

LESSON #6 CHAPTER 3:1-21

The Word Manifested to the World -Jesus Instructed Nicodemus

Divine Attribute: Sovereignty

Theological concept: Regeneration, Born-again

Geographical location: Jerusalem

Chapter Structure

3:1-9 Regeneration is the only way to enter the Kingdom of God

3:10-21 Faith is the only way to be saved

Spiritual Principles:

P1 Lowering oneself to seek the truth is the key factor for spiritual growth

P2 A regenerated man will exhibit the visible quality of the new life in Christ

A. Today's lesson...

In the last lesson, Jesus visited Jerusalem to keep the Passover feast. He set his mind not to appease the religious leaders and experts nor try to be popular to draw more followers (like the success theology today). Instead, the Lord chose the way of the cross. Therefore, on his first visit to the temple, he cleansed it, thereby making himself irreconcilable with the Jewish authorities.

Today, we shall learn from this familiar passage two controversial doctrinal topics: (1) regeneration precedes faith or faith precedes regeneration; (2) Is baptismal regeneration biblical?

B. 3:1-9 Regeneration is the only way to enter the Kingdom of God

1. Nicodemus humbled himself vv.1-2

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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."

Just as the religious leaders were wary of Jesus, one of them visited him: Nicodemus. He chose to visit Jesus in the evening not because his deeds were evil but because they were good. He wished to conceal not an evil deed from good men but a good deed from evil men.

As a pharisee, Nicodemus enjoyed well-respected religious status. As ruler of the Jews, he has political power. Yet he took the initiative to seek Jesus, who did not have religious or political recognition by the Jews. He even regarded Jesus as a "Rabbi". Rabbi is the honourable title for scripture teachers; a rabbi has the theological qualification to instruct others about God. When you reckon someone as a 'rabbi', you commit yourself to his hands, letting him build you up, inspire you, and mould you.

Unlike many who sought the signs without seeking God, Nicodemus saw God's presence behind the signs performed by Jesus, and he realised there was a deeper significance that he did not know what they were. He came to Jesus with a sincere willingness to learn them. He was well aware of the jealousy of the Pharisees and the danger of being ostracised, yet these dangers could not quench his thirst to know Jesus more. He did not send someone to spy on Jesus or copy Jesus' wisdom. He visited Jesus personally, seeking the truth with humility. And to him, Jesus responded by "entrusting himself" to him (2:24). *"for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*

P1 Lowering oneself to seek the truth is the key factor for spiritual growth

Usually, a person in a high position will not seek advice from someone at a lower position, e.g. an old man will not take advice from a young man, for they fear losing respect. But contrary to losing respect, the lower a man is willing to come down from his high place to seek advice, the more respect he will earn, for humility is a well-respected virtue. Our Lord Jesus is an exemplar of such humility, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."* (14:12) The Lord's public ministry lasted only three and a half year, his work on earth was limited both in time and space. But his disciples throughout history will preach the Kingdom of God to a greater multitude until the world ends. John Wesley said, "The world is our parish". From this perspective, the scope of the Gospel work of the universal church is greater than the work of Jesus.

Many people seated in a high place are not willing to be surpassed by the younger generation. No matter which field, if the latter generation does not outperform the former generation, the field will diminish and die off eventually. This is a scary thing.

Instead of feeling intimidated when our children perform better than us, we should be thankful to God. Each generation should ask God to bring up successors and ensure the transmission of knowledge and experience. In their enthusiasm, the successor generation must be patient in taking over the beacon. Trust and respect the older generation; do not despise them. The older generation should make way for the younger generation when it is time, as God determines. Only then will the church grow healthily. Therefore, let us rejoice and praise God when the younger generation outperforms us. May God raise a generation that is more gifted, passionate, and able to succeed in the Kingdom's work.

Reflection: O Lord, I have been self-centred and arrogant. I do not like to hear from the younger generation. I have neglected the essential duty of nurturing successors for the ministry. Please forgive me, Lord! I'll start praying for a strong team of successors for the church. Amen!

