The Gospel of John: *Born Anew*

John 2:23-3:15

As we return to the Gospel of John, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has recently cleared the Temple, and we get the sense that He has performed miracles and demonstrated His power on several occasions that remain left untold thus far in John’s account. So, let us now stand and read what comes next beginning with John 2:23:

23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus 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 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?” 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. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind 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.”

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? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you 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? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

My message this morning will fall under _subheadings: 1) the universal problem; 2) the universal solution; and 3) the hope of the world._

I. The Universal Problem

At the end of chapter 2, the Apostle John makes an observation of his friend and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. He writes:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

I’m sure many of us have read this passage in the past and simply moved on, but Church…don’t move on just yet. I want us to deal with what John just said so that we can feel the knife’s edge as it was intended.
Here’s what John just said: He said that many people believed in Jesus due to the signs that He performed, but Jesus did not entrust Himself…He did not give Himself over to…those believers.

Now, let us remember that the goal of the Gospel, according to John, is for people to believe in Jesus. As John writes at the end of this incredible book that we are reading (20:30-31): Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

So…once again, let us sit in this tension: many believed in His name that week in Jerusalem as a result of the signs that Jesus performed. Many were impressed, many were enthralled, many were excited, many pledged their allegiance to Jesus…but Jesus withheld Himself from them. If that doesn’t bother you, it should.

Can we agree that if Jesus does not give us Himself, we are not saved? Can we agree that if Jesus does not entrust Himself to us…if He does not come and make His home with us along with the Father…that we are those most to be pitied? Church, don’t run from this tension…step into it. Assume this text is speaking of people like you and me until proven otherwise. Don’t let your long years in the church or your impressive resume of religious accomplishments blind you from what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you in this text: it is possible to be a person who “believes in His name,” and yet Christ is not in you. These words of the Apostle here at the end of chapter 2 serve as the Surgeon’s scalpel, to carve away the cataracts of presumptuous souls, that we may see the state of our depravity for what it is: our hearts are hopelessly rotten, and no degree of enthusiasm, no degree of religious effort, no degree of our well-intended goodness…in fact, even our “belief in His name” will not save us from the rottenness that is within. That is what John just said, and if we are at all paying attention to the first two chapters of his gospel, this is what John has been saying all along.

Remember the words of John the Baptist as he speaks to the priests and Levites—religious leaders of the Temple: “…among you stands One you do not know.” Remember how the jars of Jewish purification were found empty. Remember how Jesus makes a whip and condemns the facade of temple worship. At every turn, John the Apostle has been preparing us to step into the tension that he just articulated so clearly…it is a tension that should bother every one of us: Jesus has hidden Himself…He has not entrusted Himself…to good, religious people.

What comes next is a story that fleshes out this tension in living color. In 3:1-2 we read: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus 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.”

Let us consider who this man Nicodemus is, and who he represents. John tells us first that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. I know many of us immediately think negatively about the Pharisees because of our long years in the church, but don’t do that. To hear this story as it was intended, we must begin with the ancient, first-century Jewish perspective that the Pharisees were the most admirable, serious followers of God’s Word. In other words, Nicodemus represents the very best of us. NT scholar William Barclay writes:
In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6000 of them; they were what was known as a *chaburah*, or brotherhood. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. The name Pharisee means the Separated One; the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law of the scribes.

Now…most of us have no concept of scribal law because we see very little of it in the Old Testament. If you want to learn about the scribal law, we must turn to the *Mishnah* which is the codified scribal law, and the *Talmud*, which is the explanatory commentary on the *Mishnah*. There we will find a degree of dot and tittle that boggles the mind. For example, the codified law of the scribes in the *Mishnah* as it pertains to the Sabbath covers 24 chapters! Whereas God’s law simply said, “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy;” the *Mishnah* described in specific detail the kinds of knots that could be tied on the Sabbath; how far a person could walk on the Sabbath; what kinds of food a person could prepare on the Sabbath; and on and on and on. These were the nitpicking rules and regulations that the poor Pharisees dedicated their lives to observing. To even think about living that kind of a life required a degree of devotion to God that most people could not even imagine…such is why the Pharisees were highly regarded and honored in Israel.

Now, in addition to being among the Brotherhood of the Serious, John reports that Nicodemus is also a “ruler.” The term here implies that Nicodemus is a member of the prestigious Sanhedrin, which was comprised of 70 high-level leaders who served as Israel’s supreme court. So…when it comes to a “good person” of high regard, you could not pick a better representative than Nicodemus.

John reports that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. The highly regarded ruler comes to investigate Jesus in the veil of darkness; and for John, we know that darkness represents the absence of the Light, who is Jesus Himself! And the famous Pharisee begins the conversation with these words: 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.

