Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

God's Role in Regeneration
Scripture: John 3:1-10
Code: 43-13

For this morning, I want you to open the Word of God to the third chapter of John, back to the third chapter of John and the opening ten verses. Now, you who have been with us the last couple of weeks know how important and critical this portion of Scripture is. You know something about it now that we've sort of penetrated it at least as far as verse 3. The good news, we'll finish all the way down to verse 10 this morning. I can't exactly tell you when but we will finish verse 10.

Now I'm going to read it to you and then I'm going to say what's obvious, and then we'll dig down to what may not be quite as apparent. John chapter 3 verse 1. John writes, "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 have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he's old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and 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. Do not be amazed that I said to you, "you must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?'"

Five times in this passage we have a reference to being born again, or born from above. The word *anothen* can be translated "again" or "from above," and both are applicable. Jesus is saying that for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, the realm of salvation, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, that person must be born from above, born again. This is the doctrine of regeneration, at the very heart of understanding salvation.

It was twenty-five years ago or so that the most publicized and recognized evangelist, Billy Graham, published a book and that book has been a staple in the evangelical world for all these twenty-five years and it's spun off a lot of other resources. The title of that book is *How To Be Born Again*; it's a how-to book, *How To Be Born Again*. That book gives steps to being born again. The approach is well-intentioned, of course, and it does call for repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but that book and its title fail to understand the principle that Jesus is teaching here. The whole point of this text is that something must happen to you that you don't participate in. There is no how to be born

again. There are no steps to being born again. Nowhere does Jesus tell Nicodemus, do this, say this, pray this.

Nowhere does He tell him how to be born from above, how to be born again. Yes, it says a man must be born again. And in verse 8 He says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” but that is not a command, that is a statement of fact. God’s kingdom is only for people who have been given God’s life. You can’t live in His kingdom unless you are a partaker of the divine nature, unless you are a new creation. And the analogy is so simple and so basic that it can hardly be misunderstood. The analogy is birth. And everybody gets that. You did not participate in your own birth. There are no books out there that say how to be born physically. You don’t have anything to do with that and that’s the reason our Lord used this analogy. As you play no role in your physical birth, you play no role in your spiritual birth. That’s the point of the analogy. Jesus is saying the kingdom only opens to people who know it’s one hundred percent a divine miracle and who forfeit all efforts to participate.

The kingdom is open? What do we mean by the kingdom? The realm of salvation, the way to God, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, heaven, blessing in time and eternity—all that is part of the kingdom of salvation; all of that is available only to people who are born from above by a creative act done by God in which they don’t participate. I told you last time, theologians say this is monergistic rather than synergistic. This is a work of God apart from man. The sinner then must be the recipient of a divine miracle that comes down from God, and there are no steps, there is no how-to. That is the simple, clear, unmistakable point of using the analogy of birth rather than some other analogy. Again I say, you don’t do anything to contribute to your physical birth, and you don’t do anything to contribute to your spiritual birth.

Now we need to understand this. As we said, this conversation about regeneration, the new birth, flows through three features; there’s kind of three segments here. There is the sinner’s worry, we see that in Nicodemus. There is the Savior’s Word. And then finally, the Spirit’s work, and we’re going through the conversation looking at those features. The message again, so you don’t miss it, the kingdom of salvation, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, heaven, is open only for those who abandon all self-effort. It’s a work of God.

Now let’s go back to the conversation. First, the sinner’s worry. “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 You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these things that You do unless God is with him.’”

Let me just give you a brief review. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Pharisees were an elite group of students of the Old Testament Law who obeyed that Law as well as all the rabbinic traditions that grew up around that Law fastidiously. They were the most devoted of all Jews to the Old Testament and every bit of their Jewish tradition. They were isolationists. They wanted nothing to do with the hoi-

polloi, the populace, the people. In fact, later in the gospel of John you will find that they deemed the entire population apart from themselves to be cursed. They were the ignorant and the cursed. They didn't see themselves as in some kind of a role of ministering to people; they simply isolated themselves. They were the arch-hypocrites; they were the archetypal hypocrites of all hypocrites. They were whitewashed on the outside and full of dead men's bones on the inside. They pretended to be religious and lead people to heaven. And actually they created sons of hell. They multiplied sons of hell everywhere they went because they themselves were sons of hell.

