

# COMMENTARY ON JOHN

## LESSON NUMBER 29

*John 3:4* “**Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?**” <sup>5</sup> *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* <sup>6</sup> *That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” (John 3:6) .....John 3:4-6)

### **EXCEPT A MAN BE BORN AGAIN**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

John the Baptist came preaching, “*Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matt 3:2). When Jesus commenced His ministry, He declared the same thing (Matt 4:17). In relating the words of Jesus, Matthew reports thirty-two references to “*the kingdom of heaven*.” He mentions “*the kingdom of God*” five times. Mark mentions “*the kingdom of God*” fifteen times; Luke mentions it thirty-two times. John mentions it only two times (John 3:3,5), and reports Jesus referring to “*My kingdom*” a single time (John 18:36). Those are the only three times the word “*kingdom*” occurs in John’s Gospel in any standard version of Scripture. The word “*Kingdom*” occurs thirty-three times from Acts through the Revelation. However, when it is mentioned, it is always pivotal, and never incidental. In His parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus said the wheat was “*the children of the Kingdom*” (Matt 13:38). “*The Kingdom of God*” is the broad umbrella under which the church is being gathered to be presented to Christ as His “*bride*” (John 3:29; Rev 21:2,9; 22:17). To “*see*,” or comprehend, “*the Kingdom of God*,” is to discern what He is doing in Christ Jesus. To “*enter*” the Kingdom of God is to become a participant in what God is doing through Christ Jesus. In order to receive what God provides in Christ Jesus, men must be involved in what God is doing – not attempt to involve God in the extraneous things they are doing. The value of any activity is determined by how it fits into what God is doing.

**Now, the Lord Jesus will affirm that to be at all involved with the Lord and what He is doing, a new birth is mandatory.** Immediately, this will not be understood by Nicodemus. Although he was a religious and devout man, his manner of thinking did not make room for the concept of being “*born again*.” This mind of ignorance is still prevalent.

#### **HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD?**

*John 3:4* “**Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?**” (John 3:4)

This is Nicodemus’ response to Jesus’ affirmation: “*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). This is the first time in all of Scripture that the expression “*born again*” is used. The Psalmist wrote of a people who were to be born, hearing “*His righteousness*” declared (Psa 22:31). It is also

written, *"And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her: and the Highest Himself shall establish her. The LORD shall count, when He writeth up the people, that **this man was born there.** Selah"* (Psa 87:5-6). However, it does not appear that anyone concluded from these texts that people would be *"born again."*

Moses wrote of God not giving the people *"an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day"* (Deut 29:4). He also wrote of God circumcising the heart (Deut 3:6). David pled with the Lord, *"Create in me a new heart"* (Psa 51:10). He wrote of the people being *"willing"* in the day of the Messiah (Psa 110:3). Isaiah wrote of *"eyes"* that would see, and *"ears"* that would hear (Isa 32:3; 35:5-6). Jeremiah wrote of God putting His law in the inward parts of man, and writing it upon their hearts (Jer 31:33). Ezekiel wrote of God giving people a *"new heart"* and *"a new spirit,"* and of God putting His Spirit within them (Ezek 36:26). However, for men to reason from those expressions to the conclusion that there was a new birth, or the experience of being born again, appeared to be too difficult for them – even the best and premier men before God. The new birth is part of the perspective included in this statement: *"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him"* (1 Cor 2:9).

**GOD DID NOT ALWAYS SPEAK TO BE UNDERSTOOD.** Particularly of old time, God did not always speak to be understood. The prophets are an example of this. They did seek to understand the prophecies of the Messiah. Swept up in the glory of the promises, they were *"trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow"* <sup>NIV</sup> (1 Pet 1:11). Peter writes to the believers concerning this circumstance: *"It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things"* (1 Pet 1:12). This was a necessary consequence of **not** being born again. With the holy prophets, not being born again was not a matter of their choice, but of the times during which they lived. There were certain things that had to be accomplished before there could even **be** a new birth. Sin had to be taken away, an atonement made, the devil destroyed, and a Mediator established at the right hand of God. We know this, Nicodemus did not. That is why he asked Jesus how being born again could be accomplished

**HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD?** Other versions read, *"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"* <sup>NRSV</sup> *"How is it possible for a man to be given birth when he is old?"* <sup>BEB</sup> *"How is it possible for an adult to be born?"* <sup>CEB</sup> During those early times, very little was known about the intricate makeup of men – spirit, soul, and body. O, there were some things known about such realities. Elihu said, *"But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding"* (Job 32:8). Solomon wrote, *"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honor, when thou dost embrace her"* (Prov 4:7-8). Yet Solomon, with all of his wisdom, was turned aside and by *"outlandish women,"* of whom it is written, *"nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin"* (Neh 13:26). And why was this so? **Because the kind of "wisdom" Solomon was given cannot change a man, make him new, or cause him to triumph over the devil.**

Nicodemus must have sensed that, according to nature, man becomes less able as he grows older, and the thought of being *"born again,"* was too large for him to process. It

is my persuasion that men still think this way, and that the thought of being *"born again"* is largely rejected by the Christian world. They are familiar with the language, but not with the reality.

