You Must be Born Again

John 3:1-21

Key Verse John 3:3 “In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

There are many kinds of people in this world. They differ in work, race, age, gender, and personality. However, there are some things that everyone has in common - peace, joy, and righteousness. In one word it is the kingdom of God. Many people want to have the kingdom of God. People work hard to gain peace, joy, and righteousness. Here is a man who is very close to the kingdom of God, whose name is Nicodemus. He was on track to reach it. But sadly, even though he was very close to the kingdom of God, he had no kingdom of God. Like Nicodemus, there are some who have anxiety, fear, or emptiness in their hearts because they do not have the kingdom of God. In today's passage, Jesus wants to give this kingdom of God to such people. Let us carefully hear the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, which helps us discover the way to gain the kingdom of God. And I pray that we may be full of the kingdom of God, which is joy, peace, and righteousness, through this passage.

1. Who is Nicodemus?

Today the Bible introduces us to one person. Let’s look at verse 1. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.” The Bible introduces this person as a Pharisee, rather than by name. Why does the Bible introduce this person first with his religious position? This is because the way to know him was to know his religious position. Then who is a Pharisee? A “Pharisee” meant “separated” or “an elite.” The party of the Pharisees began at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah to renovate their country after the Jews returned from 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Ezra and Nehemiah encouraged their people to live only by the law of God, far from the Babylonian culture diseases. At Jesus’ time a Pharisee was a very influential religious leader and teacher of God’s law. It was not easy to become a Pharisee. To become a Pharisee, a man from his boyhood had to memorize the five books of Moses. Then he had to begin a study of Mishnah and the Talmud. As soon as a Pharisee candidate got up in the morning, he had to practice demanding rituals such as fasting, prayer and bathing three times a day. Nicodemus had to overcome petty desires to become a noble human being. He used all his human abilities to achieve legal completion. His moral deeds and religious knowledge of God seemed to be perfect for achieving the kingdom of God.

He also was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, which was made up of 70 members. Of course, a Sanhedrin member had to be a rich and well-connected. It was like being a U.S. senator. To others, Nicodemus looked magnificent and an object of envy because he had everything in honor, wealth, knowledge, and power. So far, there seemed to be no reason for Nicodemus to come to Jesus, who was 20 or 30 younger than himself, based on his social, religious, and human standards. So why did Nicodemus come to Jesus and ask for help? What motivated him to come to Jesus?

1. You must be born again

Look at verse 2. “He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Through this verse, the motivation of Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus was the reality of miracles which Jesus performed. Simply, Nicodemus felt God’s presence in Jesus. Nicodemus knew that no human being could understand and solve his problems, but only God could do it. So as soon as he found that God who could solve his problem appeared in Jesus, he came to Jesus. Humanly, Nicodemus seemed the closest person to God. However, he did not feel God at all. He could not experience the power of God.

We may have the same problem as Nicodemus. As a Christian, we know God and know God's Word. Some people do weekly Bible study and meditate on God’s word faithfully. Some people are busy teaching and preaching the Bible to others. They have neither big moral sins nor religious problems. However, even though there seems to be no problem, some people may not feel God’s presence and his power. Some people may live unhappy and burdened lives despite their religious practices. So why are we not experiencing God's presence and power?

Let’s hear more carefully Jesus reply. Look at verse 3. “In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Jesus declared not only about Nicodemus’ personal problem but also about all people’s common problem according to the truth. Jesus said that Nicodemus didn’t see the kingdom of God. Because Nicodemus and people don’t have the kingdom of God, they could not experience God’s presence and the power of God. To others, Nicodemus looked magnificent, like an object of envy. But this well decorated man was empty and miserable. He had nothing left to hope for. Nicodemus lost the very important thing in his life, which is the Kingdom of God. So how could he have the kingdom of God?

Jesus taught Nicodemus how to get the kingdom of God. Look at verse 3 again. “In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” He said that when he is born again he could get the kingdom of God. So what was Nicodemus' reaction when Jesus said that he had to be born again? Nicodemus could not understand it. Look at verse 4. ”How can someone be born when they are old?” Nocodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus said it was impossible to be born again because Nicodemus could not contemplate reentering his mother’s womb. What was Nicodemus's problem?

Here is the very important thing to say today. The kingdom of God is not what we can achieve by our own efforts. Nicodemus misunderstood the kingdom of God to be a result of hard work or something like achievement which he could gain through his human or religious practices. But Jesus clearly said that the kingdom of God was only when he was born again, not by his own efforts. Then what is being born again? Let’s us think of our own birth. When we were born, there was nothing for us to do. We were not born because we did something good. We were not born by gaining much. We have done nothing for our birth. We are born entirely by grace. That is why we have absolutely nothing to boast about ourselves. The same is true of our being born again. What achievements, accomplishments, and knowledge do we have to have for us to be born again? There is nothing we can do for ourselves to be born again. Then what should we do? We need to entirely rely on someone who makes us born again. It is not ourselves but God. We cannot be born again except by God and the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we must humbly and eagerly await, and rely on God and his work to be born again. We must pray and rely on God, confessing that it is only possible that God can change and make us born again while we cannot do anything by our own efforts or strength.

