

## You Must Be Born Again (John 2:23–3:15)

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### Introduction

*Signs* (miraculous works) were Heaven’s means to identify the Messiah to believers—the righteous remnant in Israel who were looking for His appearance. The Lord attracted these to Himself as His followers. Thus, we read, “*This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him*” (2:11).

The enemies of Christ also demanded signs as *proof* of His Messianic authority, not that they might submit to Him, but in an attempt to control Him. They obviously recognized Jesus as spiritually superior but rejected His claims to be from God the Father. They rather accused Him of doing His works by demonic power (Luke 11:14–16).

John now moves to the issue of *believing*. Chapter 2 closes with a *transitional* statement to introduce Nicodemus and the new birth, the one thing needed for all who would enter the kingdom of God (2:23–25).

### I. Salvation and Believing

#### 1. Salvation is more than believing.

*Everyone* believes. We are very trusting beings. We are all like sheep, easily led by the leader we trust. We live by faith and are only shaken when our expectations are disappointed. Therefore, when people in John’s day witnessed Jesus’ miracles—His signs—they believed in Him (v. 23), but their believing was not saving faith.

Some have labeled their faith *spurious* or false. I take exception to that. They *believed* in Jesus. It was real faith but not saving faith.

#### 2. Children of God demonstrate saving faith because they are *born of God* (vv. 12, 13). Those who became children of God were first *born of God* (1 John 5:1). This truth is often confused in modern evangelical preaching and evangelism, as many teach that one’s *faith* (his “accepting Jesus into his heart”) is what initiates God’s saving work. In other words, God saves those who believe, and because they believe, they are born again. John uses a wordplay, describing how “*many believed*” (Gk, *pisteuō*) in Jesus, but Jesus did not *believe* (*pisteuō*) them. This describes Nicodemus, who said, “*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*” (3:1). Jesus responded to this by informing Nicodemus that He needed to be *born again*.

Jesus knows the hearts of all (v. 25).

### II. The New Birth Necessary

#### 1. Jesus was visited by an influential but unsaved ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus exemplifies those who believe because they see a supernatural *sign* but have no saving connection to Christ.

##### a. Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, probably because it would have been difficult to see Jesus during his busy day. Some suggest that he may have been reluctant to be seen with Christ, fearing criticism. I personally disagree for two reasons. First, it was early in His ministry, and opposition was not strong at this time. Nicodemus was probably sent to Jesus by the council because he said, “We know that you are a teacher come from God.” Second, when the opposition was increasing later, Nicodemus defended Christ to the Sanhedrin (7:50, 51).

b. Who was this man?

Nicodemus was a wealthy, influential, powerful religious man, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews; however, he was not saved—not born again. When he did not understand what it meant to be born again, Jesus asked, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (v. 10). Nicodemus was a *didaskalos*, one who taught the things of God and the duties of man from the law. He was religious but lost.

He was respectful. He called Jesus *Rabbi*, which means “my great one” or “my honorable sir,” a term of respect exclusively used to address teachers of the law. Jesus’ response to him was simply to cut him off mid-sentence. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (v. 3).

2. The Teacher corrects the teacher.

- a. The priority with Jesus was not status or supposed importance. What Nicodemus was about to ask we will never know because Jesus cut him off with a truth (“*truly, truly*”) pronouncement (v. 3; note the example of Paul in Philippians 3:7, 8).

Jesus cut to the chase, as it were. If Nicodemus thought that he represented the kingdom of God, he needed to be corrected. He would not even see the kingdom of God unless he was born again.

- b. The spiritual nature of salvation (v. 4). The Greek adverb Jesus used and translated *again* is *anōthen* and can mean “from above” (*heaven*), “from the beginning,” “for a long time,” or “again.” Jesus was being deliberately ambiguous (1 Corinthians 2:14). Two births are necessary for one to be in the kingdom of God (vv. 5, 6).

3. What does it mean to be born again?

- a. The Spirit of God is the agent of the new birth. To be given entrance to the kingdom God, one must be born of *water* (natural birth) and *Spirit* (spiritual birth). Nicodemus understood only natural birth—re-entering his mother’s womb to be born again. The problem is that what is born of the flesh is flesh, but what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
- b. As in natural birth, the one born again has no control over his spiritual birth. A natural man has no more ability to determine his own spiritual destiny than he could determine his parents or the time of his being born into this world (vv. 7, 8).
- c. Nowhere in this discussion does Jesus give any instruction on how to accomplish the new birth (v. 12). Salvation is the work of God alone.

4. In light of this, what can anyone do?

- a. Understand that unless the Spirit is working in a person to bring to salvation, an unsaved natural man of the flesh has no interest in Christ. He would not seek salvation if he could.
- b. If the Spirit of God is working in you, He will give you the desire—indeed, the urgency—to seek Christ. If that desire is in you, believe in Jesus and, like Paul, and pursue one thing (Philippians 3:13, 14). This is how born-again people think. One does not do this *to* be born from above; he does it *because* he has been born from above.
- c. The fundamental difference between the free-will notion of salvation and that taught in the Bible has to do with the question, which comes first, faith or regeneration? We believe that the Bible teaches one believes because he has been regenerated. Have you been born again?