

He Loved Me . . .

He Loves Me Lots

The Gospel of John

Text

John 3:1-15

Topic

Jesus insists that "unless one is born again,
he cannot see the Kingdom of God"

Title

"The Born Again Ultimatum"

**"No matter how much you claimed to love me,
you could never have a Frost Giant
sitting on the throne of Asgard"**

It is the painful moment in the MCU Loki realizes he is the son of Laufey, King of Jotunheim (Yodenheim), the realm of the Frost Giants. His natural birth disqualified him from ever becoming king of Asgard.

"Unless [you are] born again, [you] cannot see the kingdom of God" is the painful moment Nicodemus learned that his natural birth disqualified him.

Jesus explained, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (v6). Elsewhere in the Bible, we read, "Flesh... cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (First Corinthians 15:50). Nicodemus must receive a spiritual birth.

Being born spiritually is a favorite topic of John's. The apostle speaks of being "born of God" seven times in the letter we call First John. If my search was accurate, John is the only Bible writer to use that phrase.

Language scholars point out that "born again" is interchangeable with "born from above."

- When you believe God, you are "born of God."
- From an Earthly perspective, you are
- "born again."
- From Heaven's perspective, you are "born from above."

I'll organize my comments around two points, **#1 You Must Be Born Again To Enter God's Kingdom**, and **#2 You Must Be Born From Above To Express God's Kingdom**.

#1 - You Must Be Born again To Enter God's Kingdom (v1-7)

Was Nicodemus *conscientious* or a *coward*? It is common to suggest that Nicodemus "came by night" because he was a coward who did not want to risk being seen with Jesus. While possible, *the Bible never says that*.

Of course he came by night. It was Passover, and as a "teacher," he would be busy all day. Jesus was likewise working all day doing "signs." At night they could sit, relax, and talk.

Joh 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

"Pharisees" were the hyper-spiritual Jews. They believed their places were secure in the coming Kingdom of God for two reasons:

1. They were born God's chosen people.
2. They meticulously kept God's Law.

We like to point out that the Pharisees started with good intentions. They wanted to honor God in everyday actions. It led, however, to self-righteousness. It will lead us there, too, if having begun in the Spirit we attempt to be made perfect by our flesh (Galatians 3:3).

Nicodemus was a "ruler of the Jews," thus a member of the Sanhedrin. According to one source (and I quote),

"There were two classes of Jewish courts called Sanhedrin, the Great Sanhedrin, and the Lesser Sanhedrin. A lesser Sanhedrin of 23 judges was appointed to sit as a tribunal in each city, but there was only supposed to be one Great Sanhedrin of 71 judges, which among other roles acted as the Supreme Court, taking appeals from cases which were decided by lesser courts."

Nicodemus was kind of a big deal among Jews. Today we'd call him an influencer. His podcast, *Nic at Night*, would have been the most popular in Israel.

It's easy to elevate individuals based on their outward achievements. Keep in mind that any of the five disciples following Jesus at the time were more 'spiritual' than Nicodemus. You, too, if you follow the Lord. How smart can a person be if they haven't received Jesus?

Joh 3:2 This man came to Jesus 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."

His words seem sincere. Nicodemus acknowledged the "signs" Jesus was doing as evidence He was "come from God" and that God was "with Him."

The Scriptures predicted that the Messiah would perform the signs Jesus was performing.

Nicodemus might have been giving Jesus the opportunity to identify Himself as the Messiah. The Messiah would establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. Nicodemus assumed he was ready for it.

Joh 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The Kingdom of God is first an earthly Kingdom to be ruled by a descendant of King David. In Second Samuel, the Lord promised David, "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom **forever**" (7:12-13).

David's son, Solomon, was a partial fulfillment of this promise, but that word "forever" indicates the physical Kingdom of God coming in the future.

Whatever "born again" might mean, *Nicodemus wasn't*. It was incredible to him to think he wasn't ready for God's Kingdom.

Joh 3:4 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?"

Commentators accuse Nicodemus of antagonism or sarcasm, but you can't conclude that from his words. Have you written to someone or sent a text that was misunderstood? Have you been the victim of spellcheck altering what you meant to say into something embarrassing? We don't have enough information to accuse Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was understandably confused. Jesus explained what He meant:

Joh 3:5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

"Water and the Spirit" has dozens of complex scholarly interpretations. *It has one biblical interpretation.* Jesus may have been giving Nicodemus, and us, a clue where to look for it.

The Bible had no chapter and verse divisions until they were added in 1227AD to make it easier to reference passages. Before that, you had to know where a passage was from its key words.

Listen for the words “water” and “spirit” as I read Ezekiel 36:25-27.

Eze 36:25 Then I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

Eze 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new **spirit** within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Eze 36:27 I will put My **Spirit** within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.

The teacher of Israel should have immediately remembered the Ezekiel passage. Jesus was, in effect, teaching Nicodemus from God’s Word.

The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible.

God promised Israel new spiritual life by transforming them from within:

- God would cleanse them from sin. (We’ll see in a moment that He can cleanse you because Jesus died on the Cross to take your sin upon Himself).
- God would regenerate their dead “spirit,” bringing them to life spiritually.
- God the Holy Spirit would come to live within them.

Joh 3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

“Flesh” in this context means your natural state as a human being. You inherit a sin nature. It is fiction, a fantasy, to think there is anything good or godly within you or that you can improve yourself enough to be right with the Lord. God must give you a new “heart,” a new nature, a spiritual nature.

