

SAVED (Part 6 of 6)

In explaining what He meant in verse 3 by the phrase “born again,” Jesus said unto Nicodemus in verse 5 “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.” Some people say this refers to literal water. It doesn’t. Nicodemus would not have understood Christian baptism (which did not yet exist) nor would he have misunderstood John the Baptist’s baptism. Further, had it been either of these two, Jesus would not have refrained from baptizing people (as John 4:2 makes clear) if baptism were necessary for salvation. The water Jesus is speaking of is merely symbolic – as it was in the Old Testament – of purification.

Nicodemus would have understood this reference to the Old Testament water of purification, which was sprinkled on the altar and sacrifices in most of the rituals. Being a scholar, no doubt Nicodemus remembered Ezekiel 36:25 and the promise of the New Covenant: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you.” Two verse later is the promise, “And I will put my spirit within you” (v. 27). Those statements, bringing the idea of water and the Spirit together, put together another promise: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (v. 26). That’s the Old Testament promise of regeneration by water and Spirit.

The only baptism implied here is the baptism in the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said, “And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:33). Spirit baptism takes place at salvation, when the Lord places the believer into the body of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), and purifies the believer by the water of the Word (Ephesians 5:26; cf. John 15:3). Paul refers to this as “the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5), almost perfectly echoing Jesus’ words in John 3:5: “Except a man be born of water [the washing of regeneration] and *of* the Spirit [and the renewing of the Holy Ghost], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

The whole point of Jesus’ message to Nicodemus was, Nicodemus you need to be spiritually purified and spiritually reborn. Your good deeds, the law, the rituals – including baptism – cannot give eternal life.

Nicodemus was a recognized and established scholar in Israel. And being an established scholar, he should have been familiar with the New Covenant teaching from the Old Testament regarding the only way of salvation – and that only way of salvation was through the Messiah, and Jesus was the Messiah (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Matthew 1:21-23; Hebrews 9:1-28; 2 Timothy 3:15).

Chapter 3 began with a night time visit from Nicodemus with Jesus. But after the question in verse 9, Nicodemus added nothing more to the conversation (at least nothing is recorded), as the dialogue between the two men moved into a discourse by Jesus. Although nothing in John 3:1-10 suggest that Nicodemus was converted that evening, he never forgot his discussion with Jesus. In John 7:50-51 Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin. In John 19:38-39

Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. Through the actions of Nicodemus, actions that indicate saving faith, it is believed that Nicodemus finally came to grips with his works-based system of salvation. Nicodemus came to understand sovereign grace and for the first time in his life he fully understood what it meant to have salvation.

Nicodemus illustrates the numbing effect of a works-based righteousness. From one perspective our good deeds have absolutely nothing to do with our salvation; from another perspective they have everything to do with it. Good deeds will never merit salvation. To merit salvation would mean to earn it or to deserve it. The deeds would have to be so good, so perfect, and without any mixture of sin in them, that it would impose an obligation upon God to grant us salvation. Yet, the New Testament is abundantly clear that none of us lives a life that is good enough to earn salvation while we are sinners. That is why we need a Savior, atonement – and why we need grace.

We all understand and agree that we are not perfect. But not one person in a thousand realizes how significant that statement is. One writer said, "Somehow we think that God is going to grade on a curve and as long as my life is less sinful than somebody else's then relatively speaking it's good enough to make it into God's kingdom." "We forget that God requires perfect obedience to his law, and if we fail to obey perfectly, then we're going to have to look elsewhere for a way to get salvation. That's where Christ comes in. Christ makes his merit available to us. When I trust him by faith, then his righteousness becomes my righteousness in the sight of God. So it's his good work that saves me and that saves you – not our good works."

"Nevertheless, in response of gratitude we are called to obey. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Martin Luther taught that justification is by faith alone. But he expanded the concept by saying that justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. A person who is truly trusting Christ and resting on Christ for redemption receives the benefits of Christ's merit by faith. But if that person has true faith, that true faith will manifest itself in a life of obedience. Simply put, I get into heaven by Jesus' righteousness, but my reward in heaven will be distributed according to my obedience or the lack of it."

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