

Session 2

June 12, 2022

BORN AGAIN BY THE SPIRIT

John 3:1-8, 14-17

Titus 3:5 says, “He saved us, not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Praise the Lord that our salvation is not based on God’s *justice*! If it was, who could be saved? Let’s face it: all have sinned, so all deserve eternal damnation. Rather, our salvation is based on His *mercy*. In this iconic passage, Jesus talks about the new birth experience with Nicodemus; what it is and how it takes place. And the Holy Spirit is prominent throughout. Three key ideas are expressed.

Infatuation (vv. 1-2). Notice that this visitor is carefully *identified* (v. 1). Even before his name is mentioned, John pointed out the uniqueness of this encounter. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. This sect had some very legalistic beliefs; a tradition that set them up to be charged by Jesus as hypocrites (see Jesus’ scathing rebuke of them in Matt. 23:1-36). As a “ruler of the Jews” (v. 1), He was also *influential* (v. 1). But he was in a way, *incognito*. That this encounter was at night is significant. Obviously, for whatever reason, Nicodemus wanted to speak to Jesus both privately and secretly. Finally, Nicodemus was clearly *interested*. Both his respectful greeting of Jesus as Rabbi, and the acknowledgement of the uniqueness of His miracles demonstrate that Nicodemus was legitimately seeking some answers. For reflection: Read John 7:50-51 and John 19:39. *What do you see as the relationship between all three of these references to Nicodemus?*

Regeneration (vv. 3-8). It amuses me that Jesus answers a question that Nicodemus was not asking! Note that only the apostle John uses the “born again” terminology (here, and in 1 John. See 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4; and 5:18, where collectively, the apostle gives *evidence* of the new birth in the Christian’s life). The exchange is intense, with sarcasm by Nicodemus in verse 4 (not naivety as some commentators want to say), followed by a not-so-gentle rebuke by Jesus in verse 10: “Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things?” Verse 5 has been misinterpreted by many. To be born of the Spirit is clearly regeneration. But what does it mean to be born of water? Certainly, Jesus was not referring to baptism here since baptism is *not* required for salvation. And the physical birth is also out of the question (If life begins at conception—and it does—then a physical birth is not required for salvation either!). So, what does Jesus mean? Again, the context helps. As a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus would have equated water with cleansing; the most common idea in the Old Testament (for example, see Lev. 19). Hence to be born of water means that one’s sins must be cleansed. And to be born of the Spirit means that one must be regenerated. Jesus took care of the sin problem on the cross. Regeneration is accomplished by the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation (vv. 6-8). For reflection: *Look up the verses mentioned in 1 John above. Can you outline 5 or 6 “proofs” that a person can use to examine the legitimacy of his or her salvation experience?*

Invitation (vv. 14-17). Salvation is by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). This is perfectly illustrated by the events of Numbers 21. Because of their continued complaints and rebellion during the Exodus, “the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died” (Num. 21:6). The repentant among Israel sought Moses to intercede on their behalf. God had Moses form a bronze serpent and affix it to a pole in the midst

of the camp. When someone was bitten, they simply had to look upon the serpent to be made well. The entire story is filled with symbolism! The fiery serpents were indicative of sin; the result of which was death (Rom. 6:23). Moses, like Christ, mediated for the people. The symbol of judgement was lifted up in the midst of the people, like Jesus on the cross (see John 12:32). Salvation was accomplished not by any works that needed to be done, but rather simply looking to the serpent; and this depicted faith. Certainly, Nicodemus knew that Old Testament story well, and now he was seeing it fulfilled in Christ. For reflection: *The offer of salvation by faith has not changed, and neither has the intended audience. Praise God that “whosoever will” may come!*