Nicodemus is described in Matthew 23 as one of those whom Jesus pronounced a series of damnations upon and curses on. Nicodemus would be like the apostle Paul who when giving his own testimony about what it was to be a Pharisee says that he was zealous for the Law, that he was blameless before the Law, that he kept every tradition and he marched to the steps that the Pharisees required in every tiny detail, tithing even tiny little herbs. They were fastidious about their religion, but they were hypocrites.

One of them, like Nicodemus, we see in Luke 18. He is described by our Lord. The Lord creates this imaginary Pharisee and this Pharisee goes into the Temple to pray and he says to God, "I thank You that I'm not like other men. I thank You that I'm not like this crummy tax collector. I fast. I tithe everything that I possess. I do all these good things." That's a Pharisee, that's Nicodemus. He's not just one; he's at the top of the pile. Verse 10 says he's *the* teacher in Israel. Pharisees were teachers. He's *the* teacher in Israel. He's the most illustrious, the most noble of teachers, the master teacher. He's a member of the Sanhedrin, according to chapter 50. He's a part of the Jewish council of seventy. That was a very elite group of people that were the Supreme Court of Israel. He's an Old Testament expert. He's intelligent. He's bright. He's immensely successful. Traditions tell us that he was one of the three richest people in the city of Jerusalem. His wisdom, his ability to think and reason and do his business had made him extremely, extremely successful and wealthy. He had it all. And, of course, from the Pharisees viewpoint, they loved money. Jesus said they loved money.

Well, Nicodemus had a way of loving it into his own purse successfully. He became very, very rich. And, of course, the equated riches with God's blessing, so he was deemed to be blessed of God mightily because he had been so rich. In his heart he knew he was a fake and he knew he was a phony, and he knew he was a hypocrite. Religion on the outside. Empty in his fear, doubt; anxiety tearing up his soul. Here's his problem. Who does he go to? He's *the* teacher.

Then he comes across Jesus and guess what? Jesus is a teacher at a higher level than he is because he's never done a miracle, he's never seen a miracle, he's never seen anybody who did a miracle, or met anybody who saw a miracle. So he comes to Jesus and he says, "Look, we know You have come from God." In his own heart he knew he did not. But he knew Jesus was from God because of the signs that He had done, the miracles He had done. Finally here was a teacher above himself. And his heart cries out for reality.

And so he comes with that introduction. That was the statement on his lips. But Jesus knew what was in his heart, verse 3, Jesus ignored what he said, verse 3, “Jesus answered and said to him…in the third person, so we’re going to have a discussion here, we’re going to talk theology, going to talk about the kingdom. It’s not personal right now; it’s in the third person: “Truly, truly,” which means this is new, brand new and He says it again in verse 5, “Truly, truly...truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” You’re not going to get one foot in the door unless you’re born again.

Why does He say that? That has nothing to do with what Nicodemus said in his introduction. The reason Jesus said that was because He knew the sinner’s worry. He knew what was worrying Nicodemus. How did He know that? Go back to verse 24, “He knew all men.” Verse 25, chapter 2, “He didn’t need anyone to testify concerning man, He Himself knew what was in man.” And here’s the illustration of it. He had omniscience. He knew what men thought. He knew their thoughts. He knew the longings and desires of their hearts explicitly. Here’s a loyal religionist. This is a Pharisee. This is a legalist of legalists. He’s reached the apex of Judaism and he’s not in the kingdom and he knows it and his heart is full of fear. He has no peace. He has no joy. He has no sense of assurance or forgiveness. And in his heart he’s crying out, “What do I do? What do I do? Or what do I stop doing?” ’Cause all he knows is “do”; it’s a works system. And our Lord says to him, “Nobody enters the kingdom who’s not born again,” which is to say you’ve got to go all the way back and start all over. And I told you in the last couple of weeks, that comment simply says this: all accumulated religion, all accumulated morality, all accumulated human goodness adds up to zero...absolutely zero with God, meaningless.

