

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON 20th August 2023 am SERIES "You must be born again" Part 3

"New birth and faith"

Scripture references from the ESV

John 3:9-15⁹ 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? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[a] ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

One of the most important subjects of the Christian faith is what it means to be **born again**. The only people who have eternal life are those who have come under the rule of King Jesus, and Jesus tells us that unless we are born again, we cannot see, let alone enter, this kingdom life. This raises the question:

How can we get this new life?

As we have seen previously, without the sovereign work of God's Holy Spirit, no one will ever be born again. A miracle needs to happen where God, by his Spirit, comes to live in us and give us this new life. As the Spirit blows where and when he wishes, it sounds as if there is nothing we can do to get eternal life. Technically that is correct, because the Spirit of God is not under our control. Yet Jesus does point to two things that we need to do.

Faith and repentance are necessary if we are to have eternal life (v15)

Jesus is teaching that there is something God does and something we do.

- God's action is to cause us to be born again, without which we cannot see what we need to see to believe.
- Our action is to repent and believe, in order to have eternal life.

God goes first, but if you are to have eternal life, there must be a response of repentance and faith

Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant when he said **unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God** (John 3:5). His question was

'How can these things be?' (v9), but why could he not understand? On one level, it was because he had not yet been born again, and still needed God to work by his Spirit. However, Jesus pointed to another reason why Nicodemus could not understand – **but you do not receive our testimony (v11 above). Remember that Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel – a clever man who sought to do God's will.**

- His problem was not a lack of intellect or desire. It was ultimately a problem with Jesus himself.

He refused to accept that what Jesus was saying about himself was true. It was not only Nicodemus who had that problem. Jesus used the plural form of 'you', thereby including Nicodemus' religious friends as well. None of them would accept Jesus' testimony as true.

- Nicodemus' failure to understand what Jesus was saying about the New Birth was ultimately because he would not accept what Jesus said as being true.

That is the problem that everyone has. The reason people do not understand Christianity, and especially the New Birth, is a failure to hear what Jesus says and to take him at his word. This raises another question:

Why should we trust Jesus?

In **John chapter 20:30-31**, we find the specific purpose for John's account of the life of Jesus: **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** What is written in the verses we are looking at is given to help us come to trust Jesus. In them, Jesus tells us three things about himself to help us to take Jesus at his word and put our trust in him for eternal life.

1. **Jesus speaks truth to us.** A first-hand witness to something that has been spoken of and planned can be trusted

to give you an accurate testimony. Imagine a conversation taking place in the throne room of heaven between God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. In that conversation:

- The Father speaks of his love for us

- The Son speaks of his willingness to come to earth to die in order to save us from sin
- The Spirit speaks of his power to cause us to be born again so that we are washed clean and given a new heart to obey God

Only someone who was there could know the content of the conversation. In vv11-13 (above), Jesus told Nicodemus that he had spoken to him about earthly things that could be read in the scriptures, but he could also speak of heavenly matters. How can we know that Jesus is qualified to speak about heavenly matters, which had not been written down at that point? The answer Jesus gives is that no other person has been to heaven and sat in on that conversation (v13):

There is only one who has – God the Son

He, Jesus, was there when this plan was being put together.

He was sent to bear witness to it.

- He asks us the question: will you receive his testimony as true? We need to ask ourselves what it would take for us to believe Jesus.

Jesus speaks truth to you

That is why you can trust Jesus.

1. **Jesus sacrificially loves us.** Jesus referred back to an event in Israel's history to make this point (Numbers 21:4-9)

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze^[a] serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and cared for them by miraculously feeding them with bread from heaven. Despite his amazing kindness, the people grumbled against God, despising the food and thinking he was against them. God's

response was to judge his people, by sending snakes amongst them to bite them, causing their death. The people realised their sin, confessed it to God and in his mercy, he provided a way for them to live. Moses was told to make an image of the snake out of bronze and set it up on a pole. A person bitten by a snake would then only need to look at the bronze snake and they would live.

Later in John's gospel, Jesus describes himself as the **bread of life**. Just as Israel grumbled against God because they loathed the physical bread he gave them to sustain their physical lives so the people of Jesus' day grumbled against Jesus who is the spiritual bread, giving spiritual life.

- That grumbling would lead to them rejecting Jesus and having him crucified on a cross.

