'll become a believer. In fact, the 61-year-old Hitchens says that if he does make a confession of faith later, it will only be because the cancer has gone to his brain and left him demented.^[6]

Unlike Hitchens, Nicodemus is a man who believes in God and even more specifically, believes in Jesus' miracles.

That's what makes verse 3 so staggering. Notice the text. “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”

I'm struck by the approach Jesus took with seekers. Did you ever notice how often Jesus *didn't* close the deal? Think of the rich young ruler, or in the case of today's study, the rich older ruler. These men came to Jesus looking like good kingdom prospects. And rather than inviting them to sign a prayer card, Jesus told them things that caused them to walk away perplexed.

That's because Jesus wasn't interested in getting superficial, emotion-based results. His aim was to make disciples, not merely get decisions.

I'm intrigued that while Nicodemus didn't ask a question, Jesus answered one. It's the question that Nicodemus needed to ask, a very fundamental one. Here's a man who wanted to “talk shop,” rabbi to rabbi. “You're from God, Jesus. I'm a man of God, and I'm open to learning some new truth. So teach me.”

Not so fast, says Jesus. You say you're a man of God, but I say to you, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” As Leon Morris explains, “In one sentence He sweeps away all that Nicodemus stood for, and demands that he be re-made by the power of God.”^[7]

Who needs a second birthday? Don't miss this. Good people like Nicodemus do. In fact, based on what Jesus told Nicodemus...

C. Anybody who wants to see God's kingdom needs it (3). "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Did you catch that?

1. *You can't see God's kingdom if you have been born only once. No one can see the kingdom without being born again, says Jesus. No one.*

Which raises two critical questions. One, what does Jesus mean by "the kingdom of God?" And two, what does He mean by "born again"?

As far as God's kingdom goes, Jesus had a lot to say, and for good reason. The kingdom of God was the hope of the Jewish people, a hope the prophets had been predicting for centuries (see Isa. 9:7; Dan. 7:27). When the Messiah comes, He will establish God's kingdom and rule forever with His people under His care.^[8]

In the four gospels the term "kingdom" appears 121 times.^[9] But ironically, in John's gospel we find the term only twice, both in John 3 (verses 3 & 5). In John's gospel we read a lot about eternal life, for in John's mind possessing eternal life is virtually synonymous with entering the kingdom of God.^[10]

So seeing God's kingdom is equal to experiencing eternal life. Who's going to do that? Jesus says, "Only those who have been *born again*." What's that mean?

Quite frankly, the words shocked Nicodemus. For starters, he knew what "born again" meant. It's what happened when a pagan man became a Jewish proselyte. When that happened that man was regarded as being *reborn*. "A proselyte who embraced Judaism," said the rabbis, "is like a new-born child."^[11]

So when Nicodemus heard Jesus talk about being born again, that's the filter in his mind. He knew that being born again is what needed to happen *to other people*, particularly *to lawless Gentiles*.

But why is Jesus telling me that? Doesn't He know who I am? I'm a religious leader, not some sensual Gentile. I keep the Law of God. I teach classes on it. What does this talk about being born again have to do with me? I already belong to the people of God. I'm a member of God's chosen covenant family.

Hold on, Nicodemus, says Jesus. That's what you think, but hear me plainly. You have more in common with that pagan Gentile than you've ever admitted. The truth is, you'll never even see God's kingdom, let alone enjoy its blessings, unless you experience what that pagan needs to experience. You must be "born again."

You're talking about *me*, Jesus? I need a second birthday, just like that pagan guy?

That's right. You must be born again. Literally it's "born from above." That's because it's a supernatural birth, one that occurs top-down, inside-out. That's what *from above* indicates. You must be born *from above*, that is, from heaven, which means this second birth isn't something you can produce, nor your parents, nor your religious system. It must come *from God*.

That's the point John made at the very beginning of his gospel in John 1:12-13, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but *born of God*."

Or to put it another way...

2. *You can't see God's kingdom until the Spirit of God does something for you that you can't do for yourself.* What that is and how He does it we'll consider more carefully the next time as we ponder the nature of the new birth in verses 4-8. But I want you to hear the necessity of it right now from Jesus' lips.

Verse 5—to enter the kingdom you must be “born of water *and the Spirit*.”

Verse 6—“*the Spirit* gives birth to spirit.”

