**YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN**

 September 25, 2016

John 3:1-15 / Key Verse: 3:3, “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’”

What do you think is the most important thing in your life? Success, honor, wealth, human love? In today’s passage, we meet a person who gained almost everything that generally people want to have as most important things. His name is Nicodemus. According to Jesus, Nicodemus was not happy not because he was not a successful man but because he was not born again. Today we will learn what it means to be born again, why we must be born again, how we can be born again and lastly what we should do to be born again.

**I. Unless they are born again** (1-8)

Look at verse 1. “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.” This verse is Nicodemus’ brief resume. In this resume, we can see how he was a successful man. Religiously he was a Pharisee. It means he was a highly educated and spiritually disciplined man. To be a Pharisee in Jesus’ time, young men had to master many studies including Moses ‘Laws and many other areas. They had to do fasting twice a week and memorize many bible verses. They were usually spiritual counsellors and teachers highly respected in Jewish community. A member of the Jewish ruling council can be similar to a parliament member in our modern time. This means he had power, high social position, wealth and honor among his own people. We can imagine that in order to be such a successful man how much he worked hard struggling to overcome many temptations and hardships.

However, look at verse 2. Let’s read verse 2. “He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’” Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Why did he come to Jesus at night? Most likely, he seemed to want to avoid being seen by others, especially other fellow Pharisees since most Pharisees were against Jesus. But in John’s gospel, the word “night” was used specially with spiritual meaning. It represented the darkness of men’s heart. So, here, Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus at night implies that his heart was dark.

The name, “Nicodemus” means, “the conqueror of the people.” As his name says, in a sense he became a conqueror among people. He became one of the powerful, influential, and richest men. When he was young, he might have thought that he would be happy if only he became an honorable Pharisee and achieved high position in this world. But after obtaining all that he wanted, was he happy as he had expected? No, he was not. His heart was ruled by darkness. What caused his inner darkness? Why could not all his human success and achievement give true happiness to him? According to Jesus’ reply, it was because he could not see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus admitted that Jesus came from God and based on sign-seeking faith, he probably expected some miraculous signs from Jesus to solve his inner darkness. But how did Jesus reply to him?

Let’s read verse 3. “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’” Jesus knows what was in each person. As soon as Jesus saw Nicodemus, he understood his deep agony and knew what he really needed. What he really needed was not to see more miraculous signs from Jesus but to see the kingdom of God. Here the verb “see” has the meaning of “experience.” “Experience” means “knowing personally”, in another word, “have personal relationship.” In order to be truly free from the darkness of his heart, Nicodemus needed to experience the kingdom of God personally. In order to experience the kingdom of God personally, what Nicodemus needed was to be born again. That’s why Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Then what does it mean to be born again? Here the Greek word for “again” means “from above.” So to be born again means to be born from above; born of God. It means our spiritual birth as God’s children. As you know, sin broke our spiritual relationship with God. Because of sin, man is alive physically but spiritually dead. Spiritually dead men, even though they can have everything that this world can offer, have nothing which belongs to the kingdom of God. They cannot experience the kingdom of God. They cannot see the beauty and majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ. They cannot experience true joy and peace and love and freedom that only God can offer. They cannot taste true happiness that this world can never take away. They cannot experience the spiritual victory over Satan’s power; joy robber; such as anxiety, stress, and fear. Besides, they have to be eternally punished and tortured by Devil in the lake of fiery sulfur after physical death. But here is good news. Those who are born again; born of God cross over from such spiritually dead life to eternal life. Those who are born of God can be truly and eternally thankful and joyful regardless of human condition or situation because they can see and experience the kingdom of God who is above all. That is why we must be born again and being born again is the most important thing for each person’s life.

Then how can we be born again? Look at verse 4. How did Nicodemus respond? He asked, “How can someone be born when they are old?” “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus could not understand Jesus’ word at all. It is because he tried to figure it out by reason. Human reason does not enable us to understand spiritual truth. Spiritual truth can only be understood by the help of the Holy Spirit. Since Nicodemus could not understand the meaning of being born again, this time Jesus explains how man can be born again spiritually. Let’s look at verses 5-7. Let’s read these verses. “Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my teaching, ‘You must be born again.’”

