

Russell Kelfer

Ye Must Be Born Again

974-B (also listed as 315-A)

Series: Let God Be God

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.
INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

Ye Must Be Born Again

How do you take the purest gold found in the world, melt it down, and try to determine which part is best? How do you take the most beautiful diamond ever mined and try to break it into its most perfect parts? How could you take the most beautiful music ever penned and try to compare it until everyone agreed that one part was the crowning touch of all the music ever written? You could never get even the experts to totally agree.

Then can you imagine the danger of taking *any part of Scripture*, and labeling *that portion* as the most valuable or vital? The problem is even more difficult with Scripture for:

Every Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching, for conviction, for improvement, for training with respect to righteousness, in order that the man of God may be complete, fitted out for every good work.

(II Timothy 3:16 Wuest Translation)

In other words, every word, every syllable of the Word of God was penned by the hand of God, and every stroke of God's pen is perfect and perfectly designed to equip the saint to become godly. So even though we who teach or preach or write about the Scriptures may use glowing adjectives to describe one portion or another as the most meaningful to us, no part of God's Word can be raised to a level above the rest, any more than any part of the nature of God itself can be said to be more vital than another.

But while all Scripture is God-breathed, and is thus of equal importance, some Scripture is more universally essential to the finding of eternal life. You can find your way to Heaven without reading the genealogies. You can find your way to Heaven without knowing the story of Daniel in the Lion's den. You can find your way to Heaven without reading the book of Revelation, or for that matter, without even knowing enough about Heaven to write a paragraph. But there is at least one passage of Scripture that so divides the Christian message from that of all other religions that they are not even compatible. There is at least one portion of God's Word that so clearly defines God's plan to redeem man

Ye Must Be Born Again

that if you had nothing else but this one passage, the entire world could know the reality of redemption. So while it is not more vital than the rest of the Word, it is more vital than much of the Word to the task of evangelism and assurance. It is that portion of the Word which we address in this lesson.

We are in the process of looking at some of the highlights of the life of Christ on planet earth. Our objective is several fold. 1) We want to see the plan of redemption unfold. 2) We want to learn more perfectly the principles demonstrated and the lessons taught by the Master on planet earth. 3) But for this particular series of studies, perhaps our most important objective is to see how God behaves when He inhabits the body of a man and lives the same life you and I are called to live. We want to see what our lives ought to become when we learn to let God be God in us.

We have walked these past few weeks through the opening steps of God's pilgrimage on earth. We watched the Master's face, the fire of the enemy's onslaughts in the wilderness, and we saw just how God behaves when the battle gets tough. We watched as John the Baptist suddenly realized just who this man Jesus really was, and we saw how he responded. He knew immediately that he must decrease; that Christ must increase; and we saw how God in man behaves when man is tempted to steal God's glory. We watched as Jesus called out from among the regular, run of the mill, average man on the street a team of men to change the world. We saw what God saw when He looked at the likes of Simon, a man filled with imperfections, but a man, who when filled with Jesus, would alter the course of history. We watched as Jesus tenderly met a need His mother thought was crucial and turned the water into wine. We watched as the Son of God saw the house of God being turned into a place of merchandising and profiteering, and we saw how God behaves in a man when the purposes of God are trampled upon. We have watched, and we have walked with Jesus just enough to marvel at how the mind of God reacts and responds to life on planet earth.

Yet, as exciting and revealing as these incidents have been, they do not in any way reveal the basic reason Jesus came like this passage that is before us today does. It is the core and crux of man's redemption. It is the hub from which the spokes of transformation reach out into the human life. It is the key that unlocks the door, allowing sinful man to enter into the presence of a Holy God. It is a clear-cut statement acted out on the stage

Ye Must Be Born Again

of reality of what man must do and what God has done for salvation to become personally real. It is the story of a man who came seeking Truth and found the answer to his questions far simpler than he anticipated, but far more demanding than he desired. It is the story of Nicodemus. We begin reading at the exact point we left off in our last lesson in John, chapter 3. It reads like this:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?
(John 3:1-9)

Our title, then for this lesson is "Ye Must Be Born Again".