Why doesn’t someone experience the amazing life that they can enjoy - the Kingdom of God, full of peace, joy, and righteousness - as everyday life? What is the problem? It is because they do not allow God to work in them. They ignore and reject God in their heart, who makes us born again and gives us the kingdom of God. We forget that we cannot do anything to be born again. We are too proud of ourselves and forget who we really are. We have the wrong idea that we can change ourselves or achieve the kingdom of God by our own efforts. However, based on today’s passage, we all agree and confess that we cannot do anything to be born again, but only God can make us born again by his power and his grace.

Then how does God make us born again to have the Kingdom of God? Look at verse 5. “Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” Jesus taught that if Nicodemus wanted to enter the kingdom of God, he must be born of water and the Spirit. Here “water” refers to the water baptism of John that accompanied repentance. We need to repent of our sins. Repentance is necessary for the new birth. Repentance means to confess our sins, renounce our sins, and turn away from our sins. It seems that repentance is like our religious practice and that we must try to repent to gain the kingdom of God. However, this repentance also cannot be done without the full grace and work of God. Even if we confess our sins literally with our mouths, if we do not truly acknowledge, mourn, and turn from a sin in our hearts by the help of God, it is not true repentance. Sometimes the reason why we cannot experience the kingdom of God is that we do not really repent. True repentance must be based on the Word of God and found in the presence of the Blood of Jesus. Then the work of the Spirit will come. This is beyond human control. It is a totally sovereign act of God. Only things above can make us to be born again. But Nicodemus didn’t understand the work of the things above. So Jesus explained the work of God with a story.

Look at verses 14-15. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus refers to an event that is described in Numbers 21:4-9. When Israelites began to complain in the desert, God sent numerous snakes among them to fatally bite them. They repented and Moses prayed for them. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, promising that anyone who looked at the bronze snake would live. To human knowledge this does not make sense. The people who were on the ground must look at the ground to avoid snakes and those who are bitten should seek immediate medical care. But God promised that when they looked at the bronze snake they would live. Jesus applied this to his death on the cross. Jesus was lifted up on the cross as the Lamb of God. Jesus shed his blood for the sin of the world. Those who look at him with faith receive eternal life. It is the best news for anyone, no matter who he or she may be. Look at verse 15 again. “That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Like Nicodemus, we cannot understand the work of God. But just when we accept God’s gift –Jesus Christ- we may have eternal life. We must only look at Jesus and live. When we have Jesus in our hearts, we have peace, joy, and righteousness in the Holy Spirit. Thank God for giving us the eternal life to only those who accept Jesus.

Why did God send us his one and only son Jesus? Look at verse 16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The reason why God sent his precious one and only Son Jesus is only that God loves us. There is no other reason. God doesn’t want us to perish and be condemned but have eternal life because we are his children. Thank God for sacrificing his one and only Son Jesus to save us from sin and death. May God bless all of us to accept Jesus who reveals to us God’s unconditional and everlasting love for us so that we may restore our spirit and see the kingdom of God.

God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. No. The world is already condemned because it is under the power of sin and death. Jesus came to save everyone who believes in him. Jesus is the light of life. But many refuse to come into the light because they love the darkness. What they fear most is that their evil deeds will be exposed. So, when we see the people’s rejection toward Jesus, we have to have a shepherd heart for their spiritual suffering under the fear of their evil deeds.

Through the Word, I confess that I have forgotten that I received the grace of Jesus and that I was born again only by God’s love and mercy through his one and only son Jesus’ sacrifice. I misunderstood that I deserved to receive the blessing and grace of God by what I have done for God. Based on today’s passage, I found that I am a terrible sinner who cannot live without God's grace. There is nothing I can do to gain the kingdom of God. I cannot be reborn except by the grace of God. But I do not rely on God's grace in my whole life. I was so proud of myself and I didn’t repent of my sins deeply and seriously before God. I must completely rely on God’s mercy and grace to have the kingdom of God, not by my ethical or religious deeds. Additionally, I must simply repent of my sins to people and to God. I blamed my financial difficulties for my environment. But when I thought about it, I realized that I wasted material things, which God provided, mainly for seeking my physical pleasures and worldly desires. I repent that I loved my material and physical desires more than God and relied on things on the earth more than God. I pray that I will rely only on God to have the kingdom of God and use my material possessions and my power for the kingdom of God and for God's mission.

In conclusion, Nicodemus had everything that we might want to have. But he didn’t have the kingdom of God. To see the kingdom of God, he must be born of water and the Spirit. With his achievement or his good deeds, he was not able to get the kingdom of God. He must be born again spiritually by repentance and only the gift of God. The gift of God is Jesus. Jesus came to this world to die for our sins. Anyone who humbly admits that they cannot be born again by their achievement, efforts, and possessions comes to Jesus and receives the salvation from God without cost and starts a new spiritual life in Jesus, who truly satisfies their lives.