Here, we need to understand what “water and the Spirit” means. We should not try to interpret each word separately because here the word “water” was used in another expression of the Spirit. So, here, “ ‘unless they are born of water and the Spirit’ means, ‘unless they ae born of water; (that is; namely) the Spirit.’” The background for “water and the Spirit” is Ezekiel 36:25-27, which says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you… I will put my Spirit in you…” here, we see that God used the word “clean water” as another expression of the Spirit. Jesus also said in John 7:37-39, “On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.” Here, we learn how we can be born again spiritually. It is through the Spirit of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh. No matter how much efforts flesh make, flesh cannot give birth to sprit simply because spirit is in totally different dimension. This is the reason why Nicodemus could not be born again through his flesh efforts and achievement. Only Spirit can give birth to spirit. According to 1 Peter 1:23, we were also born again through the living and enduring word of God. Jesus also said in John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you- they are the spirit; in another word; full of the Spirit and life.” Here, we see man can be born again spiritually through the Spirit of God and the word of God. Nicodemus was surprised at Jesus ‘words, “You must be born again.(7)” He needed to understand more about the work of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus explained using the metaphor of wind in order to help him. Verse 8 say, “The wind blows wherever it pleases, you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” The wind is mysterious. The wind blows wherever it pleases. No one knows where it comes from or where it is going. We cannot not see the wind, but we can feel it and see the evidence of it. For example, you can see the shaking of tree by wind. In the same way, the Holy Spirit works as he wishes. We cannot see the work of the Holy Spirit with our physical eyes and we don’t know how and when it will work. It is absolutely up to the Holy Spirit’s wish. But one thing is clear; he always leave the evidence of change. The clearest evidence of being born again through the Holy Spirit is our transformed mind. No matter what problem or situation you face, the one who were born again through the work of the Holy Spirit is the one who hold to the word of God rather than human reason or understanding. As a result, he can experience the peace and joy of God which transcends all human understanding and reason. Only those who are born again; born of God can experience such kingdom of God personally.

**II. The Son of Man must be lifted up (9-15)**

Jesus taught Nicodemus about being born again as a prerequisite to see and enter the kingdom of God patiently and very clearly. Nicodemus should have said, “Amen” and asked more about being born again through the work of the Holy Spirit to see and enter the kingdom of God. But to our surprise, he exposed his stubborn refusal and pride saying, “How can this be?” Jesus said three times, “Very truly I tell you,” which means “I am telling you the truth of God.” But Nicodemus did not seriously consider Jesus’ words. So he kept repeating, “How! How!”” So this time Jesus challenged him. Look at verses 10-13. “You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?” Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-the Son of Man.” According to Jesus’ teaching, Nicodemus’ lack of understanding was not an intellectual problem, but his pride problem. Nicodemus was a spiritual teacher who knew the Bible very well. So he had to know about being born again very well. But he couldn’t accept Jesus’ teaching about being born again because he couldn’t break his pride which he had accumulated for a long time. Besides pride problem, Nicodemus also might have had fear of losing everything that he had accumulated. But it was a misconception. Being born again is not losing but gaining the best. Jesus did not come to rob or destroy us but build up and give life; life to the full. Jesus came to destroy only what destroys our true life; what destroys our right relationship with God; which is sin. Jesus came to make us be born again spiritually so that we may have eternal life and enjoy God and his blessings.

Look at verses 14-15. Let’s read these verses. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” In the history of Israel, there was a very representative event that teaches the way of salvation very well. It was the event that Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them into the wilderness, they should have been thankful always. But whenever they faced troubles they revealed their slave mentality and grumbled, and complained against both God and Moses. Then God sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. Then they acknowledged their sin and asked Moses’ prayer to take the snakes away from them. At that time, as the answer for their prayer, instead of taking the snakes away, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole and promised that anyone who was bitten could look up at the bronze snake and live. Usually, people who are bitten by a venomous snake take immediate steps to deal with the snake’s attack. Also, they have to watch out for other snakes which might be about to strike them. It was unthinkable to turn away from the snake’s attack and look up at a bronze snake on a pole. God’s way of dealing with this problem was unreasonable and beyond human understanding. But it requires their full trust in God as a matter of life and death. Only those who trusted God more than their own ideas or thinking could look up at the bronze snake. Here Jesus used the bronze snake as a symbol for himself. Jesus said, “The Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him (14-15).” The phrase “must be lifted up” means the only way of salvation that God provided. In order to rescue people who are dying because of venomous snake-like sin, they was no solution other than Jesus who must die on the cross. Our sin is like venomous snake; snake of pride, lust, greed, jealousy, bitterness, hatred, and complaining. These snake of sins attack people and people are dying from the poison of sin without human remedy. But God offered the way of salvation through Jesus. What God requires from us is to believe in him; only believe in him. Then he promised that we will be born again as God’s children and as God’s children we will have eternal life and experience his kingdom.

Today, we learned that in order to see and enter the kingdom of God, we must be born again. We can be born again through the work of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. Being born again is most important in our lives because without being born of God we can never experience the kingdom of God. To be born again, all God requires to us is to trust and believe in Jesus. I pray that God bless each one of us to fully trust and believe in Jesus and live blessed born-again life.