They rejected God by rejecting Jesus. When he was presented to them as their King, they would not have him to rule over them and they would not submit to him and go to him for eternal life.

2000 years ago, the people rejected Jesus but they only did what we all do.

Every one of us is born with a heart that rejects God by rejecting Jesus. Jesus is the eternal God who created us, and, as our creator, he has every right to rule over our lives. Yet we refuse to submit to him and his commands. We react as the crowds did 2000 years ago, and as the Israelites did when they grumbled against God. We are saying that we loathe the bread of heaven that was sent from heaven for our eternal life.

Rather than sending snakes to bite the people, God allowed the judgement to fall on his Son. The burning pain of eternal death that should have fallen on all of us because we rejected God instead fell on Jesus.

He went to the very pit of hell so that we would not have to.

Why did he do it? **John 3:16** tells us that it was out of his love for us.

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

Jesus did not just tell us the truth about the salvation plan, he came himself out of love for us and at great cost to himself to purchase this salvation from sin for us. Do you think someone like that would lie to you?

He died for you.

That is why you can trust Jesus.

2. Jesus defeated death for us. In v14 (above), Jesus says he would be lifted up. Obviously, he was lifted up on the cross, as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole, but there is also has a deeper meaning.

He will be lifted up through death to resurrection life to sit on God's throne in glory.

Jesus is the one who came from heaven (v13) but how would he get back there? In John's gospel account, Jesus reveals that he will take the route of:

- Rejection suffering and death on the cross
- Resurrection and ascension back into heaven

Jesus would enter heaven as the triumphant king over sin, Satan and death with thunderous praise from the angels. As we follow Jesus, so we follow him into a life of sacrifice, putting to death our own longings. We follow him through death into resurrection life.

He defeated death for you

That is why you can trust Jesus.

- Jesus knows the truth about God's eternal plan of salvation - he speaks truth to us
- Jesus has come to rescue us and to secure that plan of eternal salvation – he sacrificially loves us
- Jesus rules as the victorious King over sin Satan and death – he defeats death for us

Jesus has done all of that for you, and he asks will you receive my testimony as true and trust me?

He calls for a response and that response is one of repentance and faith.

What is this repentance? In this context, it means to repent of trying to save ourselves by:

- trying to make amends for our sin, and trying to do enough good works to put us right with God.

Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, who had spent his whole life trying to do those things. The example of the snake in the desert also speaks to this. The snake bite caused paralysis, and so the Israelites could not reach the bronze serpent to touch it. They could only lift their eyes and look. That is the point Jesus is making.

We cannot do anything to put ourselves right with God

We just need to look to Jesus.

When we think of repentance, we mainly think of the need to turn away from all the bad things we have done and are doing and we look to Jesus for forgiveness. Crucially, we also need to turn away from all of our supposed good works and good intentions, admitting that we are spiritually paralysed by sin and unable to do anything to gain God's favour.

- Even the good things we have done are driven by mixed or bad motives and therefore earn us nothing except God's wrath.

We need to turn away from self-righteousness and self-justification, and turn to look at Jesus who lived a perfect life for us and died to put right our sin. It is an act of faith. It may be that you turned to Jesus to receive eternal life many years ago, but

what are you trusting in today?

There is a real danger that we can drop back into a works-based acceptance with God, because that is the default state of every human being. We know that we are saved from our sin by looking to Jesus, but then we live as if we have to work to keep God happy. We see-saw between fear and pride.

- On good days, we take pride in the fact that we are defeating sin
- On bad days, we feel crushed by guilt that we have messed up again.

That is NOT gospel life

Gospel life is a life of continual repentance and faith

We continually admit that nothing we do will ever make us right with God and nothing we do will ever cause God to reject us. This is because:

- Jesus has taken our sin and made atonement for every sin we have committed or will ever commit.

- Jesus has lived the perfect life we failed to live and his goodness is put to our account

Living the gospel life means we are continually trusting in the work of Jesus Christ to keep us right with God, and not going on the see-saw of fear and pride.

Are you living the Gospel life today and trusting in the work of Jesus Christ to keep you right with God?

Then this assurance from **John 3:14 -15** is yours:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted

up,

¹⁵ that whoever believes in him (Jesus Christ) may have eternal life.