

John 3:1-21 State of Origin

1. The Spirit and the Voice of God

"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."

Imagine yourself as a small sailing boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Without a wind to fill the sails you will never see or enter a port. That is the message of John 3. Unless the Wind of God, the Holy Spirit, blows on your life then you will perish and you will never see or enter the kingdom of God; you will never know God and, more particularly, you will never really know King Jesus and experience the blessing of the life that he alone can give you. The Spirit of God is as invisible and mysterious as the wind. Jesus says that when the strong Wind of God is blowing you can hear its sound or, literally, "voice." The Spirit of God is not a mystical, abstract force. The point is that as Jesus teaches you are hearing the sound of the Wind of God, you are listening to the voice of God himself. As Jesus himself puts it later on, *"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."*

As John 3:1-21 is read to you now, listen to the sound of the Wind. May that fresh breeze blow upon you and give you life.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The 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."

⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the

truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

From John 3 understand three things about the Spirit of God: (1) he makes his voice heard through the teaching of Jesus; (2) he alone enables people to see and enter God's kingdom; (3) he alone opens the eyes of people and brings them to true saving faith in Christ.

2. The Spirit and Life in the Kingdom

We've seen that the Spirit of God makes his voice heard through the teaching of Jesus. Now note that only God's Spirit enables people to see and enter God's kingdom.

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." So Jesus declared. State of Origin. Flesh or Spirit. I know you are as puzzled as I am as to why I have never been chosen to play for NSW in the annual rugby league State of Origin clash with Queensland. The only reason I wasn't automatically selected for the team is that I wasn't born in NSW. In fact I wasn't born in Australia. True, I've never played a game of rugby league in my life. But that wouldn't have anything to do with my omission from the squad. Birth is so limiting isn't it? I will never experience the glory of a victory over Queensland simply because of an accident of birth - something I have absolutely no control over.

Some time back a former student of mine in Pakistan got in touch. He is now a pastor in Karachi. He was born and raised in an Urdu-speaking culture. His English is very limited. Also his prior education had been very inadequate through absolutely no fault of his own. Somehow he developed the idea that he was capable of doing a post-graduate M.A. in theology course here in Sydney. The plain fact of the matter is that his birth and its consequences have made it quite impossible for him to see and enter into this reality. Similarly, though I lived for 7 years in Pakistan my birth in an English-speaking culture makes it impossible for me to enter into life as it is experienced by Pakistanis themselves.

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Pakistan is of this world. I was not born in Pakistan. But I can fly to Pakistan and see and enter Pakistan. But, as Jesus later says to Pilate: *"My kingdom is not of this world."* So you can't travel there. Jesus declared, *"I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* He also pronounced, *"I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* There is only one way you can see and enter God's kingdom - through birth, what Jesus calls *"birth from above"* or a birth *"of water and the Spirit."* Hindus and Buddhists try to attain to the ultimate state by avoiding rebirth. But, Jesus says, only a supernatural birth will bring you to experience life "in the kingdom of God" which John normally calls "eternal life." A little boy asked his mother where he came from, and also where she had come from as a baby. She told him some tall tale about a stork. When he asked his grandmother she told him much the same. He said to his friend, "You know, there hasn't been a normal birth in our family for three generations." In our computer age it won't be long before kids are asking their mothers not "When was I born?" but "When was I downloaded?"

Nicodemus could only think of normal birth: *"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to*

be born?" To Nicodemus Jesus might as well have been talking about the stork bringing the baby. But Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel. What Jesus was saying should have made sense to him. So Jesus says to him, *"You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?"*

A child asked, "Mother, doesn't God give us our daily bread?" Mum answered, "Yes, dear."

"And Santa Claus brings us our toys at Christmas?"

"Yes, dear."

"And the stork brings babies?"

"Why certainly, dear."

"Then what's my father hanging around for?"

Like this child Nicodemus was treating fatherhood as an irrelevancy. Nicodemus had failed to understand his Old Testament: that the only people entitled to regard themselves as God's people are those who have been fathered by God. In Deuteronomy 32 Moses castigates the Jewish people declaring, *"They have acted corruptly towards him, to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?"* Again in verse 18 he states, *"You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth."*

Jessica, our youngest daughter was born in Pakistan. When she was born we were not issued with a proper birth certificate. When a statement of birth is issued by a hospital in Pakistan it only has the name of the father on the document. The name of the mother is absent. In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, as still is the case in many cultures in our own time, the significance of a person's birth is dependent on paternity, on knowing who the father is. Jesus effectively says to Nicodemus, "You of all people, as a teacher of the Old Testament, should know that it is not enough to be the physical descendants of Abraham. You should know that the true people of God are those who have been born of God, fathered by him, brought into being by him, constituted as his children."

When Jesus came to the Jewish people he came to those who, to use the words of Moses, were no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Remember how John begins his Gospel: *"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."* Note this very carefully. Jesus came to "his own", that is, the Jewish people. But the Jewish people were **not** the children of God, as demonstrated by the fact that they did not receive Jesus. It's just as we are told in John 8. There the Jews protest against Jesus' teaching, insisting, *"We are not illegitimate children. The only Father we have is God himself."* To which Jesus responds, *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here."*

When Jesus speaks about "seeing" and "entering" the kingdom of God he is recalling Numbers 14:21-24: *"Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous*

signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it."