Note the term of respect: the great ruler and Pharisee honors Jesus with a compliment, referring to the carpenter from Nazareth as a “rabi” (a teacher). And even more so, Nicodemus compliments Jesus by acknowledging that God is with Him, because no human being could perform the signs that Jesus was performing apart from God’s power.

Let us pause and appreciate Nicodemus thus far. It is nothing short of remarkable that Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at all, for Jesus is clearly beneath his station in terms of social and religious standing. Let us not be offended that Nicodemus came at night; better to come at night than not at all! And, as we know, Jesus is remarkably accessible. Jesus models his openness and willingness to engage an inquisitive soul at any hour, thanks be to God! And let us finally acknowledge that Nicodemus has said nothing less than the truth thus far: Jesus is a Teacher; Jesus certainly came from God; and God is certainly with Jesus as demonstrated by the miraculous signs. Nicodemus has not said anything wrong or untrue, but what Jesus says next
answers the question that Nicodemus has not yet asked; but it is nonetheless a question that every human asks: Can you be trusted? What is your program? Sure you might be from God at some level…you are very impressive…but whose side are you on? What are you asking of us?

Church, can you see that Nicodemus represents those whom Jesus did not entrust Himself to? Nicodemus is a seeker/early believer. He is taken by Jesus because of the signs; He is curious and enthralled. He is willing to compromise his reputation to investigate the Man who is now the talk of the town following the Temple cleansing. But like so many of us, Nicodemus has come to sniff Jesus out to see if Jesus can be of service to him. He has come as one who has an air of authority to see if Jesus is legit. Church, Jesus will welcome your inquiry at any time and for any reason, but know this: just as soon as you inquire of Jesus, He will drive the conversation because He knows exactly what you need from Him.

As we return to the text, we discover that Jesus is not interested in the ruler’s compliments. Instead, Jesus turns the conversation to what matters most. In vs. 3 John writes: Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Whereas Nicodemus thought he could discern the work of God in the signs performed by the Nazarene, Jesus states clearly: You can’t actually see God’s Kingdom at work until you are born again. Your eyes can’t be trusted. Your estimation of religion and God’s plans are futile if you have not been born anew…you can look all you want…you can follow every dot and tittle of the Mishnah till your dead, but access to the Kingdom is denied to those who have not been born anew.

Nicodemus responds to Jesus with this question in vs. 4: How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?

Now, Nicodemus is not a young pup. He is well learned in the scriptures, and so we should not think that this concept of being “born anew” is anything new for the Pharisee. William Barclay spends several pages in his commentary describing how the concept of “born again” was not only a common concept amongst the Jews, but it was a common concept amongst the Gentile mystery-religions as well. According to Barclay, when Jesus came teaching that we must be born again, He provided the answer that everyone was intuitively asking, both Jew and Gentile. However, what we find in Nicodemus’s response reveals the heart of many who have lost any hope of true change in their lives. As Barclay writes:

When we read this story, it looks at first sight as if Nicodemus took the word anew…with a crude literalism. How can anyone, he said, enter again into his mother’s womb and be born a second time when he is already an old man? But there is more to Nicodemus’s answer than that. In his heart there was a great unsatisfied longing. It is as if he said with infinite, wistful yearning: “You talk about being born anew; you talk about this radical, fundamental change which is so necessary. I know that it is necessary; but in my experience it is impossible. There is nothing I would like more; but you might as well tell me, a full-grown man, to enter into my mother’s womb and be born all over again.” It is not the desirability of this change that Nicodemus questioned; that he knew only too well; it is the possibility. Nicodemus is up against
the eternal problem, the problem of the man who wants to be changed and who cannot change himself.

Did you hear it? Did you hear the universal problem? The universal problem is this: We MUST be born again…and we all know it. There is no hope for those of us who carry the curse of a rotten heart, always destined to sin, always in rebellion to God, always trying to pretend we are something that we are not. We know that no amount of “doing good” will somehow make up for all of the evil that is in us. We need to be transformed; we need to be changed through and through; we need to be born again…but we are absolutely powerless to make this kind of change come to pass. That is, indeed, the universal problem.

In case you didn’t catch it the first time, Jesus will restate the problem with great clarity in vs. 5: Truly, truly I say to you: unless one is born water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That which born of the flesh is flesh, and that which born of the Spirit is spirit.