**CAN HE ENTER THE SECOND TIME INTO HIS MOTHER'S WOMB?** What Nicodemus apparently did not recognize is that if a man could have a second start by entering again into his mother's womb, he would still sin and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). **Regeneration, or being born again, has more to do with what men ARE, than what they DO.** Of course, men do not seek such a natural rebirth, but they do love to think about a fresh moral start. That is why they make New Year's resolutions, give themselves to self-help plans, and make themselves accountable to others. The Christian world is cluttered with methods, techniques, and plans, that conveniently ignore the Savior's statement: *"Ye must be born again."* Nicodemus did not ignore the statement, but asked how it could be accomplished. Jesus will give him an answer.

### **BORN OF THE WATER AND THE SPIRIT**

<sup>5</sup> *"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."*

Here is one of the twenty-five times when it is record that Jesus said *"verily, verily"* – and **all of them** are in the Gospel of John (1:51; 3:3,5,11; 5:19,24,25; 6:26,32,47,53; 8:34,51,58; 10:1,7; 12:24; 13:16,20,21,38; 14:12;6:20,23; 21:18). This is a saying that precisely conforms to the will of the Lord. There is no chance that anyone can enter into the kingdom apart from being *"born again."*

Jesus is not talking about something **men** do, but something that **God** does. The person who is *"born again"* has been *"begotten of God"* (1 John 5:18), and is *"born of God"* (1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18).

**"EXCEPT A MAN BE . . ."** The way this is stated is important. This does not speak of what a man does, but of what he IS. Other versions read, *"is born,"* <sup>NKJV</sup> *"without being born,"* <sup>NRSV</sup> *"unless one is."* <sup>LIVING</sup> **This is a condition that will be assessed by God Himself.** He is the One who will determine whether or not a man IS born again.

**BORN OF WATER.** Other versions read, *"born from,"* <sup>CJB</sup> *"born again of,"* <sup>DOUAY</sup> *"being born"* <sup>GWN</sup> *"born through,"* <sup>NJB</sup> *"born not only by,"* <sup>CEV</sup> *"if a man does not owe his birth to,"* <sup>GOODSPEED</sup> *"generated out of,"* <sup>LITV</sup> *"a baptism into a new life."* <sup>MESSAGE</sup>

The allusion is to baptism, yet the text does **not** say, *"Except a man is baptized."* This word is not our baptism itself, but concerns what happens in baptism. For example, John baptized, but those submitting to his baptism were not *"born again."* They were not *"born,"* or birthed, out of their baptism.

This new birth is *"the operation of God"* (Col 2:12) – what God Himself does when men believe and are baptized (Mk 16:16). It is God who baptizes us into Christ (Gal 3:27), baptizes us into Christ's death (Rom 6:3). It is in our baptism that God crucifies the *"old man"* (Rom 6:6). It is God who raises us from water *"to walk in newness of life"* Rom 6:4). It is God who determined whether or not the person really *"obeyed from the heart"* the form of the doctrine that was delivered (Rom 6:17). He also knew the presence of genuine repentance, the presence of faith, and the desire to please the Lord. **The things that made the difference were all done by the Lord:** (1) The conviction of sin (John 16:8), (2) the gift of repentance (Acts 5:31), (3) giving us to believe (Phil 1:29), (4) burying us with Christ (Rom 6:4), (5) putting us into Christ's death (Rom 6:3), (6) being baptized into Christ's body (1 Cor 12:13), (7) being joined to the Lord (1 Cor 6:17), (8) being raised to

walk in the newness of life (Rom 6:4). All of that is summarized in the word **"BORN."**

Being *"born of water"* involves coming out of the water with all of these changes having taken place. Notice, the Lord Jesus does not say "except you are baptized in water." **It is the exit from the water that is the point** – being born out of the water. One might wonder just how we can know these things actually took place when we were baptized, being as the immediate evidence is rather sparse. The point is that when men really do believe, and when they really do repent, and when their single objective is to please the Lord, **this is what God does in their baptism**. Our part is to *"have faith in the operation of God"* (Col 2:12) – to believe that within the context of our obedience, a real birth does take place.

**BORN OF THE SPIRIT.** The Holy Spirit is the appointed Facilitator of the new birth. He sees to it that it is carried out.

**The fact that this was not spelled out to people inquiring how to be saved is worthy of consideration.** Those were in Christ were told, *"Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently"* (1 Pet 1:22). Here, the entire process from faith and repentance through baptism is summarized in the words *"obeying the truth through the Spirit."* The phrase *"through the Spirit"* is omitted in later versions (NASB, NIV, ASV, NRSV, and nearly all others). Versions that contain the words *"through the Spirit"* are: (KJV, NKJV, ABP, EMTV, YLT, AMPLIFIED). First Corinthians 6:11 affirms that those in Christ are *"washed," "sanctified,"* and *"justified"* BY the Holy Spirit.