So there he is in zero condition and he knows it. That’s the sinner’s worry. Now we came to the Savior’s Word in verse 3. And He says, “Unless one is born again, or born from above, he cannot see or enter, or participate in the kingdom of God.” That’s regeneration. You have to be born. You have to have a new nature, new life, recreation. And we looked at that in detail, not by the will of man, chapter 1 verse 13, not by the will of the flesh, not by human blood, but by God. We looked at James 1 that it is God who gave us life. We looked at Ephesians 2, made alive together with Christ. We looked at Titus 3, the washing of regeneration. We looked at 1 Peter 1, begotten again. We looked at all those passages in the rest of the New Testament, and there are many, many more that point to the fact that salvation is a work of God. It is a divine miracle that comes down from heaven in which we do not participate. We didn’t participate in our election before the foundation of the world and we do not participate in our regeneration in time. That’s a work of God.

So now we go back to the story. So let’s go back to verse 4. How did Nicodemus respond to the statement of Jesus in verse 3, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God?” And He was talking in the third person; they’re having a theological discussion; it hasn’t gotten personal yet. Preachers have said, “Well, Nicodemus doesn’t get it. He doesn’t have any idea what Jesus is

talking about. He's very confused." So in verse 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he's old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Some people think he's being sarcastic. Some people think he thinks this is ridiculous, this is a joke. You can't be born again. That this shows his ignorance and he's sort of scoffing and laughing at it.

That's not correct. That's not at all what we have here. He knows Jesus just read his mind. He doesn't say to Jesus, "Why did You bring that up? Why are You talking to me about the kingdom? Why are You talking to me about this?" He doesn't ask that. He knows Jesus just read his mind. And he knows Jesus just said, "You can't get in the kingdom by anything you do any more than you could bring about your own birth." This man lives in a world of analogies. The rabbis—that was their world, the world of analogies, illustrations parables, word pictures, parallels. He's brilliant. He's *the* teacher in Israel. He's a logician. He's spent his entire life in theological discussion and dialogue. He completely understands what Jesus said. He gets it 100 percent. And he jumps right into the third person discussion and he says, "How can a man be born when he is old?" I'll use your analogy. "He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" That proves that he totally understood what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying you come into the kingdom but you can't do anything about it. He gets it. He understands the figurative language. The rabbis and teachers used it all the time. So he takes up the analogy and he says, "Hey, You're telling me it's humanly impossible—impossible. You're speaking of something that's impossible to me." No, he doesn't miss this at all. He does not miss it at all.

Jesus doesn't tell him how to be born again. He knows better than that. Jesus is telling something that there are no how-to's for. He understood it better than most evangelicals, I'm afraid. If an unsaved Pharisaical hypocrite, part of a false religion, can in one conversation grasp the simple truth of the doctrine of regeneration, why is the church so confused about this? Where have we been? And why do so many preachers tell people the steps they can take to be born again? He was reacting as any legalist would react. "Are you kidding me? I've spent my entire life doing things to get into the kingdom, now you're telling me the only way into the kingdom is by means of something that I have nothing to do with."

Here's the heart of the gospel of grace, isn't it? All he had ever known was, you earn it, you achieve it by religion, ceremony, ritual, morality, human goodness. That's why Jesus says, "Truly, truly," because He's saying essentially, you've been caught up in the damning lie of Satan that you can earn your salvation. And I'm telling you the truth, the truth. He is hearing for the first time in his entire life, and he's had lots of theological discussions. For the first time in his entire life that God has to do something in his soul that is a work of creation, that comes down from above, that he does not at all participate in. He is stunned by this, absolutely stunned.

