

- I. Purpose of the Passage - to address the right response to the end of Chapter 2
 - a. At the end of John 2, people believed Christ but Christ did not entrust Himself to them
 - b. At the beginning of John 3, John explains when Christ will entrust Himself to a person
 - c. Passage is actually John 3:1-21
 - i. Three parts, loosely:
 - 1) The Spirit's work, versus 1-8
 - 2) Christ's work, versus 9-15
 - 3) Our work, versus 16-21
 - ii. This morning we'll only be looking at the first part - the Spirit's work
 - 1) But all three parts are intimately connected and we need to remember this over the next three weeks as we go through the passage
 - d. Nicodemus serves as an example for Christ to explain why believism, or simply acknowledging Christ or simply doing religious things, isn't enough
 - i. Nicodemus appears to be a part of the crowd that 'believed in Christ' during the Passover
 - ii. He comes at night to Christ, and Christ rebukes Him, but also explains to Him the truth
 - iii. The story ends without resolving whether Nicodemus believes or not
 - 1) Two actions that may tell us something:
 - a) He objects to the Chief Priest's and Pharisees' treatment of Jesus (John 7)

⁴⁵ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" ⁴⁶The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" ⁴⁷The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived?" ⁴⁸ Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" ⁵²They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

- a) He came and participated in Christ burial (John 19)

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. ⁴⁰So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

- 2) Since he was a 'ruler of the Jews,' both of these acts were very dangerous for him
 - a) He appears to do these things publicly, which is even more dangerous
 - b) So, we aren't absolutely sure, but there may be signs that Nicodemus was born again

II. Christ's Response - if believism isn't enough, what is?

- a. You must be born again (vs 3-6)
 - i. What is being born again?

- Five defining statements to help us understand what being born again is
 - ◆ Spoiler - #3 is the main definition, the rest are supporting points

- 1) It is a completely new life - "You must be **born**"
 - a) This is simply the idea of being born, in birth there is new life
 - i) a child is not a reformed you, but rather a totally new life
 - b) There is no repair of the last life, but a total new life (II Corinthians 5)

¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

- 2) It is against/antithetical to our nature - "You must be born **again**"
 - a) A clash of two natures - the Flesh versus the Spirit
 - b) Flesh begets flesh
 - i) The flesh is our nature - John 1:14 - and the Word became flesh
 - ii) Our nature can be nothing but our nature
 - iii) Our nature is corrupt, fallen

⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

- ◆ Both guilty of sin and enslaved to sin (Romans 8)

- b) Spirit begets spirit
 - i) The new birth is brought about by the Spirit and not by flesh

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

- ◆ It brings a nature that is pure and holy - not corrupt and fallen (Romans 8)

- 3) It is both cleansing and regeneration - "unless one is born **of water and the Spirit**"
 - a) Two births that equal being born again
 - i) Water and the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 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. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

- b) Water represents cleansing or forgiveness from sin (I John 1:7)

⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

- ◆ We see the symbolism of water used in this way in other places

(Hebrews 1:19-22, Ephesians 5:25-26)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

i) This is not a direct reference to baptism

One. That is, Christ is not using water to represent Baptism - Christ is not saying Baptism is necessary for salvation

Two. Instead, Baptism represents this, not the other way around

ii) Piper's Thoughts

One. No reference of baptism in the rest of the passage

Two. Baptism does not fit the analogy of wind - if it is totally dependant on the Spirit, how does the human act of Baptism effect it

Three. Baptism does not fit with Jesus' scolding of Nicodemus - there was no reference to baptism in the Old Testament that Nicodemus should have understood

Four. There are evident Old Testament references to water and the Spirit that are not about Baptism directly (Ezekiel 36:24-28, Isaiah 44:3)

c) The Spirit represents regeneration, a new life that is born in holiness to God (II Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 4:20-24, Colossians 3:9-10)

¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

²⁰But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²²to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

d) So being born again is being saved to the uttermost, it is totally effective and there is nothing else necessary

i) In being reborn we are saved from the guilt and punishment of sin (washing)

ii) In being reborn we are saved from the bondage to sin (regeneration) (Titus 3:4-7)

⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, **by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit**, ⁶whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

e) What does regeneration look like? In John's letters, John intimately ties being born again to four things:

i) Knowing God (I John 4:7)

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

ii) Loving God (I John 5:1)

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

iii) Faith (I John 5:1, 4)

⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith.

iv) Practicing righteousness and not sin (I John 2:29, 3:9, 5:18)

²⁹If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith.