The universal problem is now defined. In our flesh…in our natural state…we are those without hope of seeing and entering into the Kingdom of God. For some people, that is not a problem, for they have given themselves to the kingdom of the Evil One, and they have no interest in every meeting their Creator. The mere thought is repulsive to those who have been given over to “a debased mind to do those things that ought not to be done.” But for those who long to know God, to see God, and to enter into His presence, the universal dilemma is both urgent and desperate: we must be born again, we must be born of the water and the Spirit, but this transformation is nothing that we can possibly hope to accomplish in our human efforts and striving. As Nicodemus suggests, God might as well be asking us to crawl back into the womb of our mothers as full grown adults…it feels that impossible. That’s the problem. Ok, before we move on to the universal solution, let me quickly acknowledge a mystery. Jesus says we must be born of water and the Spirit. There is a ton of debate about what the ‘water’ is referring to here. Most scholars think that Jesus is referring to the water of baptism, such that our rebirth comes about through repentance of sin, the washing of away of our guilt through sacrificial atonement of Christ, and then the regeneration of the Holy Spirit...all of which is signified in Christian baptism. That may likely be the case, though we must be careful to avoid making baptism a condition of salvation, for that is certainly not supported in the NT. Some believe the water refers to natural child birth, so Jesus is saying we must undergo two kinds of birth...but that is unlikely. The water and the Spirit are really represented as one thing that we are baptized “out of...” I’m going to move on because I think there are better opportunities to unpack this text later on in John’s gospel, so please forgive me! I simply do not have time to say all that there is to say about this, but I anticipate that we will come back to it!

Let us now look to what Jesus presents as the universal solution to the universal problem.

II. The Universal Solution

In vss. 7-8 Jesus sheds the first light of hope that our problem is not as hopeless as we once thought. He states to Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
Here Jesus speaks to Nicodemus as one who knows very well that the ancient Hebrew word *ruach* means both “wind” and “spirit.” So Jesus appeals to a physical experience in order to point to a spiritual experience. No one understands fully how the wind works. We can’t see it, we don’t know where it comes from or where it is going, but we know it’s real because we can experience it, we can see the trees moving, we can see what the wind accomplishes. So the *ruach…*the *pneuma* in the Greek…the SPIRIT/WIND accomplishes that which we cannot understand or control, though we can be certain that is has been accomplished! Just as we can observe what the wind does though we can take no credit for making it happen, so we can observe what the Spirit accomplishes, and again, we can take no credit for making it happen. This is how people are born again: they are born anew through the POWER of the Holy Spirit…it is fully God’s doing, not our doing.

Now, in vs. 9 Nicodemus asks the right question, the question we should all be asking: “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus is a reasonable person. He gets religion, and he is very devoted to religion. He is operating on the assumptions of every world religion out there: there is a good god who rewards good people for doing good things, so if I want to be with the good god I need to be a good person who does good things. Reward and punishment…that makes sense, right? Do enough good, and you are rewarded. Do more bad than good, and you get punished. This is the religion of human achievement, and it is consistently the core of every world religion with one notable exception: Christianity. And here in John 3 is the distinction in living color: entrance into the Kingdom of God requires that we be born again; and that is something that God accomplishes, it is not something that we can accomplish at all.

So Nicodemus, a man who has spent his whole life, heart and soul trying to please God through rote obedience to the scribal law asks: “How can these things be?” That is a loaded question that we could unpack in a 100 ways. The Pharisee may be asking a technical question…as in “please give me the details of how that works.” I suspect he is also asking, “How can it be that people who are not striving as hard as I am striving can be born again? How is that fair?” He may be asking, “If the Spirit accomplishes rebirth of His own doing, how are the Jews any different than the other nations?” He may be asking, “If this is true, how is it that I am an old man who has been religious my whole life and I’m just now hearing about this?”

I actually think Nicodemus is asking that last question here in the text based upon the way that Jesus responds in vs. 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you: we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Jesus gently rebuke Nicodemus as the heralded “teacher of Israel,” which suggests that the Old Testament scholar should have been picking up on the clues of God’s final redemptive plan all along. Instead of applying every ounce of his energy submitting to scribal codes, the great teacher of Israel should have been seeking the Messiah of God with all of his heart in the scriptures. Church…this is a rebuke many of us need to take to heart. How often do we exchange the pursuit of Jesus and the power of His Spirit for “rule-following-righteousness?”
How often do we settle for a form of religion that fits our schedule and yet Jesus has not entrusted Himself to us...there is no power of the Spirit...there is no indication of a rebirth having ever taken place. We have exchanged the mystery of rebirth with the predictable and achievable practices of our religion.

Jesus knows that if we become satisfied with the old, we will never turn to discover the new; which is why he lovingly but firmly chastises this highly respected leader. Jesus teaches Nicodemus that the words of the law and prophets were always pointing to this: the Son of Man who would come from heaven to make access to heaven possible for all who carry the curse of Adam’s sin.