"We know that you are a teacher come from God" At this point, Nicodemus only knew Jesus as a teacher sent by God. This partial and inaccurate knowledge is not enough to save him. (Today, the Muslims respected Jesus as the greatest prophet from God) Therefore, Jesus will point out to him the most vital knowledge – Jesus is Christ the Messiah. Without this understanding, one cannot receive the forgiveness of sin and will be condemned eternally. Dear brothers and sisters, even if your nonbelieving spouse is supportive of your faith, approves of the moral values of Christianity, or reckons him as a miracle worker, but do not believe that Jesus is the only God, the only Saviour he or she will have no part in eternal life.

Therefore, Jesus preached a sermon that Nicodemus needed to hear most. Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us spiritual wisdom. Seize the opportunity that God gives us to boldly tell people what they need to hear most so that their souls will be saved and not the words he wants to hear most. This is the duty of a true friend.

2. **Rebirth is the prerequisite of entering Kingdom** vv.3-4

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again 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?"

Jesus didn't correct Nicodemus immediately nor make small talk. He went straight to the point and told him what he needed to hear, "I tell you the truth: you have not seen the Kingdom of God, because anyone who has not been born-again cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (paraphrase) (see the Kingdom is the same as enter the Kingdom in this passage)

The Greek word for "again" *anóthen* has two meanings: 'from heaven', other is 'anew', and 'again'. From Nicodemus's response, it is apparent that he understood it to be the second meaning, 'born anew'. So in the next verse, the Lord told him that it was 'born from above' he was talking about – birth by the Holy Spirit, which is called regeneration.

3. **Born anew by the Holy Spirit** vv.5-6

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."

This verse is mistaken as the biblical reference for the approval of baptismal regeneration, which suggests that a man is regenerated by the Holy Spirit at the point of baptism. The phrase "born of water and the Spirit" in verse 5 does not refer to the baptism administered by the church but a quotation from Ezekiel 36:25-27:

"25 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."

"Born of water" in verse 25 refers to the cleansing of sin, which means forgiveness of sin, as Psalm 51:7 depicts: *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."* "Born of the Spirit" refers to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through whom we are remade with the nature of God and become a new man. Through regeneration, we receive the forgiveness of sin and an imperishable life.

Therefore, a man born anew by the Spirit will stop living the old corrupted way, turn away from evil and live anew by the holy nature of God. Life anew is the mark of regeneration. The Lord Jesus said, *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit."* (Mat 12:33) This is because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the mighty God, his work is as powerful and effective as the word of God, transform us from the inside, *"so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isa 55:11)

P2 A regenerated man will exhibit the visible quality of the new life in Christ

If a person professes to believe in Jesus and continues to enjoy the pleasures of sin, his hands remain merciless and his heart deceitful, then it is not that the Holy Spirit is powerless in his life, but that he has not been born again by the Spirit. Even if he has said the confession prayer or has been baptised, he is not a true Christian.

Reflection: O Lord, I only know that salvation means eternal life. Now I realize that I have been born anew by the Holy Spirit. Why has my new life not budded? Do not forsake me, O Holy Spirit. Help me live out my new holy life! Amen!

4. **Regeneration is the sovereignty of God** vv. 7-8

Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You[d] must be born again'

Nicodemus's surprise was due to the Pharisee's doctrine of the Kingdom of God.

"Pharisee" means 'separate ones, or the separatist or purist. They appeared in the 2nd century B.C. and were akin to the Puritans in the 17th century. They were the disciples of the pious Jewish sect called the Hasidaeans. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, there were approximately 6000 Pharisees in his time. Josephus claimed to have regulated his own life by Pharisaic principles from the age of nineteen. The Pharisees have been teaching others that keeping the commandments of God and doing His will day by day are the conditions required for admission to the Kingdom of God. For example, the refrain from eating produce on which the tithe had not been regularly paid. According to Prof F.F. Bruce,

'They built up a body of oral tradition, which was designed to adapt the ancient principles of the written law to the changing situations of later days and thus safeguard those principles against being dismissed as obsolete or impracticable. In this way, they were distinguished from their chief rivals, the Sadducees, who maintained the authority of the written law alone and who also rejected as innovations the Pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the body and the existence of orders of angels and demons (Mk 12:18, Acts 23:8). They banded themselves together in local brotherhoods or fellowships.'