Jesus could have said to him, "Oh yeah, I know it's a big change for you. I know. I'm sorry. I'm going to have to reprogram you." But He doesn't. Down in verse 10 Jesus says to him, "Are you the teacher

in Israel and do not understand these things? How did you get to that position if you don't understand these things?" He does not let Nicodemus off the hook. It is inexcusable that Nicodemus doesn't understand the new birth. It is inexcusable that he doesn't understand regeneration. It is absolutely inexcusable. Wow. But He's going to help him, so He's going to give him two hints, two hints. Hint number one comes in verse 5; hint number two comes in verse 6. And this is good teaching. This is how teachers work, effective teachers. They lead the student. They don't give them the answer; they lead the student. So here's the first hint. "This is new to you, Nicodemus, and you're *the* teacher in Israel? This is new?" Let me put it another way, verse 5, "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly I say to you"...still in the third person; we're still talking theology here..."truly, truly I say to you"...Does this help?..."unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

You know, any time you're having a conversation and somebody gives you a riddle, what's the first thing you ask for when you can't figure it out? "Can you give me a clue; give me a hint?" Nicodemus has hit the wall. He just heard something he's never heard in his life. "Can You give me a clue to this?" Jesus said, "I'll give you a clue. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Does that jog your mind, Nicodemus? Water—Spirit, water-Spirit; have you heard that?"

Traditional sermons on this have said, "Well, water and the Spirit means this: the water is human birth because we say prior to the birth of a child the water breaks. And so you have to have a human birth, a physical birth, and then a spiritual birth. So you must be born of water—that is physically born, and then born spiritually."

Really! You mean Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, "First of all, Nicodemus, you have to exist. You have to be a person because non-persons can't be saved." That's ridiculous. Furthermore, we in this modern world speak about the water breaking. The Hebrews never used that expression. He wouldn't know anything about that. This is not clinical. He's not talking about that.

Others say, "The water is baptism." That's very popular. Commentators go on for pages because you have to since it's not here, trying to invent it. And they come up with Christian baptism, which didn't show up until the second chapter of Acts. Nicodemus doesn't know anything about Christian baptism. He's giving him a hint.

Where was Nicodemus' bailiwick? Where did he live and move and have his being—in what? The Old Testament. "Does that ring a bell to you, Nicodemus? Does that ring a bell to you?" Listen, he knew the Old Testament. He probably had massive sections of the Old Testament memorized. He was very familiar with the prophets. He knew it. Water and Spirit; where would his mind go?

Go back to Ezekiel 36, Ezekiel 36. Here is a principle bound up in one of the most marvelous passages in the entire Old Testament which describes God's saving work in application to Israel, of

course. But it's the same saving work in application to Gentiles as well throughout history, as well as Jews who come to faith in Christ. Here's how salvation works. Ezekiel 36:25, notice the "I wills." Why? Because this is a work of God. This is that monergestic work of God from heaven, and you will notice five times, "I will." God speaking: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new Spirit within you." There, dear friends, is the water and the Spirit. The water and the Spirit is simply a reference to the creation, the new creation, the regenerating work of God that He does by His own in the heart of a sinner, and here He's promising one day to do it not only in individual Jews and Gentiles, but one day for the whole of the nation Israel. I will put a new heart in you, a new Spirit in you, remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I'll put My Spirit within you. I will cause you to walk in My statutes. I will, I will, I will, I will, I will, and then "you will be careful to observe My ordinances and you will," verse 28, "be My people and I will be your God." That's the water and the Spirit.

This great, epoch New Covenant passage of Ezekiel 36 would have been so very familiar to Nicodemus. He would have known it well. And then he would have known chapter 37 well where God looks at the future salvation of Israel and in verse 3 He says to Ezekiel, calling him Son of Man, "Can these bones live?" There's a picture of a valley of dry bones illustrating Israel's spiritual deadness. "Can these bones live?" "And I answered, 'O Lord, God, You know,' and He said, 'Prophesy over the bones and say to them, "O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, behold, I will cause *ruach*, Spirit, breath to enter you that you may live."'" In other words, God will give life in the future to Israel. He will save them not only as individuals but as a nation. Verse 12 of that same chapter: "Thus says the Lord God, 'I will open your graves and cause you to come out of your graves, my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I'll place you on your own land and then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it, declares the Lord." That is sovereign work of God, giving life in the future to the nation of Israel. That's His promise to the nation, and that's His plan and means for salvation for every individual as well. It is a work of God.