Verse 8—“So it is with everyone *born of the Spirit*.”

That’s where the new birth comes from. God the Holy Spirit produces it. And unless He does so, you can’t see God’s kingdom, whether you’re a leading teacher in Israel, or a pastor of a Baptist church. Or to put it yet another way...

3. *You can’t see God’s kingdom until you come to know and treasure the King.* That’s the evidence of the new birth, as we’ll see the week after next, the Lord willing, when we get to point three. When a person has truly been born again, that person treasures the King of kings, Jesus Christ. He “understands these things” (verse 10). He “accepts our testimony” (verse 11). He “believes” when He hears the King speak (verse 12). He “believes” in the One who was lifted up and died (verse 15). He “believes” in the Son the Father sent into the world and thus receives eternal life (verse 16).

Am I describing you? Do you know and treasure the king? If you do, it’s because you’ve been born again. If you don’t, you need to be, for unless you are you’ll never see the kingdom.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following...

1. *Have I admitted my need to be born again?* You say, “I’m a good person. Surely I’ll make it to heaven.” That’s what Nicodemus thought, too. He was a good Pharisee and as such had been doing the right things all his life to ensure he would enjoy the blessings of God’s kingdom. He’d been circumcised. He’d kept the law. He didn’t live a wild life. He observed the right religious ceremonies. He tried to help hurting people. He even respected Jesus and believed in His miracles.

But he needed what you and I need, to be born again. Have you admitted that?

2. *Have I experienced the reality of being born again?* It’s one thing to admit you need it. It’s another thing to experience it. I’m asking, *have you experienced it?*

Nicodemus had thought salvation was the result of his own works, but Jesus made it clear it depended on the divine work of another. Nicodemus thought in terms of what he did for God, but Jesus talked about his need for the Spirit of God to do something for him. Nicodemus focused on external accomplishments. Jesus highlighted his need for an internal transformation.

My question is, has that happened in your life? Are you sure? 95 million Americans say it has, but for many the profession is highly suspect. Why? Because something’s missing. What? Evidence. So let’s ask ourselves a third and final question.

3. *Is there clear evidence in my life that I’ve been born again?* Do I believe that God sent His Son to die *for me*, and do I believe He conquered death, and is He my king, and do I treasure Him above all else?

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Kent Hughes, p. 76.

[2] William Barclay, p. 120.

[3] Barclay, p. 121.

[4] Barclay, p. 122.

[5] Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*, pp. 5, 11-12. Quote cited by John Piper in *When I Don’t Desire God*, p. 80.

[6] <http://www.thepath.fm/news/newsitem.cfm?id=42723>

[7] Leon Morris, p. 212.

[\[8\]](#) John MacArthur explains, “He is speaking of the kingdom of salvation, the spiritual realm where those who have been born again by divine power through faith now live under the rulership of God mediated through His Son.” John MacArthur, p. 102.

[\[9\]](#) The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* provides this helpful summary of what the Bible teaches about the kingdom: “God gives it as a gift (Lk. 12:32). It is taken from some and given to others (Mt. 21:43). Christ gives Peter its keys (Mt. 16:19). He appoints it for us as the Father did for him (Lk. 22:29). God calls us to it (1 Th. 2:12), has set us in it (Col. 1:13), makes us worthy of it (2 Th. 1:5), saves us for it (2 Tim. 4:18), and has promised it (Jms. 2:5). He does not shut it like the Pharisees (Mt. 23:13). We for our part receive it like children (Mk. 10:15; Heb. 12:28), inherit it (Mt. 25:34; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Jms. 2:5), see it (Mk. 9:1; Jn. 3:3), enter it (Mt. 5:20; 7:21, etc.), or go into it (Mt. 21:31). We are to be its children (Mt. 8:12). We may be “not far from it” (Mk. 12:34), or “trained for it” (Mt. 13:52). As we decide for God we are fit for it (Lk. 9:62). It demands effort; we are to be fellow workers for it (not of it! Col. 4:11), to fight for it (Heb. 11:33), to seek it earnestly (Mt. 6:33). It is destined for the poor (Mt. 5:3), the persecuted (Mt. 5:10), and children (Mt. 19:14).” Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995, c1985). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*.

[\[10\]](#) Observation by Leon Morris, p. 214.

[\[11\]](#) Barclay, p. 126.