

Shorter Catechism 31
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 84
John 3

“The Call”

February 10, 2013

Last week we read Ezekiel 36 –

God’s promise that he would sprinkle clean water on Israel and
cleanse them from all their uncleanness –
God said that he would remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.
“And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes
and be careful to obey my rules.”

And then all the nations will know that “I am the LORD.”

And it is in that context that we should hear Ezekiel 37.

God has promised to Israel that he will cleanse his people –
that he will sprinkle them with clean water and put his Spirit within them.

But Ezekiel 37 points out that there is a problem.

Israel is dead.
And this is not a recent problem.
Israel has been dead for a long time.
As Ezekiel says we he sees the bones –
“and behold, they were *very* dry.”

And then God tells Ezekiel to prophecy twice:

first to the bones (verses 4-8)
and second to the breath (verses 9-10).
(and “breath” is the word “ruach” – which can mean breath, wind, or Spirit).

This is a two-stage recreation of Israel –

parallel to the two-stage creation of Adam in Genesis 2.
God had formed Adam’s body from dust.
Then he breathed the breath of life into his nostrils.

Now, the Word of the LORD will recreate his people in a similar manner.

Ezekiel is called to preach to the dead!

If you think preaching to hard-hearted people is difficult,
try preaching to dry bones!
Try preaching to those who are incapable of hearing or responding to the word!

You see, this is God’s point.

Israel is dead.
Israel is incapable of hearing or responding to the word!

But the word of the LORD is powerful.
And his word will accomplish his purpose.

According to Ezekiel God's word – God's *call* –
will bring life to the dead.

How?

By his Spirit.

As Paul puts it:

“For if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you,
he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies
through his Spirit, who lives in you.” (Romans 8:11)

In Psalm 84 we respond to God's call.

When God brings us to himself –
cleansing us by his Word and Spirit –
then we sing for joy at his presence.

Sing Psalm 84

Read John 3

I want to start toward the end of our passage.

John says in verse 29 that Jesus is the bridegroom,
while he [John] is, in effect, the “best man.”

If you have ever had the honor of being a best man,
then you have tasted of the joy that John experienced.

As the best man, it is your task to be a servant.

In the days and hours leading up to the wedding,
you are the one who ensures that the groom has everything he needs.
But once the bridegroom stands there with his bride at his side,
your job is finished.
He must increase, and you must decrease.

But notice how John says it (verse 27):

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”
God has called you to a certain place—a certain task.

John did not envy Jesus.

He had been given the task of preparing the way for the Messiah.

Therefore he rejoiced in accomplishing that task.

Too often we wish that God had given us a different task.

We complain that we are not suited to what God has called us to do.

John has no such complaint.

His ministry is fading—Jesus is making more disciples than he is.

But he is not concerned for himself and his “career.”

He knows that

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”
And just as the best man rejoices at the coming of the bridegroom,
so also John rejoices at the coming of Jesus.
After all, the whole point of John’s ministry was nothing other than Jesus.
Everything in John’s ministry was oriented to Christ
and what the Messiah would do.

If that was the calling of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets,
how much more is that the calling of those who are “in Christ”?
The great tragedy in the church today is that so-called ministers of Christ
spend more time talking about their own agendas and interests than preaching Christ.

But why preach Christ?

Because Christ is the one who lifts our hearts and our eyes to heavenly things.

This is the central theme of John 2-4.

In John 2, Jesus is the heavenly temple (2:13-22).

In John 3, Jesus brings the heavenly birth (3:1-21).

In John 4, Jesus establishes the heavenly worship (4:1-45).

And he is all these things because *he is the one who comes from heaven.*

Jesus told Nicodemus that we must be born again—born from above (3:3).

How can we be born again from above?

Jesus told Nicodemus that he is the one who descended from heaven (3:13).

It is only if Jesus comes from above that we can be born from above.

It is only if God becomes man that man can have eternal life.

In John 3:31, we are told that “He who comes from above is above all.”

The word “above” in verse 31 is the same word found in John 3:3.

Nicodemus rightly understood the word to mean “again,”

but he only got half of the point.

You must not only be born again,

but that second birth must be a birth “from above.”

Jesus is the one who comes from above.

All the law and the prophets speak from the earth.

Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, even John the Baptist are all earthly.

They are from the earth.

They are of the earth.

They speak with earthly voices.

Jesus is above all, because he comes from heaven.

He speaks with a heavenly voice, because he alone of all the human race,

speaks of heavenly things as one who has seen and heard them himself.

Moses spoke of heavenly things with an earthly voice.

The earthly tabernacle was but a picture of the heavenly temple.

The earthly sacrifices prefigured the heavenly sacrifice.

But earthly people cannot receive heavenly things.