The Pharisees did not receive John's baptism. They believed they could obtain righteousness by obeying the law to the letter (this is legalism). This is also why Nicodemus was surprised at the notion that unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. The Lord understood his mental block, so he illustrated it with the metaphor of wind.

"8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Interestingly, in the OT language Hebrew and the NT language Greek, one word is used for wind, breath, and spirit. In Hebrew the word is *ruach*, in Greek the word is *pneuma*. Jesus used 'wind' to explain the working of the Holy Spirit; Nicodemus naturally recalled the vision of a valley of bones turning into a great army in Ezekiel 37:9: *"Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live."*

Regeneration is God's sovereignty: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Ro 9:15). A man cannot regenerate himself, for he is spiritually dead (Eph 2:1). Neither can he earn regeneration by doing good work.

Just as human power cannot control the coming and going of the wind, the new birth of the Spirit is independent of human volition. No religious rite, including baptism, has the power to regenerate a soul. Like the wind, the hidden work of the Holy Spirit in the heart cannot be seen, but its effects are unmistakably evident.

"9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Now that Nicodemus understands the Kingdom of God is a spiritual order which can be entered only by spiritual rebirth, more questions emerged in Nicodemus' mind: Why did I not read about this in the scripture? Is this a new revelation? How do I experience it?

C. 3:10-21 Faith is the only way to be saved

1. ***The revelation of Regeneration in the OT*** vv. 10

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Regeneration is not an innovation in the NT but was implicit in the Hebrew scriptures. Noah and his family were saved by God's grace through the baptism of the flood and started life anew in a new world (1Pe 3:20-21); The Israelites broke away from the bondage of Egypt by the power of God through the baptism of the Red Sea and started life anew in the Promised Land (1Cor 10:1-2); Naaman the Syrian's 'baptism' in Jordan (the word 'dip' in Hebrew was translated as 'baptise' in the Septuagint.) cleansed his leprosy completely and restored his flesh like that of a little child, he came out of Jordan anew and proclaimed the God of Israel as the one and only true God (2Ki 5:14-15). God has revealed in the OT that for both Israel and the Gentiles, regeneration through the Holy Spirit is the only way to live anew and enter the Kingdom of God. Regeneration is the entrance to Eternal life.

It is a pity that the Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers did not understand this. They opposed Jesus, their only hope for eternal life, based on their limited and inaccurate interpretation of the Scripture.

2. ***The Disbelief of the World*** vv. 11-12

11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you[f] 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?

Even when the Word Incarnate was walking along Sea Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem, manifesting the grace and truth of God through teaching and working miracles, many Jews at the time rejected His testimony.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit came and gave birth to the church, accompanying the apostles and disciples with power and miracles, testifying that Jesus was the Messiah to the point of death. Nonetheless, many Jews in the era of the early church rejected their testimony.

The Holy Spirit inspired them to write down Jesus's teachings as a perpetual witness for future generations. Today, many people reject the testimony of Jesus, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the

church. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (1:5), Proving once again that only a regenerated man could recognise the Eternal Word. Next, Jesus explained to Nicodemus how regeneration saves.

3. ***Regeneration brings about faith*** vv. 13-18

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

'salvation', 'enter the Kingdom', 'regeneration', and 'eternal life' are the wisdom of God's saving grace. without the revelation of God, no one could comprehend. No one has ever taken up to heaven to learn this wisdom, except Christ is in heaven. Jesus did not go to heaven to acquire it, but he came down from heaven to impart it.

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. 16 "For God so loved the world,[i] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The account of Moses's bronze snake was recorded in "Numbers" 21:5-9. During one of the outbreaks of unrest in Israel's wilderness journey, they were plagued by fiery serpents, and many died because of the serpents' poisonous bite. They appealed to Jesus, who interceded with God for them, and by divine instruction, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. Anyone bitten would live by looking at the bronze serpent. The paradoxical healing method is the key to God's redemption – to believe in God and His saving devise. If one of those bitten Israelites, who looked and lived when he was at death's door, had been asked how he felt, he might well have said that he felt as if he had been born again.