I- THE FALLACY OF MAN'S REASONING

It was night. Nighttime means many things. Night has its own sounds, its own peculiarities, its own activities, its own difficulties. But the great characteristic of night is darkness, an inability to see unless someone invades the pervading darkness with light. What an appropriate time, then, for a man to come to Christ, who is the Light, who came to cast out the darkness that lives in the heart of man. But, of course, the very darkness that characterizes the night hours meant for Nicodemus anonymity

Ye Must Be Born Again

as well. It meant that he could come quietly, without fanfare, without being noticed by the masses, or reported to the masses as having come to visit Jesus.

This would have been important, for Nicodemus was important. He was a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jews, and a man known throughout the region not only for his authority in the temple, but for his success in the marketplace. He was a man of great wealth and great prestige. Whatever he did was noticed and, in this case, for a man in his position to even visit this controversial carpenter's son was a dangerous move, indeed.

Already the very mention of the Master's name brought to the surface great emotion in the hearts of Jewish leaders, and that emotion was not love. His sudden attack on their self-centered commercialism in the temple had immediately placed Him at odds with the religious hierarchy of the day and had all but assured Him of their opposition, no matter how great was His message, or how convincing His miracles.

To them, He was a threat. They had misconstrued His vehement attack on the abuses in the temple, as though they were attacks on the authority of those who controlled the temple. And yet, there had to be no more than a few of these zealous Jewish religious leaders who had been looking for and praying for Messiah to come, who had seen this man Jesus speak with such authority and wondered, "*Could it be? Could this be the Messiah?*" One such man was Nicodemus. Many make the unfortunate mistake of ridiculing Nicodemus for coming at night, but that is hardly fair. The very fact that he came at all was in itself a miracle.

In all likelihood, Jesus was staying at a home that night, possibly the home of the apostle John. It is also likely that Jesus was on the roof of the house that night, and that Nicodemus approached Jesus by way of the stairway to the roof which was located on the outside of the house. It is possible, then, that his visit was known to very few people. And while Nicodemus appeared to be timid in his *approach* to Jesus, he was not timid in his *appeal* to Jesus. He began boldly, but respectfully,

Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.
(John 3:2b)

This was in no way an attempt to flatter or bribe the Master.

Ye Must Be Born Again

This was a genuine act of respect shown by a theological authority of his day, to an unschooled, self-proclaimed teacher who had suddenly appeared on the horizon, claiming not only to possess God's truth but also to be God's Truth. "Rabbi," Nicodemus began, knowing full well that the body of men he gave allegiance to, the Pharisees, would not confer that title on the Master at all. "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God". There you have the fallacy of man's reasoning. Nicodemus came respectfully seeking, but wrongfully assuming that Jesus was a teacher who came from God. In other words, "it is obvious to me", Nicodemus was saying, "that God sent you to teach." This was his rationale — that Jesus was a man like any other man, but an exceptional man, because God had anointed Him to teach. The next phrase gives the reasoning behind the rationale. His reasoning was this,

no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God
be with him. (John 3:2c)

The natural man is willing to accept that Jesus was a good man. The natural man is willing to accept that Jesus was a great man. The natural man is willing to accept that Jesus was a teacher sent by God, for the natural man is willing to acknowledge that no man could do the things Jesus did except God be with him. That rationale is disarmingly true, but disastrously inadequate. At this point, Nicodemus had departed from the blasphemous position his brethren had taken (that Jesus was an imposter), and had acknowledged that Jesus was somebody special sent by God. That acknowledgment was enough to prepare Nicodemus to hear the truth, but it was not enough to save him or anyone else from an eternity in hell. It is, however, the premise upon which thousands of churches have been built through the ages, and the premise upon which millions of people have wrongfully rested their faith.