John says (verse 32) that Jesus bears witness to what he has seen and heard,
yet no one receives his testimony.
The problem with the earthly is that it is weak and impotent.
Earthly eyes cannot see heavenly things.
Earthly ears cannot comprehend what Jesus is saying.
Or as John put it earlier,
“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it.”
Apart from the grace of God, no one understands the heavenly things that Jesus says.
But, “whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.”

How do you receive the testimony of Jesus?

“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”
Jesus has received the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
And Jesus now gives the Spirit to his disciples without measure.
This is a remarkable statement.
In the OT the Holy Spirit was only given to the leaders of Israel.
But now the Spirit will come upon the whole people of God.
The Holy Spirit will open the eyes of the blind,
and allow earthly people to behold the glory of the Son of God,
the man from heaven.

This is the point of John 3.

This is also the point of our Shorter Catechism, question 31:

Q. 31. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

John 3 may not use the word “call,” but John 3 is all about the Spirit’s work
in us, our minds, and our wills –
convincing us of our sin and misery,
enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ,
and renewing our wills –
thus persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ,
freely offered to us in the gospel.

1. Effectual Calling Is the Work of God’s Spirit... (John 3:1-8)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus^[a] 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again^[b] 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?”

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

He was a rare Pharisee – he admitted that Jesus came from God.

If we are going to make sense of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus,

then we need to see right up front that John does not recount the whole conversation.

It is likely that Jesus and Nicodemus spoke for hours.

We have about 3 minutes of their conversation!

John is not trying to recount the whole conversation.

He is only recounting those snippets that pertain to *his point* about who Jesus is!

But Jesus says to Nicodemus that unless one is born again [or born from above]
he cannot see the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be born again?

I suppose we've gotten so used to the term that we don't think about it.

It is rather odd, isn't it?

You have to be "born" a second time.

Isabella Heitzmann was born this week.

Jesus says that if she wants to see the kingdom of God,
she must be born again.

How does this happen?

Do we have to stuff her back into Norie?

(Norie sure hopes not!)

John likes using the same images over and over,

so if you look back to John 1:12-13,

you'll see that this is already the second time
that he has used the imagery of birth.

Those who believe in the name of Christ are born--John says--

not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Now, two chapters later, John tells us about Jesus's teaching on this subject.

Nicodemus had probably been in or around the temple when Jesus had cleansed it.

At any rate, he certainly heard about it!!

So he comes to Jesus at night...

Why at night?

Well, John does a lot with darkness and light in his gospel.

Back in chapter 1 he said:

"In Him was life, and the life was the LIGHT of men.

And the Light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not comprehend it"

Nicodemus is a man of the darkness.

He is a Pharisee--a ruler of the Jews

He comes at NIGHT to see Jesus--the light of the world--
and as the conversation shows us,
Nicodemus does not comprehend what Jesus is saying!

And at the end of their conversation (in verses 19-21),
Jesus will call him to come to the light
You came to me in darkness--now walk in the light.
Three times, in John 8:12, 9:5, and 12:46,
Jesus identifies himself as the light of the world.

Nicodemus is clearly a God-fearing man (he will later convert as John 19 says)
He believes the Law--and so when Jesus cleanses the temple,
Nicodemus rejoiced to see righteousness prevail!
Nicodemus says to himself--aha!
this is a prophet who will call us back to love and obedience toward God
He wants to find out who this Jesus is!
He knows that God is with Jesus--so he comes and speaks with him.

But Jesus doesn't waste any time here!
He says simply: (v3)
Nicodemus is puzzled.
What does Jesus mean?
How can a man be born when he is old?
Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?

What does it mean that you have to be born again?
the words can be translated "born again" OR "born from above."
In fact, it is a play on words:
BOTH fit what Jesus is saying.
Yes, you must be born again--there is a new birth in view--
but it is not an ordinary birth.
You must be born from above.

Just as Jesus is the one who comes from heaven,
so also your new birth is a heavenly birth.
It must come from above.

But Nicodemus only hears the first part--he thinks Jesus is simply saying,
you must be born again.
He misses the heavenly aspect entirely.

So Jesus answers: (v5-8)

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.^[c] ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You^[d] must be born again.' ⁸ The wind^[e] 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.”

So what does it mean to be born again? to be born from above?

1. It means to be born of water and the Spirit (v5)

Jesus uses a play on words.

The word “pneuma” in Greek (like the word “ruach” in Hebrew)
can mean spirit, wind, or breath.

The wind blows where it wishes – or is it that the Spirit blows where he wishes?!

Water and Spirit are closely associated in the OT

At the creation the Spirit of God hovers over the waters.

The creation starts with water and the Spirit.

In Ezekiel 36, God promises that when he sends the Messiah,
he will sprinkle his people with clean water,
and he will pour out his Holy Spirit upon them.