You can go back. Nicodemus knew that passage, he knew those Ezekiel texts. He would also have been very familiar with the eleventh chapter of the beloved prophet Ezekiel. He would have read this many times, probably had it in memory because of the promise. Ezekiel 11:19, "I'll give them one heart, put a new Spirit within them, take the heart of stone out of their flesh, give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in My statutes, keep My ordinances and do them. They will be My people and I will be their God." This is a divine work laid out clearly in the Old Testament.

I want you to notice Jeremiah, just two passages in Jeremiah. Jeremiah 24:7, "I will give them a heart to know Me for I am the Lord and they will be My people and I will be their God. They'll return to Me with their whole heart." That's re-creation. New heart, new spirit—washed, cleansed. And then that

most familiar Isaiah...rather Jeremiah 31...Jeremiah 31:31, same verse, same chapter: “Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord. I’ll make a new covenant with the house of Israel, house of Judah. Not like the covenant I made with their fathers in the day I took them out of the land of Egypt. That covenant was the Mosaic Covenant which they broke, even though I was a husband to them. But this is the covenant, verse 33, which I’ll make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, I will put My Law within them and on their heart I will write it and I will be their God and they shall be My people.” I’m creating a new people, giving them a new Spirit, a new heart, washing them, cleansing them, purifying them. That is all New Covenant language.

Now I want to give you an illustration of it. Turn to Psalm 51. When David wrote Psalm 51, he was a believer, he was a man after God’s own heart. He had written many psalms before Psalm 51. But in Psalm 51 we have a very unique situation with David because he has perpetrated a massive, prolonged premeditated, well-planned and orchestrated set of sins—started out when he was wandering around on his balcony and he saw Bathsheba and he lusted after her and then he engaged himself after that to make sure that he connected with her, that he brought her to the palace, that he had her husband who was out fighting in defense of Israel in David’s army, left in the middle of the battle so he would die. So he had his soldiers complicit in the murder of her husband. He takes her. He commits adultery; a terrible tragic situation happens; a child is born; the child dies. You know the whole horror story. But it was protracted, prolonged, premeditated sin and this man is so overwrought and destitute over the reality of his own condition that it’s as if he’s not even saved; it’s as if he has no relationship to God. And in Psalm 51 he cries out to God, “Be gracious to me, O God, according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgression.” He’s praying like an unconverted man. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin.” That’s New Covenant language.

He’s talking like an unregenerate sinner because that’s how he feels. “I’ve sinned against You, and You only and done this evil in Your sight. And I’ve been a sinner since the beginning, verse 5, “I was brought forth in iniquity.” In other words, I was born a sinner. He doesn’t mean his mother had him illegitimately. He means from conception I was in sin. “But You desire truth in the inward part.” In other words, I need to be a different person on the inside. And so he says, “Purify me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” And then in verse 10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not take away Your presence, do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.” That’s...that’s New Covenant language. David is so profoundly exercised in repentance over his sin that he prays as if he was an unregenerate man. He knew what it meant to be regenerate. It meant to be washed clean, given a new heart, a new spirit, a new disposition, be a new creation.

So David knew and recorded this in his fifty-first psalm and Nicodemus knew that psalm, recited that psalm, knew it by memory—one of the most popular and familiar of all psalms. How could it be then that if he knew that salvation based in the Old Testament was a matter of God acting sovereignly

because He wills, He wills, He wills, He wills to give a new heart, a new disposition and to wash and cleanse the sinner from above? How is it that he got caught up in the damning lie of Satan that somehow he could earn his salvation by something he did? Jesus doesn't let him off the hook. He says, "How can you be *the* teacher of Israel and not know this? Apostate Judaism had ignored the truth of New Covenant salvation and believed the lie of Satan that you could earn yourself into the kingdom. That was hint number one. Go back to John 3 for hint number two, verse 6.

Now we're going to reason a little bit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Stop there. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." That's His second hint. "Nicodemus, there is a foundational principle here that you and your entire system have overlooked. All that the flesh can produce is"...What?..."more flesh." You can't get from flesh to Spirit. You can't do that. What He's basically indicting Nicodemus for is a failure to understand the Old Testament doctrine of sin, the Old Testament doctrine of total depravity, the utter inability and unwillingness of the sinner to do right. Nicodemus, how can you be *the* teacher of Israel and not know about New Covenant salvation by the washing of regeneration, the washing of the Word and the giving of a new heart and a new spirit and planting the Holy Spirit in the heart. How can you not know that that's a work of God and that's laid out all over the Old Testament, and how could you not know that the flesh can only produce flesh? That's a hint.