The setting of the bronze serpent aloft on a pole amid the camp of Israel is a picture of the Son of Man being raised aloft on the cross. All who believe Him will be saved and receive the new life that the Holy Spirit brings about. "so must" verse 14 indicates that it will surely happen because it is the decree of God. Dear brothers and sisters, Christ did not hesitate to die for our sins, for the begotten Son of God shares the heart of God. He desires that His Father be glorified. Every man is born a sinner and is thus condemned; as surely as a man bitten by the serpent, everyone will perish unless he is saved. Eternal life is the life in the coming age; it is also the resurrected life. Nonetheless, a born-again person could enjoy eternal life in advance because of their union with Christ, whose life is resurrected.

The Israelites thought that the bronze serpent had healing virtues. They brought it into Canaan and paid homage to it. The bronze serpent was nothing but a piece of bronze; it was the saving grace of God that healed the bitten Israelites when they believed his word and obeyed his command. But in the Son of man, there resides infinite healing virtue. The salvation of Christ lies in the substitutionary death he suffered for our sins and the imperishable life he granted us.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

The light is Jesus. The Incarnate Word manifested God's love for man and the way of righteousness. Since the coming of Christ and His exhibition of human life in the light of the holiness and love of the Father, human sin is no longer the result of ignorance but of deliberate choice and preference. Nothing can be done for a man who says, "I prefer evil", for he has chosen the judgment of God.

Just as light drives away the darkness, the knowledge of truth would arouse a man's conscience. That is why evil men hate truth and they resist Christ. On the contrary, those who live by their conscience will not resist the Eternal Word, "*whoever does what is true comes to the light*" "As a magnet attracts the metal while the dead stone lies unmoved: so are the children of God drawn by the Logos and come to the Light. We can see that this is true in the four Gospel books and the Book of Acts. Jesus had only one meeting with Pontius Pilate and only one meeting with King Herod. Both Pilate and Herod saw the Eternal light, yet they refused the light, thereby missing the *kairos* that the Lord had graciously granted them, and they both perished forever.

When the Lord calls us, that is a *Kairos*. Let us be prepared to respond boldly as Nicodemus did, for that might be the one and only Kairos for you.

4. ***Regeneration precedes faith or faith precedes regeneration***

Modern evangelism theologians propagate that God will regenerate a man who chooses to put his faith in Jesus. In other words, regeneration will occur when there is faith. The premise of this notion is that sinners can believe without being regenerated. However, if we look at the consistent teaching of the Bible, we will see that this order is impossible. Let me quote a few verses.

The Lord Jesus said, "*This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*" (6:65)

"*you were dead in the trespasses and sins*" (Eph 2:1) The bible used 'dead' to describe the state of every natural man (before regeneration and partakes of God's nature). A dead man is not asleep; he cannot respond to any stimulus because there is no life in him. Neither can he cause himself to be alive, as Jesus said, "*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.*" (6:63)

"*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Eph 2:8). This verse tells us that the saving faith is a gift of God. God, by his sovereign will, chose us and predetermined us to be saved before creation. At His appointed time, He sent His Spirit to regenerate us, through which He placed the saving faith in our hearts.

D. Closing

That night was the only time Nicodemus had a conversation with Jesus. The next time he saw Jesus, he was not receiving the Master's teaching but was touching his cold body. That night, Nicodemus saw the light. Did he follow the light? We believe that three years later, when he saw the sinless Jesus lifted up on the cross in Golgotha, he understood the words that Jesus said to him that night, "*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.*" He announced himself as a disciple of Christ when Nicodemus showed up to bury Jesus. This is proof of his newly-regenerated life. According to Jewish records, Nicodemus was subsequently driven out of the Sanhedrin. In his later years, he lived in the mountains and had a simple way of life, knowing that there is an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance, kept in heaven for him!

Have you come to the light? *“But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”*