Isaiah 32:15 declares that the coming of the kingdom of God
will be marked by the outpouring of the Spirit,
when God will make the wilderness a fruitful field.

Likewise Isaiah 44:3 says that God will “pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;

I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing upon your descendants.”

This is why Jesus rebukes Nicodemus.

A teacher of Israel should understand the connection between water and the Spirit.

When God restores his people—when he establishes his kingdom—
in other words, when the new creation comes,
then the people of God will be reborn by water and the Spirit.

Jesus Christ is the one who was baptized with water and the Spirit at the Jordan River.

And on the day of Pentecost, God poured out his Spirit on his Church.

And when the people see this glorious outpouring,
and hear of the coming of the kingdom,
they cry out, “what shall we do?”

How can we participate in the new creation—the coming of the kingdom?

And Peter says, you too can share in the promised Holy Spirit.

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins,
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In baptism, our bodies are washed with water,
and our souls are cleansed by the Holy Spirit.

So when Jesus says that unless we are born of water and the Spirit,
he is saying that we must not only receive the outward sign of baptism,
but we must also receive the inward reality--the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus does NOT say that you must be born of WATER ONLY.

You must be born of water AND the Spirit.

Without the work of the Holy Spirit in your life,
water won't do a thing!

And this is our second point:

2. To be born again means to have a second birth (not of flesh but of Spirit) (v6-8).

Jesus goes on to explain that this birth is a spiritual birth.

It is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

We have all had a fleshly birth--right?

You all were once born of natural mothers and natural fathers.

And that which is born of flesh is flesh.

Well, what's the problem with that?

Why is a fleshly birth not enough?

Jesus is saying that as long as you remain in the flesh,
you have no hope of salvation!

As long as you only have one birth,
you will never see the kingdom of God.

This is why you must be born of water *and the Spirit*.

Nicodemus is now flabbergasted!

"How can these things be?"!!!

Jesus, what are you saying?

2. ...in Us, Our Minds, and Our Wills (3:9-30)

a. Convincing Us of Our Sin and Misery, Enlightening Our Minds in the Knowledge of Christ... (3:9-15 – and Numbers 21)

⁹ *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?"*

How does Jesus respond?

Does Jesus say, "Oh I'm sorry, let me make it clear to you!"

NO!!!

Jesus rebukes him! (v10)

"Are you a teacher of Israel?"

You ought to know these things!

This is EXACTLY what the OT teaches!

So if you don't understand the scriptures, what are you doing as a teacher of Israel!

(and notice this)

"Truly, truly, I say to you (singular--Nicodemus),

We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, but you (plural--Pharisees)
do not receive our testimony" (v11)

Nicodemus will one day repent and step into the light.

Nicodemus will believe the message of Jesus,

but most of the Pharisees will keep rejecting the testimony of the Son of God.

At this point, Nicodemus asks a very good question:

"How can these things be?"

How is it possible for a person to be born of the Holy Spirit?

Nicodemus is asking a very good question.

Again, though, Jesus rebukes him, and then shows him how these things can be!

The New Birth is possible because of the Son of Man who has come down from heaven (v12-17)

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?

What is Jesus saying?

What does he mean when he says

"if I have told you earthly things and you do not believe,
how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

What are the earthly things that Jesus has talked about?

This is what Moses and the prophets have taught.

If Nicodemus doesn't understand

that the kingdom of God comes by water and the Spirit.

If he cannot comprehend the earthly realities promised in the scriptures,
how will he understand their heavenly source?

If you don't understand Moses and the prophets,

how will you understand the new revelation that Jesus brings?

If you haven't understood the earthly picture,

how will you comprehend the heavenly reality?

Well, what is this heavenly reality?

What is the "heavenly thing" that Jesus teaches Nicodemus?

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

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.^[h]

The heavenly reality that gives salvation its power,

is the descending and ascending of Jesus Christ.

He is the Word of God--the eternal Son of God--He IS God.

And yet, he is the Word made flesh!

He is true God and true Man--two natures in one person!

Jesus speaks of his incarnation and his ascension in v13

No one can ascend into heaven except the one who came down FROM heaven
God must become one of us before we can become one with him.

And Jesus speaks of his death in v14

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Do you remember that story?

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness,
they grumbled and rebelled against God,
and so God sent poisonous serpents into the camp,
and thousands upon thousands of Israelites died of snakebites.

But God told Moses to make a bronze serpent,
and that anyone who looked upon the bronze serpent would live!

Even so,

now the Son of Man must be lifted up,
that all who look to HIM will have eternal life.

Think about it--it was the image of a serpent
that healed those who were dying because of serpents

And even so, it was the image of sinful flesh
that brought healing to those who dying of sinful flesh!