What would Nicodemus have thought about? Well, let's go back and find out. One area of Scripture that he would have been very, very familiar with would be Genesis 6, when God gives His reasons that He's going to drown the entire world. When I say the entire world, I mean the entire world. All the millions of people who had been born since Adam to Noah are all going to be drowned in a flood, with the exception of Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives, eight people who were justified by God through faith by grace. But the rest of the world was drowned.

Why? This is where the whole human race ended up. Verse 3, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever because he also is flesh." This is the problem. There's the very word Jesus used, "flesh." That is the word for fallen, corrupted, sinful humanness. And then down in verse 5 He shows what flesh produces. "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." That's as clear a statement about human depravity as you find in the Bible. Every intent of every thought of every heart was only evil continually. Flesh produces that because that's all it can produce.

If you're going to be in the kingdom of God, you need a new heart. Chapter 8, the Flood begins to fade away, the whole human race has been drowned. We come into chapter 8, we hope for a better world. Noah builds an altar in verse 20, takes animals and offers God sacrifices, which means Noah recognizes that he is a...What?...a sinner 'cause that's why you offered sacrifices. And the Lord smelled the soothing aroma and the Lord said to Himself, "I'll never again curse the ground on account of man. But oh, by the way, the intent of man's heart is still evil from his youth. Nothing changed except that God wouldn't drown us anymore. Did you know that, Nicodemus? Of course you

knew that. You knew that nothing in man pleases God, nothing. You must remember the book of Job, Nicodemus. You must remember the testimony of Job. Chapter 14, verse 4, “Who can make the clean out of the unclean? No one,” He says. “No one.”

You must remember the testimony of Eliphaz in chapter 15. “What is man that he should be pure, or he who is born of a woman that he should be righteous?” Ha, impossible, one who is detestable and corrupt cannot be made righteous. He must have remembered Bildad in Job 25, “How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman? Even if the moon loses its brightness and the stars are not pure in His sight, much less man, that maggot, that worm.”

Job’s friends and Job all knew the theology of total depravity. They all knew it. And Job was written in the patriarchal period around Genesis. This isn’t new information. And then there was Psalm 51:5 that I read to you where David says, “In sin did my mother conceive me, I was iniquitous from my conception.” Do you think Nicodemus knew this verse? Isaiah 64:6, “All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags. All of us wither like a leaf and our iniquity is like the wind, takes us away. There is no one who calls on Your name, no one. You have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.” That’s Old Testament teaching on depravity. And our good friend, Jeremiah, is not to be left out. Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick.” That’s the heart.

Now there was a time when the apostle Paul thought he was holy, thought he was righteous. He really did. And then when he came to the truth, he counted all his righteousness as manure, he says in Philippians 3. Paul understood Old Testament doctrine.

Turn to Romans 3. In Romans 3 Paul is indicting the entire human race, Jew and Gentile, for their sin. He is saying that the Gentiles are sinful and the Jews are equally sinful. And to prove his point, starting in chapter 3 of Romans, verse 10, Paul quotes a whole series of verses from the Old Testament; starting at verse 10, going all the way to 18. All those are direct quotes right out of the Old Testament; right, most of them from the Psalms and Isaiah. Paul says, “Let me define sin. There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they’ve become useless. There’s none who does good, there’s not even one. Their throat is an open grave, their tongues are used to keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their paths and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Every one of those is an Old Testament statement on the sinfulness of sin. What’s wrong with you, Nicodemus? Paul the former Pharisee knew all of those passages and finally saw the light. Verse 20, “By the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified in His sight.” Flesh produces flesh and nothing more, and this, verse 21 says, is witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, meaning the Old Testament. The Old Testament then teaches all of this concerning the sinfulness of sin.