Listen now to what Jesus teaches Nicodemus in vss. 13-15, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

We now know who the Teacher of Israel is, right? He is the carpenter-King from Nazareth, the one who likely astounded Nicodemus when he was 12 years old, and now at the age of 30, this man’s piercing eyes and loving gaze informs the ruler that he, the seasoned Pharisee, is the schoolboy. Nicodemus is in the presence of Perfect Truth, and for the first time in his life, the scriptures are being opened to him in a way he never dreamed possible. As Jesus speaks, all the scriptures pointing to the Son of Man come to his mind. And again, when Jesus reminds him of Moses and the Israelites in the desert on that fateful day when so many were snake-bit as a result of their sin, he remembers God’s instruction to Moses in Numbers 21:8-9:

And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

No doubt the Jewish rabbis had often scratched their beards when teaching on that text; yet they rightly concluded that it was not the bronze serpent that saved the snake-bit sinners. God saved the sinners from the painful death of the serpent’s bite when they trusted Him to look upon that which was lifted up before them. They were saved by their faith in the God who was behind the pole.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Yep. That story was pointing to the Son of Man. And when the Son of Man is lifted up...just like that Serpent...when the Son of Man becomes the curse and endures the humiliation of being lifted up on the cross...as snake-bit sinners gaze upon the One from heaven who is crushed for their sake...then and only then can those who believe in Him have eternal life.”

Jesus will unpack that further next week as we look at the end of His conversation with Nicodemus, but let us now stop to acknowledge what we have learned along with Nicodemus.

The universal problem is that we all need to be born again, but that is nothing that we can accomplish in our striving.
The universal solution is the Son of Man who came from heaven, who takes on the curse and is lifted up. He is the solution. As we gaze upon the Son of Man lifted up, the Holy Spirit will accomplish what only the Spirit can accomplish: The Spirit will cause us to be born again! And once born again…once we are born of water and the Spirit…we will see God’s Kingdom, and we will be those who enter God’s Kingdom!

III. The Hope of the World

So Church, what is the hope of the world? Let me tell you what the hope of the world is not. The hope of the world is not good religion, or good religious people. The hope of the world is not a good legacy, a good name, or a growing congregation. The hope of the world is not financial independence, the right president, or better policies. The hope of the world is not a stronger army or new technology. The hope of the world is not even our faith or our belief or our doctrine.

There is only ONE hope in this world: it is Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, high and lifted up! (Show picture of Jesus on the cross if you can find a good one). I hope you got that from the text, because that is exactly what we just read. The Hope of the World is Jesus lifted up, and when people gaze upon Jesus, the mystery of regeneration can begin through the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no other catalyst for rebirth. There is no other requirement for rebirth. And there is no substitute for rebirth. We all MUST be born again, which means every single person on the planet needs to see JESUS high and lifted up and believe on Him for their salvation! That is the hope of the world.

So…what should we do?

1) I beg you: Examine your lives and sincerely ask the Lord if you have been born again. I’m sorry to cause you some degree of uncertainty, but I must confess that I have concerns that there may be many in our congregation who, like Nicodemus, have become quite proficient at religion, yet they have not yet been born again, and thus their “belief in Jesus” is on their own terms and for their own benefit. Church, this is not a saving faith…the text makes it clear that Jesus will not entrust Himself to those who believe on Him as their genie in a bottle. He will not entrust Himself to those who somehow think that they are some kind of an authority who can sniff Jesus out and determine if He is compliant to their preconceived ideas of religion and reality. He will not entrust Himself to those who feel that Jesus compliments their fleshly nature and desires. Jesus entrusts Himself to those who KNOW they are snake-bit and look to Him for the cure! He sends His Holy Spirit not to make us better, but to remake us altogether! He won’t save the old man, He will make a new man! Seek the Lord and ask Him if you have been born again. Do not settle for the religion of achievement. Submit yourselves to the Gospel of Grace! We MUST be born again…anything less radical than a rebirth is a dead religion that cannot save us.

2) Church, Fix your eyes upon Jesus, and do not turn away from the One who bore your curse. Look upon him when you lay down to rest and look upon Him when you rise. Plan your day so that your gaze never strays from the Payor of what we could not pay! He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He is the Son of Man who bridges the gap between sinful
men and the Father in heaven. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life…and as we gaze upon Him, we can be assured that His Holy Spirit will transform us…that we will be born again in the tears of our repentance and the power of the Spirit…we will be saved by His grace.

Finally, 3) Lift up Jesus at every opportunity. Hold Him up so that the world can see Him for who He is: He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the Lion of Judah who is coming again to judge the nations. He is the Light who shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome Him! Lift Him up Church…let us lift up Jesus to a hurting culture…He is the hope of the world…and we all MUST be born again!

Let us pray!