

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON 6th August 2023 am

NEW SERIES "You must be born again"

Part 1 "You must be born again - WHY?"

Scripture references from the ESV

John 3:1-7 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus^[a] 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^[b] 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.^[c] ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You^[d] must be born again.

There is a question to ask yourself that is more important than any other question you can ask of yourself or anyone else. Many have asked this question over the years. George Whitefield, friend of John and Charles Wesley, was one who did so. He studied theology in Oxford and planned to be ordained as a minister in the Church of England. Every day, he did his devotions and prayed. He visited the sick, cared for the poor, did prison ministry and tried with all his might to live a righteous life.

- Yet he had no peace with God. He was constantly tormented, believing that he belonged to the devil rather than being a child of God.

In his journal, he wrote of a horrible fearfulness, accompanied by inward darkness that overwhelmed his soul. Then he read a book given to him by Charles Wesley. It was originally a letter written by a man called Henry Scougal and entitled

The life of God in the soul of man

Through this book, Whitefield's eyes were opened to understand what true religion is. He realised that what puts us right with God is far more than just believing Christian truth and doing Christian duties. He understood that he did **not** have the life of God in his soul and for 12 months he wrestled with the most important question.

- It is a question that relates to how we can have eternal life and how we can be sure that we are truly a child of God and will one day be at home with him.

To get to this question, there are two observations to make from the text above.

1. There are credentials that fail. (v1). Nicodemus had the following credentials:

- He was a Jew – he would have believed that his birth into a Jewish family automatically made him a member of God’s covenant people.
- He had been circumcised – an external sign that he belonged to the covenant people of God
- He was a Pharisee – those who lived by the strictest religious rules, and who had even created extra applications to make sure they did not break any of God’s law.

Nicodemus was sincere in his quest for religious righteousness, and he had a deep hunger for the truth which is why he came to Jesus, rather than just talking about him with others.

On top of all his other credentials, he belonged to the Sanhedrin – the Jewish governing body, which exercised great power to ensure people kept the law. He was **the teacher in Israel** (John 3:10). When people had questions about the scriptures, he was the one they went to. He had studied deeply and was responsible for teaching others.

Here was a man with good credentials who surely ought to belong to God’s people.

- He thought he knew who Jesus was (v2), but did the right thing in coming to Jesus to discover who he really is.

Nicodemus apparently had all the right credentials to belong to God’s people.

He had the conviction to come to Jesus to find out the truth

He came to Jesus believing that he was a member of God’s kingdom because of all his credentials. He believed that he

knew something of who Jesus is and that he would have the discernment to see whether Jesus was genuine through having a conversation with him.

With his answer (vv3,5 above), effectively Jesus tells Nicodemus that even though he thought he saw something of who Jesus is, he was actually spiritually blind to the salvation that is offered through God’s kingdom. He might think he belongs to God’s Kingdom but he is actually outside of the saving rule of God. Jesus told Nicodemus:

Your credentials fail when it comes to membership of God’s Kingdom

How devastating that must have been for him. It is equally devastating for us if it is true in our case. It is possible to be:

- Born into a Christian family and have godly parents
- To have been baptised as a baby, or even as an adult following a profession of faith
- To consider yourself to have been born in a so-called Christian country such as Britain
- To live a morally good life, keeping the ten Commandments and following the New Testament
- To be a member of a church, and even in to be in a position of leadership
- To be a teacher of the Bible to others

and yet still be outside the kingdom of God.

These credentials are not enough

We may have good standing with other people because of them, but they are not enough to give us an entrance into God's family, and if we think they are, then it means:

We have never understood how powerful and influential is the sin in our hearts

The Bible tells us that our hearts are desperately wicked, so that even the best religious duties we perform are unable to give us entrance into God's kingdom. We are still sinful in the sight of a holy God. Something more is needed.

2. New life is essential (vv3,5). No matter how impressive our human credentials may seem, they cannot give us entrance into the Kingdom of God.

What is required is a New Birth.

Nicodemus asked what this new birth is (v4). Jesus' answer is that the New Birth is about being born of water and the Spirit (v5). Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was telling him, though he came to Jesus saying 'We know'. Now he had come to admit that he does not know. He asked **How can these things be?** (John 3:9).

What is this New Birth? It is so important that we understand this. Jesus defines the new birth (vv3,5) as

- Being born again
- Being born of water and of spirit

Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand this, because he was **the teacher of Israel (3:10)**. Therefore, this concept of being born of water and the spirit must have already been taught in scripture. In **Ezekiel 36:25-27**, we find that God spoke directly to his people and made them a promise. **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.**

Nicodemus should have realised that Jesus was pointing him to this promise.

- It is a promise to cleanse the people from their sin, and to put his own Spirit within them so that they would be able to obey him.

That is what the New Birth is. Henry Scougal put it like this:

True religion is a union of God with the soul, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or in the apostle's phrase, it is Christ formed in us. In short, I do not know how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed than by calling it a divine life.

It is the very life of God in the soul of man

It is this work of God alone that will enable us to see the Kingdom of God with eyes of faith and gain us entry. You may

- have been born into a Christian family but you are still just born a natural human being with a sinful nature **(v6)**
- have been baptised, but that only made you wet on the outside, and did not cleanse you from sin
- be externally very religious but that will not change the heart from which your external acts come

What is needed is the work of God where he imparts his own Spirit within us, cleansing us from our sin and giving us a heart to obey him.

- There is no eternal life outside of this transforming work of God's Spirit.

Having seen that all credentials fail and that New Life is essential, we are ready to ask the heart-searching question:

Have you been born again?

Are you, like Nicodemus, just trusting in your credentials? Are you sure that you have this new life that is essential?

The next question, obviously, is how can I be sure that I have been born again? That is for next week, but rather than leave you entirely with doubts and challenges, there is an answer that can be taken from the text.

The New Birth is an act of God whereby:

- God washes us clean from our sin – hence you will have this assurance that the sin which troubles your conscience has been cleansed
- God puts his Spirit within you – hence you will have a new desire to obey God, not in order to earn his favour but because you love him

There will be a peace in your heart that your sin has been atoned for through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and you are now clothed in his righteousness, fully cleansed from your sin and right with God.

You will be experiencing the life of God in your heart so that

- You feel the depth of his love for you, loving as he loves and loving the things that he loves
- You will love Jesus Christ, the words that he speaks and the people that he loves

The longing is for everyone in this church to be born again and to know that they are born again.

It may be that you are troubled because you are not sure if you have been born again, or you know that you have not been born again. Then do as Nicodemus did.

- Though outside of God's Kingdom, he came to Jesus.
- Though he did not understand what Jesus said, he kept asking questions.

At the end of John's gospel, you will discover that Nicodemus did come into the Kingdom of God. He did not give up.

- He opened his heart of confusion up to Jesus and was met with grace and compassion
- Jesus did not turn him away. He helped him understand and brought him to new birth.

Have you been born again?

- If you have, then you will have experienced in your soul the joy of sins forgiven, of being put right with God and

you will have a new love for God's people.

- If you have not, then seek Jesus.

Come to him with all your doubts and questions.

Cry out to him that you thirst for him, ask him to cleanse you from sin and ask him to put his Spirit within you because

Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (v5)