4) It is absolutely necessary for salvation - "he **cannot** enter the kingdom of heaven"

a) I only include this in my definition because Christ emphasized this very emphatically in two repeated phrases

i) Verily, verily...(Amen, Amen...)

ii) ...he cannot see the kingdom of God

5) It is humanly impossible - "How can a man be born when he is old?"

a) Nicodemus's question is not ridiculous, although misguided

i) How can a man be born again?

b) Flesh begets flesh, only that which is born of the Spirit can be spirit

i) Our nature is totally corrupt and has nothing in it that could possibly cause us to be born again (return to Romans 8)

⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

◇ We are flesh, and therefore we cannot please God

◇ Leads into our next topic for this morning

b. Being born again is an act of God, not man (vs 7-8)

i. If being born again ever happens, then this is a necessary consequence of it being humanly impossible (Matthew 19:25-26)

□ Following the discourse with the rich young ruler, the disciples ask an astute

question, I want to look at Christ's answer

²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

ii. The act of God in being born again is like the wind - two things Christ teaches from this

- 1) The work of God is like the wind - we cannot control or predict it
 - a) There is nothing we can do to cause ourselves or others to be born again
 - i) Even today, with our advanced scientific know-how, we can't do anything to change what the wind is going to do, the best thing we can do is tell you where it is.
 - ii) We are helpless to change this at all - "with man this is impossible" (Romans 9:15-18)

¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it **depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.** ¹⁷For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

- b) Nor can we, with good accuracy, predict who the Spirit of God will choose to regenerate
 - i) Again, even today, with our advanced scientific know-how, we can't really predict the wind. We can tell major trends in the wind, but no one can tell you when exactly a gust of wind is going to blow your leaf pile back over your lawn.
 - ii) This doesn't mean we can't sense broad trends of what the Spirit is doing - just like the wind, we may be able to predict it's going to be windy today
 - iii) But we can't predict person to person who will receive the gospel, and it is dangerous to try to do so - the Spirit will work where He will work (Romans 9:18)

¹⁸So then he has mercy on **whomever** he wills, and he hardens **whomever** he wills.

- 2) Although the work of the Spirit in causing the rebirth is hidden, being born again is not a hidden act of God - like the wind, we can see it's effect
 - a) Being born again is not a fruitless action of God
 - b) Those born again will reveal fruit in their lives
 - i) I John 5:1 - everyone who believes...has been born of God
 - ii) I John 2:29 - everyone who practices righteousness...has been born of Him
 - iii) I John 4:7 - whoever loves...has been born of God
 - c) A more common metaphor for this truth in the New Testament is fruit (Matthew 7:15-19, Galatians 5:16-25)

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will

recognize them by their fruits.

¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

- ◇ Fruit is the evidence of the Spirit's work, just like seeing where the wind blows
- ◇ Only those reborn in the Spirit can exhibit good fruit
- ◇ So, we can distinguish those whom the Spirit has worked in from those who are not regenerated by the evidence, the fruit, seeing where the wind is blowing

III. Conclusion - What should we do

- a. We should examine ourselves to see if we are truly born again or if we are simply being religious
 - i. This is constantly commanded of Christians (II Corinthians 13:5)

⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

ii. Five tests to examine yourself (Piper)

- 1) Romans 8:7–9, "The mind of the flesh *does not submit to God's law* . . . but you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit if the Spirit dwells in you." **The test:** do you have a submissive spirit to God's commands or are you rebellious?
- 2) 1 Corinthians 12:3, "No one can say *Jesus is Lord* except by the Holy Spirit." **The test:** Is Jesus really your Lord? Do you [follow His lead] each day? Do you seek his will in all things and subordinate your will to his?
- 3) Romans 8:15–16, "You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but you have *received the Spirit of sonship*. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." **The test:** do you have a humble confidence before God that casts out fear and fills you with a childlike delight in knowing God as your loving Father? Do you cry out, "Abba! Father!"?
- 4) 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural man *does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God*, for they are foolishness to him." **The test:** Do the things of the Spirit attract you? Are you hungry for his truth and his fellowship and his power in your life? Or do they seem silly and unattractive compared to other things. (Cf.

1 Peter 2:2.)

5) 1 John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and *he who loves has been born of God.*" **The test:** Do you love people? Do you have good will toward them in your heart? Do you find fulfillment in working for the joy of their faith? (Cf. Galatians 5:22.) More importantly, do you love the church? Do you love the people of the church?

- a. We should humble ourselves, realizing that our salvation is not of us, but of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 4:7, How Sweet and Awful is the Place, Luke 18:9-14, 1 Peter 5:5-6)
 - i. The necessity of humility in our salvation is emphatically taught in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 4:7, 1:30-31)

⁷For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

³⁰And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

- ii. The attitude of humility is well expressed in the song, "How Sweet and Awful is the Place"

3. "Why was I made to hear Thy voice, And enter while there's room, When thousands make a wretched choice, And rather starve than come?"

4. 'Twas the same love that spread the feast That sweetly drew us in; Else we had still refused to taste, And perished in our sin.

5. Pity the nations, O our God, Constrain the earth to come; Send Thy victorious Word abroad, And bring the strangers home.

6. We long to see Thy churches full, That all the chosen race May, with one voice and heart and soul, Sing Thy redeeming grace.

- The attitude of humility realizes that it is unworthy of salvation
 - The attitude of humility attributes salvation solely to the love of God
 - The attitude of humility truly desires the salvation of others
 - The attitude of humility seeks only the glory of God

- iii. Another good example of the attitude is the prayer of the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

- c. We should desperately desire and seek the Spirit's work in our life
 - i. Our prayers ought to earnestly and intensely seek the Spirit

1) This is a necessary consequence of knowing that:

- a) This work is impossible for us
- b) This work is done by the Spirit
- c) This work is a free gift of God

2) If these are true, then prayer is our only option

(Ephesians 3:14-19)

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.