Jesus did not so much as acknowledge Nicodemus' honorable theology, nor did the Master attempt to enter into a doctrinal debate with this scholarly Jewish leader, so filled with knowledge, yet so destitute of wisdom. Simply lovingly looking straight into his eyes, and without so much as a reference to who Nicodemus said He was, Jesus made that amazing statement that so changed the course of spiritual history. He said,

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again,
he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

II- THE REALITY OF GOD'S DEMANDS

The issue, you remember, was who Jesus was. Nicodemus had come up with a theory of his own. He had determined that Jesus was a teacher come from God, because otherwise no man could do those kinds of miracles. Jesus wasn't changing the subject. The issue was still *who Jesus was*. But Jesus had to deal first with the *real issue*. The real issue was that Jesus *was* God; and before a man could come to know God, he had to have eyes capable of seeing God, of seeing the Kingdom of God. Man's eyes had been covered over with the cataracts of sin, and thus his ability to see God was limited to what God had done or was doing that was physical in nature. Nicodemus had seen a few of God's physical signs and had determined that Jesus was sent by God. But Nicodemus did not have eyes to see that which was spiritual, because he was spiritually dead. So in order to deal with the real issue (who Jesus was), something had to happen to Nicodemus to raise him from the dead. He had a wealth of knowledge about the Scriptures. He even had a wealth of knowledge about the Messiah, but he had no capability to understand spiritual truth. Therefore, for Jesus to try to communicate spiritual truth to Nicodemus would have been as ridiculous as it would have been for Him to have visited the Jerusalem cemetery and try to carry on a conversation with a corpse.

Do you fully understand what that means? It means that for you to spend time trying to discuss spiritual principles with someone who has not received spiritual life is an affront to their intelligence and an affront to God. It is as fruitless as broadcasting beautiful FM music and expecting someone who has only an AM radio to hear it. You will frustrate them, alienate them, irritate them; but you will not satisfy them, because they cannot hear. Paul explained it clearly in I Corinthians 2,

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God.

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that

Ye Must Be Born Again

are freely given to us of God.

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth; but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

(I Corinthians 2:9-14)

Nicodemus wanted to know who Jesus was, but he couldn't. He did not possess the capability to understand spiritual truth, because he was spiritually dead. So Jesus, rather than tell Nicodemus *who he was*, told him what he needed to do to find out. He had to be *born again*.

The concept of being "re-born" was not totally new to the Jewish mind. Jewish proselytes were said to be "re-born" when they came to accept the Jewish faith. But the concept that someone who was already a Jew needed to be "re-born" was new indeed. Once again, we will find that Nicodemus couldn't grasp the principle at first, because he did not understand that the issue was not Jewish versus non-Jewish, it was physical versus spiritual. And if the issue was physical versus spiritual, then that meant that every man or woman who would ever live would have to face the same decision Nicodemus was facing now. No matter how religious they had been, no matter how moral they had been, no matter how charitable they had been, no matter how socially prominent they had been...if they were spiritually dead, they were spiritually dead. If all had sinned and come short of the glory of God, then *all* men were spiritually dead. Nick faced the issue of the ages, and eternity was at stake.

But, oh, how Jesus loved Nicodemus. Were it not for that great love that rested within the bosom of God, Nick would have been either pacified or rejected as too traditionally religious to try to convert. We would have probably humored him and sent him on his way. Not so with Jesus. He loved Nicodemus too much not to tell him that he was lacking the only thing in life that could give him life. He had to be *born again*.

The word "must" that was cradled so tenderly in the center of that statement erased for all eternity man's hope of designing creative alternatives to salvation. The word "born" clearly spoke of an experience so conclusive that it could not be mistaken for

Ye Must Be Born Again

something else. In the physical realm, no one wonders whether or not they have been born. Either they have been, or they haven't. The word "again" was the word "*anōthen*" which spoke both of a second birth, clearly separating it from the physical birth, and it spoke of a heavenly birth, clearly indicating that it was something that could only initiate with and be performed by a Holy God. It means both to be born "from above" and to be "born again". Both meanings will be amplified in the remainder of the passage.