Immediately prior to these words God tells Moses that he will destroy the entire nation and create from Moses a new nation (v12). In reality God comes close to doing just this, because that entire generation of Jews, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, die in the desert and never see or enter the land. In other words, God has to give birth to an entirely new people to fulfill his purpose. The message here for Nicodemus and all of Israel's teachers is crystal clear. Only a people born of God can see and enter the promised land where they will enjoy the blessings of his rule. Unless you or your friends and relatives are reborn by the Spirit you will have no part in God's kingdom.

3. The Spirit and the Illumination of Faith

The voice of the Spirit of God is heard in the teaching of Jesus. Only the Spirit of God enables people to see and enter the kingdom of God. Thirdly, it is only the Spirit of God who opens the eyes of people enabling them to place saving faith in Jesus.

To understand Nicodemus' importance keep in mind how John 2 closes: *"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."* Immediately after this we are told of "a man of the Pharisees" coming to Jesus, a man who has seen the miraculous signs Jesus has been doing and has believed in his name, professing, *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."* Nicodemus voices his testimony about Jesus but Jesus does not entrust himself to *this man* because Jesus knows the blindness, the foolishness that is in a man, the complete inability of natural unregenerate man to see the kingdom of God.

In William Shakespeare's great play King Lear comes to the point where he pronounces, *"When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools."* Nicodemus plays the fool. At the end of Chapter 2 John describes a superficial faith based on people's experience of miraculous signs. Israel in the desert also experienced miraculous signs but that generation of Jews still died in the desert and never saw or entered the promised land. Nicodemus comes to Jesus applauding the miraculous signs he has performed. Jesus rejects his testimony, telling him, *"I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Do you see the point Jesus is making? All Nicodemus can see is the sign. He cannot see what the sign is pointing to.

Someone interested in star signs once asked comedian Bob Hope, "What sign were you born under?" He replied, "Keep off the grass!" In one sense Jesus' disciples were born under a sign. In 2:11 we read, *"This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him."* True faith is a response to the revelation of Christ's kingly glory. Jesus uses miraculous signs to point to his kingly glory. The glory of Jesus is the focus of true disciples. But Nicodemus' faith is false. He doesn't follow the signs. He fails to sense

the splendour and glory of Christ. For Jews the temple was the palace, the centre of God's rule. Jesus identified himself as the Temple in Chapter 2, that is, the centre of God's kingdom. Nicodemus is as blind as a bat, a creature of the night. Indeed, John describes him coming to Jesus at night because he represents those of whom John speaks later; those who love darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil.

Some passengers were seated in a plane waiting for the pilot to arrive. Finally, both the pilot and copilot appeared from the rear of the plane and began to walk up to the cockpit down the center aisle. Both seemed to be blind. The pilot was using a white cane, bumping into passengers as he stumbled down the aisle. The copilot was using a guide dog. Both had their eyes covered with sunglasses. The passengers assumed this must be some sort of practical joke. But soon the engines started revving, and the airplane began to move down the runway. The passengers started whispering among themselves and looked desperately to the stewardesses for reassurance. Then the plane started to accelerate rapidly. People began to panic. Some were praying. As the plane got closer and closer to the end of the runway, their voices became more and more hysterical. With only 10 metres of runway left their shouts reached a new pitch as everyone screamed at once. At the very last moment, the plane lifted off and was airborne. Up in the cockpit, the copilot breathed a sigh of relief and told the pilot: "You know, one of these days the passengers aren't going to scream, and we aren't going to know when to take off!"

Nicodemus represented the pilots of Israel. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council but he could not see the kingdom of God in front of his very nose. He was a teacher of Israel and yet he could not see that only those created by God as his people were eligible to come under God's rule. It is a tragic thing when people who think of themselves as Christians depend for their teaching and leadership on leaders who are blind. They might as well fly in a plane with blind pilots. Never make the silly assumption that all pastors and ministers in churches are true Christians, true believers. Nicodemus had nice things to say about Jesus like many such leaders. But his flattering words to Jesus are those of a ham actor playing the part of a foolish religious leader on "this stage of fools." Watch yourself when you watch evangelists and preachers on the TV stage of fools.

George Whitefield was a great preacher mightily used by God to bring many into the kingdom of God. One day a friend asked him, "Why do you so often preach on 'Ye must be born again?'" "Because," replied Mr. Whitefield, looking solemnly into the face of his questioner, "Ye must be born again!"

Recognize that if you have not been born again you have no part in God's kingdom. Cry out to God to open your eyes to see Jesus! Also, recognize that the Spirit is the Wind of God and he blows where he pleases. We cannot see him and follow his workings in the lives of people. We cannot predict whose life he will next transform. But you know that the Word of God is the sound of the Wind; that he uses God's Word to bring people to saving knowledge and to bring you to a greater knowledge of the glory of Christ. Do not merely pray for your relatives and friends. Find ways to get them exposed to the gospel and the teaching of God's Word. Make sure you yourself are able to share the gospel with people so that you might become an instrument used by the Spirit of God.