Being born again is not a New Testament mystery belonging solely to the Church. It was promised to Israel as a prerequisite for citizenship in God’s Kingdom. Jews and Gentiles must be born again.

Nicodemus was a deeply religious person. He had risen through the ranks to be a respected leader. He represents the finest person any religion can produce.

Religion cannot save you. Neither philosophy nor psychology or politics; not mysticism or meditation. Jesus saves because He is the unique God-man who can take upon Himself your sin and give you His righteousness.

His coming at night metaphorically suggests darkness. Without Jesus, human beings are groping in the dark.

Joh 3:7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Nicodemus could have discerned from the passage about water and the Spirit, and getting a new heart, that a total regeneration was necessary to hold citizenship in God's Kingdom. He would not have used the language "born again," but hearing it could have been an "Aha!" moment when things fell into place.

You are born of God the moment you believe. You are in the Kingdom right now, but the literal, physical, on-earth Kingdom won't be established until the Second Coming of Jesus.

#2 - You Must Be Born From Above To Express God's Kingdom (v8-15)

The discussion continued with an emphasis on being "born from above." Jesus points to "heavenly things" and coming "down from Heaven" (v12-13).

Joh 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I like to think that Jesus and Nicodemus were, as was the custom, sitting on a rooftop patio enjoying an evening breeze. "Wind" is invisible, but it creates effects that can be seen, e.g., "the sound of it."

The Holy Spirit in us is invisible, but we can see His effects in our lives. He encourages joy, self-sacrifice, Christ-likeness. He enables obedience to the Word of God.

Joh 3:9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus had all of his life been taught that he was a saved Jew who must strive to be righteous by keeping God's Law and all of the minutiae added by rabbis. Jesus' words were a hard pill to swallow.

Nicodemus was in some respects not unlike the apostle Paul, who wrote:

Php 3:4 ... If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:

Php 3:5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;

Php 3:6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Php 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.

Php 3:8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

Php 3:9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith...

It was hard for Nicodemus to wrap his mind around the thought that his Pharisaical Jewishness was insufficient.

You might use filters on your pictures when you upload them to social media. It changes the way you look.

Many things can act as filters through which we interpret God's Word. They can change its meaning. I love to read systematic theologies, but there can never be one system devised by a man or men that can account for every nuance in God's Word without changing the plain meaning of certain verses that don't 'fit' with the system. The Bible is true, not the system.

Joh 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

Some of what Jesus was revealing was knowable. One of the 'filters' was that the majority opinion among Jews was that the Messiah would be a military man. Israel assumed the Messiah's first accomplishment would be to free them from Rome. Next, he would establish God's Kingdom.

Their filter was physical and material, even though passages like those in Ezekiel made it clear that inward change must first occur.

Joh 3:11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

In verse two Nicodemus said, "**we** know," and included his fellow Pharisees. Jesus' "we" were His disciples thus far: Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Those knuckleheads were already more qualified to give testimony than any Pharisee.

The signs Jesus were doing should have spoken for themselves that He was the Messiah.

Joh 3:12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

Joh 3:13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from Heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in Heaven.

One scholar makes sense of this:

"The Judaism of Jesus' day circulated many stories of bygone saints who had ascended into Heaven and received special insight into God's ways and plans. Jesus insists that no-one has ascended to Heaven in such a way as to return to talk about heavenly things. Jesus can speak of heavenly things, not because He ascended to Heaven from a home on earth and then descended to tell others of His experiences, but because Heaven was His home in the first place. He is the one who came from Heaven."

Joh 3:14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

The Book of Numbers is set between the second and fortieth years of the wandering of the Israelites. It records a lot of grumbling and complaining about their circumstances. At one point, when the Israelites expressed their disapproval of desert life, we read,

Num 21:6 So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

Num 21:7 Therefore 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.

Num 21:8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."

Num 21:9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Odd incidents in the Old Testament illustrate New Testament truths so we can grasp them. When Abraham was told to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, he obeyed. God stayed his hand. Later you discover that the site of the almost-sacrifice is *exactly where Jesus was crucified*. God the Father did not spare His only begotten Son. It was a type.

Jesus pointed back to the serpent on the pole as a simple illustration having two components:

1. First, to be saved and given physical life, all an Israelite had to do was look at the serpent. It was an act of grace on God's part.
2. Second, the serpent must be lifted up so all could see it.

Nicodemus was challenged to believe Jesus for spiritual birth in much the same way as the ancient Israelites were commanded to turn to the bronze snake for life.

1. To be saved and given spiritual life, all a person has to do is 'look' to Jesus. Salvation in Him is an act of grace on God's part.
2. Jesus must be lifted up. He tells us what that means later in the Gospel of John, saying, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (12:32-33).

Joh 3:15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Nicodemus' marveling makes it seem as though what Jesus was teaching is too deep to comprehend. It was and is too simple.

The new heart promised Israel, and all mankind, is received by believing Jesus. It's available to all men everywhere.

People always seem to know if you are from California. Maybe it's because you're not worried about earthquakes, or that you talk about getting a Double-Double the minute you land.

Believers are from Heaven. We haven't been there, but the Lord is there, and we are described as being seated with Him in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6).

The Lord has seated you right next to Him.

The more you see yourself there, and set all your affections there, the more you will express the Kingdom to those who are groping in the dark for the light of the world.