And by looking to the Son of Man, and believing in HIM--we now may live!

b. ...and Renewing Our Wills, He Persuades and Enables Us to Embrace Jesus Christ, Freely Offered to Us in the Gospel(3:16-21)

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. 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."

And this is where we find that famous verse,

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life

This verse gets misused a lot.

It actually gets misread a lot.

What does it mean that "God so loved the world"?

Does it mean that God loved the world SO MUCH!!!!

In English you could almost believe that!

But not in Greek.

This verse would be more clear if we translated it,

"For God loved the world thus" or "For God loved the world IN THIS WAY...
that he gave his only begotten Son!"

You see,

this passage isn't talking about HOW MUCH God loved the world,
it's talking about HOW God loved the world.

How did God love the world?

He refused to let us die in our sins!

He refused to allow us to remain with only a fleshly birth!

How did God love the world?

He sent his SON--his only-begotten Son--to be the bearer of our sins.

He sent Jesus to be the one who hung there on the cross,
so that whoever believes in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.

This verse also gets misused when people claim that it teaches
that Christ died for the sins of everyone.

Think about it for a minute.

What does the verse say?

It says that the Son of Man must be lifted up (in other words, crucified),
for whom?

Who are the ones who benefit from Christ being lifted up?

Those who believe.

Okay.

Who are the ones who do not perish, but receive everlasting life?

Those who believe.

Right.

So in other words, John 3:16 teaches us that Christ's death brings salvation to whom?

Those who believe.

This means that Christ did NOT die for everyone in the same way!

Rather, his death redeems **THOSE WHO BELIEVE**.

And if you look back to John 1:12-13,

John even TELLS us who believes!

"But as many received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God,
to those who *believe* in His name: who were born, NOT of blood,
NOR of the will of the flesh, NOR of the will of MAN, but of God"

In other words,

Christ's death saves those who are born again by water and the Spirit.

Yes, God loved the world in **THIS WAY**,

that he sent Jesus Christ to save his people!

There are two ways of saying it--and both are true in their own right:

- 1) God condemns the world, and saves his people out of it
- 2) God saves the world, destroying the wicked in the process.

This latter way of saying it is John's approach here.

God did not leave the entirety of humanity to perish in their sins,
to wander in darkness forever!

No, God has sent his only-begotten Son to be the Light of the World,
and the Savior of US who were lost!

And so, finally:

4. To be born again means to come to the Light and leave the Darkness behind (v18-21)
(or, as our catechism puts it, the Spirit persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ
freely offered to us in the gospel).

Remember that Nicodemus came at night.

Jesus says, in effect, leave the darkness and come, walk in the light.

The Light has come!

Will you put away the deeds of darkness?

If you who are wicked come into the light, Jesus says,
your evil deeds will be exposed!

And one day,

Christ WILL reveal the hearts of those who dwell in darkness!!!

BUT,

if you LOVE the Light!

if you DO what is true

then when you enter the Light,

the Light will reveal that what you have done, you have done IN God.

There are two phrases I would like to call to your attention.

1) DOING what is true

2) carrying out your deeds IN God.

"Doing what is true"

Normally, we think about "believing" the truth.

But Jesus says that we are to DO the truth.

What does he mean?

Truth is not simply something that you believe.

Truth is also something you DO.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God?

that he is the Word made flesh?

and that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life?

That's nice.

But do you practice that truth?

Do you DO it?

Truth is to be lived—not just believed!

But you can only do this truth IN God (v21)

Your deeds must be "carried out in God."

This clearly follows from what it means to DO what is true.

If we have received eternal life;

If we have been born again of water and the Spirit;

And if we have believed IN the Son of Man;

then all that we do is to be done,

NOT in the flesh,

BUT in the Spirit.

Not by human power,
But by the power of God.
And if you DO the truth,
and if you carry it out IN GOD,
then you may walk in the Light with joy,
because the Light reveals that you are in Christ!
Yes, you will continue to sin, and you will continue to repent every day along with the rest of us!
But Jesus wants you to see past the earthly,
and to see the heavenly reality!
You are no longer who you once were!
You have been forgiven!
You have been redeemed!
You have been BORN AGAIN!

As John concludes the chapter:

“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”
Jesus has received the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
And Jesus now gives the Spirit to his disciples without measure.
This is a remarkable statement.
In the OT the Holy Spirit was only given to the leaders of Israel.
But now the Spirit will come upon the whole people of God.
The Holy Spirit will open the eyes of the blind,
and allow earthly people to behold the glory of the Son of God,
the man from heaven.

“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.
Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life;
whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life,
but the wrath of God remains on him.” (3:36)

Jesus utters his word to you!
He calls you.
If you hear his call, then look up – and live!