So what Jesus was saying so clearly to Nicodemus, and what He is saying so clearly to us today, is that no man or woman alive can enter into the Kingdom of God, nor even see the Kingdom of God, unless something supernatural takes place within their human spirits, something that originates with God, but which is so incredibly real that it is likened to birth, the most traumatic experience of life. Unless that happens, Jesus was saying, nothing eternal can ever enter your soul. Nothing.

You can join every church in the country, sing in every choir in the world, serve on every committee in captivity, preach to untold millions, be ordained a deacon, an elder, a steward, or even a bishop. You can write theological treatises that boggle the mind of the religious elite. You can give away all your possessions to feed the poor. You can even enter a monastery and go into seclusion to prove your devotion to the God you claim to serve. But my friend, unless at some point in time, you have asked God to ignite your dead human spirit by placing within you His precious Holy Spirit, thus giving you the capacity to hear and see and understand that which is spiritual, *you will not ever so much as see the Kingdom of God*. You will come to the end of your earthly pilgrimage, and a grieved and brokenhearted God will have to weep and remind you of Matthew 7:22, where Jesus spoke these words,

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you:

(Matthew 7:22,23a)

I NEVER KNEW YOU

To know God is not to know about God; Nicodemus knew more about God than you will ever know. It is to know God

Ye Must Be Born Again

intimately, personally, spiritually. You cannot do that if you are spiritually dead. You must be born again.

To do that, you must come to God and acknowledge that you are dead. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, proclaims “and you he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sin” (Ephesians 2:1). You must also acknowledge that in and of yourself you cannot make yourself come alive. It is the gracious gift of a sovereign God. So Paul goes on,

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened [made alive] us together with Christ, (by grace are ye saved;)

(Ephesians 2:4,5)

By grace we mean that apart from the undeserved but supernatural empowering of a loving God, you couldn't do it if you wanted to. Only God can do what must be done. Only you can let Him. As with physical birth, the seed of the Word must make entrance into the womb of your heart, and conception must take place. Your spirit must unite with God's Spirit, and in humble acknowledgment of His total provision for your total sinfulness, you must ask Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, to forgive your sins and heal your wounds and make you come alive.

When you do, God's Spirit enters your spirit, and birth takes place. You have been born again. Not revitalized—reborn. Not even revolutionized—reborn. You will have infused into your life the capacity to experience the spiritual. You will no longer judge whether or not Jesus is who He says He is by what He has done or is doing in the physical realm. You will suddenly have the capacity to experience and understand what He is doing in the spiritual realm, and what He does or doesn't do physically will only be measured by its spiritual significance.

The Word of God, which must have the Spirit of God to interpret it, will come alive. No more dead orthodoxy. Now living Truth. The mind of God, once a theological maze to your intellect, though it is so much higher than the natural mind, will begin to make sense, and will even begin to dominate your thinking. You will be living in a whole new realm of life, because for the first time in your life you will be alive. You will be alive, because you have been born, born from above, born into the realm of the

Ye Must Be Born Again

Spirit.

Until that happens, you are like a car without an engine or an engine without any fuel. You may look like a new sports car, but you're not going anywhere. Without power, the sleekest of automobiles is worthless; and without being born again, you do not have the power even to see the Kingdom of God, let alone experience it.

We will take up there in our next lesson, as we deal with Nicodemus' response, and Jesus' response to him. It will further clarify the issue of who is and who isn't a Christian. But on the authority of the Word of God, I must remind you that if you have not at some point in your life, no matter how religious you have been, or how irreligious you have been, recognized that you were dead and called on Christ to give you life, nothing else we say or anyone else will say, will make much sense. The issue isn't who is Jesus? The issue is: do you even have the capacity to see who Jesus is? You do not, unless you have been born again.

The new birth is not an evangelical creation; it is a Scriptural imperative. Please do not put down this page until you are certain that you have faced the issue squarely. Either you have been born again, or you will never see the Kingdom of God...never.

I beg you, right this moment, to ask Christ to come into your life. He is not a teacher come from God. He is God. And your knowledge that He is come from God will not save you. Only one thing will save you. You must be born again.

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230

210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org • © Russell Kelfer