So what does the Old Testament teach? Salvation is a sovereign act of God by grace that He does independent of any action on the part of man. Man needs a complete spiritual birth. He needs to be washed. He needs to be transformed. He needs to have his heart replaced with a new heart. His Spirit replaced with a new spirit, or disposition. And he needs the Holy Spirit planted within him if he's going to enter the kingdom of God. And that is not something he can do because he is flesh and flesh produces only flesh. "So, Nicodemus, how can you be *the* teacher in Israel and you don't know this?" He doesn't let him off the hook. So He says in verse 7, "Don't be amazed." Why would you be amazed that I said to you; now He gets into the second person: "You must be born again. You're not going into the kingdom until this happens to you and you can't make a contribution because you're flesh, and flesh can't do this."

This is the denunciation of all religion apart from the sovereign grace of God and the gospel of Christ. Don't be amazed. Why would you be amazed? You know the Old Testament. You've been blinded by believing the lie of Satan. Don't be amazed.

This leads to the final point, the sinner's worry and the Savior's Word—the final point is the Spirit's work. End of verse 6, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." This is a work that only the Holy Spirit can do. Well how does that work? Verse 8, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from and where it's going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Huh, this is another analogy. This is another analogy—listen to me—that takes spiritual birth completely out of the hands of the sinner. What do you do to control the wind? Nothing. It comes from above; you can't summon the wind; you can't send it away. You can't write a book on how to increase the wind in your community. You can't do that. How to increase the wind in your yard. You can't do that. You can't do that. It is completely and totally the sovereign work of God. The wind is invisible, it is uncontrollable, it is irresistible, it is unpredictable, it cannot be summoned, it doesn't show up because you want it, it doesn't go away because you'd like to get rid of it. This is the second analogy that our Lord uses with this smart, sharp, clear thinking, logical rabbi—to tell him that this is a work in which he doesn't participate. This is irresistible grace, like John 5:21. "The Son gives life to whomever He will." The same verse says, "And God who raised the dead gives life." It is the will of God and the will of the Son and the power of the Spirit. It's a certain work of God. It is so new to Nicodemus, just so contrary to everything he's ever known. Verse 9, "How can these things be?" I mean, you just destroyed my entire life, like Paul on the Damascus Road. Paul said it's all manure, every bit of it. Nicodemus isn't there yet. What can he do? Well, he can't do anything, can't do anything.

You say, "Well, what happened to him?" He disappears in verse 10 for the moment, he disappears. He disappears with a question, a question he's never had in his entire life in his mind. What do I do? I was just told I can't do anything. I don't understand that. What do I do?

So what happened to Nicodemus? What happened to him? Well, for now he disappears. But he showed up again. Go to chapter 7 of John. Chapter 7, Jesus is in Galilee and the Jews want to kill Him. And the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, is near; so they migrate down and He is confronted again by the Sanhedrin. They want Him dead. He's preaching and teaching in the Temple, according to verse 28, and people are listening and, wow, they're saying all kinds of things. Some think He's the Messiah. Some think He's the prophet, down in verse 40. "This is the prophet; this is the Messiah." And there's a division, according to verse 43. Well, the rulers want Him dead, so they get some Temple guards to go seize Him and arrest Him so they can kill Him. But they wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him. When they got there, they couldn't...they couldn't lay their hands on Him. So the officers come back to the chief priests and the Pharisees of whom Nicodemus was one, and they said to them, "Why didn't you bring Him? We sent you to arrest Him, why didn't you bring Him?"

The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." We couldn't get past what He said. He paralyzed us with His words. The Pharisees then answered them, "You've not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he?" So now we know that Nicodemus hasn't become a believer; this is a year later. And he was in the Sanhedrin. But verse 50, Nicodemus steps up. Nicodemus, he who came to Him before being one of them, one of the Pharisees and chief priests on the Sanhedrin, said to them, "Our law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he's doing, does it?" Point of order, the lynch mob isn't right. You can't do this. Even the Romans gave due process. Hmm, that's a bold step to take. When the whole group wants Jesus dead, and you step up in defense of the law because you want to protect Jesus, not a believer yet.