Peter summarizes the fact well when he traces the effectiveness of the new birth to *"incorruptible seed:"* *"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever"* (1 Pet 1:22-23). Jesus will also affirm later that the new birth is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, when He says, *"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit"* (John 3:8). It is the work of the Holy Spirit that is likened to the blowing of the wind, which cannot be charted.

Now, let this saying sink down into your ears. If a person is not born again out of water, and by means of the Holy Spirit, *"He cannot enter the kingdom of God."* That is, he will not be translated into it (Col 1:13), will not be brought to it (Heb 12:22-24), nor partake of any of its benefits. Part of true spiritual growth is the increased confirmation that you have been born again. It will be revealed in your joys and sorrows, what you love and hate, your preferences, and your objectives.

### **BORN OF THE FLESH AND BORN OF THE SPIRIT**

<sup>6</sup> *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."*

Jesus will confirm the absolute necessity of the new birth. It is not an option. Now that sin has been taken away, and Jesus has been exalted, being born again is mandatory.

**THAT WHICH IS BORN OF FLESH IS FLESH.** Other versions read, *"flesh gives birth to flesh,"* <sup>NIV</sup> *"what is born of flesh is flesh,"* <sup>NRSV</sup> *"what is born of human nature is human,"* <sup>NJB</sup> *"Humans can reproduce only human life,"* <sup>NLT</sup> *"Humans give life to their children,"* <sup>CEV</sup> *"Whatever owes its birth to the physical is physical,"* <sup>GOODSPEED</sup> and *"That, having been generated out of the flesh is flesh."* <sup>LITV</sup>

The point Jesus is making is that there are only two orders with which men can be

associated: the flesh and the Spirit. By saying *"That which is born of flesh is flesh,"* He means it is confined to the flesh. Nothing from the flesh, or that is natural, can be transported into the realm of the Spirit. Things that are *"of the Spirit"* cannot be blended with things that are *"of the flesh."* A person who is not *"born of the Spirit"* is not accepted by God, does not comprehend the things of God, and cannot be joined to Christ. Whatever, or whoever, is born of the flesh is locked into ultimate decay and Divine rejection. Such a person cannot be educated out of that state. He cannot learn new habits that will make him acceptable. There is no routine that can make *"flesh"* spiritual. That is why there is the resurrection of the dead – flesh and blood bodies cannot occupy eternity! Both heaven and hell require new bodies, which everyone will receive, whether saved or lost.

The nominal church regularly contradicts this affirmation. It attempts to transform *"flesh"* into *"spirit."* It does it by attempting to port over the wisdom of this world into the domain of the Spirit. It attempts to put spiritual words into fleshly musical scores. It organizes the church, and the institutions it spawns, according to the manners of this world. It does not see that what the world creates can only be used in the worldly order. You cannot take a worldly system and adapt it to spiritual life. It simply is not possible, because *"that which is born of the flesh is flesh"* – and can be nothing more.

People who attempt such things have revealed how little they know about the Kingdom of God. They have also made known that they have a certain love for the world, even though they do their best to modify it so that it looks honorable. There is no need for confusion on this matter. The Lord has spoken with unquestionable clarity. *"For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be"* (Rom 8:6-7). That is about living in the flesh. The conclusion is, *"So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God"* (Rom 8:8). That is why it is written, *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Cor 2:14). Valiant efforts may be made to dress-up the flesh, so to speak, making it honorable. Men may educate it, discipline it, make it religious, parade its successes, and bath it in Bible texts. However, after they have done all this, it cannot enter into the of God. It has not been moved out of the cursed order – *"the flesh."*

**THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE SPIRIT IS SPIRIT.** Other versions read *"but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life,"* <sup>NLT</sup> *"the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven,"* <sup>LIVING</sup> and *"whatever is born of the Spirit is spiritual."* <sup>WILLIAMS</sup> Who or what is *"born of the Spirit"* cannot be moved into a profitable association with *"this present evil world"* (Gal 1:4). What is *"of the Spirit"* has no worldly utility, because it is not intended for that realm. God, for example, would not allow the people to make Jesus a political king. When they attempted to do so, their efforts were simply thwarted (John 6:15). The teaching of the Apostles cannot be employed to make the kind of government the people desire. Their teaching is designed to orient the people for glory, **not** enable them to adapt to this present evil world. Candidly we are reminded, *"For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit"* (Rom 8:5). That is the result of the Spirit's work. It begins at the point of the new birth, where a heavenly citizen is produced. At that point the individual is reconciled to God, cleansed, and given the Holy Spirit. Nothing about his new being and status was produced by the flesh. And, nothing that has been accomplished is intended to make the flesh acceptable.

Nicodemus had asked if a man could enter his mother's womb again. Jesus is telling him that if such a thing could be done, nothing spiritual could come of it. Even given a fresh start, the flesh cannot produce something *"of the Spirit."* You may reform it, regiment it, and envelop it with new habits. You may stop it from outward sins, and make it, so to speak, "go to church." But it will still be flesh, unacceptable to God, and incapable of yielding or receiving anything spiritual. If this truth was actually received by the churches, it would change them radically. Their approach to education, congregational activities, and involvements with the young people and seniors would be significantly altered.