The people in leadership looked at Nicodemus, *the* teacher in Israel, "Oh, You're not also from Galilee, are You?" Mockery, sarcasm. "Search and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee." They rebuke with sarcasm and mockery this their most illustrious teacher. He served notice that he's leaning toward Jesus. And they mock him. They mock the one they had revered and elevated. This is, by the way, actually two years after the meeting at night; two years have passed. So there is only one year left until the death of Christ. Let's go to chapter 19.

So two years later, Nicodemus is still a Pharisee, still on the Sanhedrin. But he steps up in a point of order in favor of Jesus. Come to chapter 19; Jesus is dead, verse 38, "After these things, Joseph of Arimathea being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus. Pilate granted permission, so he came and took away His body." Oh my, look. "Nicodemus who had first come to Him by night also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes." That's a resin, powdered resin that they used to spread out on the body to diminish the smell of decaying flesh. And aloes has a kind of a sandalwood fragrance. He brought 75 pounds. That's a massive amount because that's one way they showed honor to an illustrious person. This is an

honorable act on the part of Nicodemus; it's also a bold act. Nicodemus joins his companion, Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a believer but hadn't been willing to confess it openly. And now Nicodemus is bold and he comes and we know now that he has identified himself with the Lord Jesus and he is there, and he took the body of Jesus. You can imagine this. Nicodemus handling that body that he had spent that night talking to in his own arms, binding the body of Jesus with linen wrappings and putting in the spices in between all the wrappings as the burial custom was, and along with his friend, Joseph, they laid Jesus in the garden in a new tomb which no one had ever been laid in. There he is with the body of Jesus in his arms.

What happened to Nicodemus? I'll tell you what happened. God came down, gave Him life, gave him a new heart, a new soul, washed him, regenerated him. What about the rest of the story? Well, the rest of the rest of the story, you mean? Tradition says that he was the only person who stood up at Jesus' trial before Pilate and defended Jesus. Tradition says he was baptized by Peter and John. Tradition says that his confession of the Lord Jesus was so bold that it led him to being deprived of his office, deprived of his position as a teacher and deprived of all of his entire fortune, all his property, all his possessions, and he was banished from Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin he had served. He was reduced, living outside the city, and his family left inside the city to abject poverty. There's a wonderful little traditional story that his daughter was so poor that she reached the shame of digging in the dung piles for pieces of grain to eat and survive. And a rabbi came by and saw her and felt compassion for her and said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I'm the daughter of Nicodemus." And the rabbi said, "Whatever happened to your father?" And she said, "He came to be a follower of Jesus and was banished." And the rabbi refused to help her.

Some centuries later a man named Photius refers to an ancient document that records that Nicodemus was martyred in the first century for his devotion to Christ. How he was beaten to death by a mob. And that's the full story. He lost everything in this world, gained everything in the world to come. What can you do? I give you John 6:37, "Him that comes to Me I will not cast away." You can plead with God to give you life; it's His prerogative. But you can pray and He doesn't reject that honest prayer. You can say with the publican in Luke 18, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Father, we thank You again for the wonderful story of Nicodemus, this amazing account of Scripture. For all the richness of it, for all the magnificence of divine truth, there is no parallel, nothing even comes close, nothing ascends to this level, nothing. This is the greatest treasure in the world, the most important thing in the world, divine truth; sweeter than honey from the honeycomb, more precious than gold, much fine gold. We thank You for the sweetness, the value, incomparable joys that come to us in the understanding of divine truth. We understand it. We get it. The truth, hidden from the wise, revealed to babes, for Your glory, Your glory alone. I pray for those who are here who are like Nicodemus, maybe religious, moral, but worried, fearful, doubtful, knowing the hypocrisy of their own hearts, knowing they're not in the kingdom. Would You be merciful for Your own glory? Would You save them by Your will, wash them with the water of Your Word and give them a new

Spirit and plant Your Holy Spirit within them, give them new life, regenerate them? Open the grave, let them out, transfer them from the kingdom of death and darkness to the kingdom of Your dear Son and produce in them repentance and faith and obedience. All of this for Your praise and Your glory.

Father, thank You for this wonderful time of worship. Use us, Lord, to proclaim this truth boldly and then to wait on Your power and give You all the praise, we pray. Amen.

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