



## Blessed Assurance

***In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." — John 3:8***

The conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus is one of the most familiar conversations that Jesus had during His ministry. Even so, it is also one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council and a teacher of the Law. He was one to whom the people of Israel turned to for advice, and *he* came to Jesus. Nicodemus does not seem to be a typical Pharisee. He was not likely to be one who would contort his face when he was fasting so that other people could see his suffering. He was not likely one who prayed on street corners so that people could hear his eloquent words. Nicodemus had not externalized his religion as did many other Pharisees. Nicodemus seems to be a godly Pharisee.

The Pharisees believed in man's moral accountability. They believed that human beings were responsible for their actions and would one day have to answer to God for every deed they had done. They also believed that a person had to earn his salvation. This made them ardent followers of the Law. To make certain that they were keeping the Law, they built law upon on law, precept upon precept.

Nicodemus had seen or heard of the many miraculous signs that Jesus of Nazareth had performed. He had heard of the uplifting teachings of Jesus and witnessed the excitement that surrounded Him. Nicodemus saw in Jesus something the other Pharisees missed: that Jesus was a teacher come from God.

That must have really excited Nicodemus! How nice it would be for this teacher of the Law to ask the Teacher come from God a few questions. As the teacher of the Law approached Jesus, you cannot help but think that going on inside the head of Nicodemus was one burning question: Was he doing the right thing for his salvation?

Isn't that a question that we often ask ourselves in our own Christian lives? Are we doing the right thing? How can we know for certain that we are going to heaven?

Ascetic monks in monasteries would take vows of silence. They would torture themselves in a variety of ways. I have read of monks who would hold their fists tight until their fingernails grew through the other side of their hands—always wondering, always fearing: Were they doing the right thing? Were they suffering enough for their Savior?

Before the Reformation, Martin Luther would sleep on the cold, damp floor of the monastery rather than sleep in his bed. He would climb up and down the steps of the monastery on his knees in prayer asking for forgiveness. He always wondered if, when he got to heaven, he would have missed salvation by only a few steps. Was he doing the right thing?

Many religions people today—Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, even some Reformed people—have no assurance that they will go to heaven when they die.

The next time people come two by two knocking on your door and engaging you in conversation, ask them what assurance they have that when they die they will go to heaven. As they hem and

how for an answer, tell them that you have the assurance that you are heaven-bound and until they can boldly explain from God's Word that they are saved they need not come back.

But then you had better be able to explain from God's Word on what you base your assurance. For the early monks, for Martin Luther, for Nicodemus, and for too many others there is always that burning question: "Am I doing the right thing for my salvation?"

## **A Radical Teaching**

This question was so much a part of the life of Nicodemus that he didn't even have to ask Jesus the question. Jesus answered it before he could even ask it. And Jesus came with a radical answer. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

We have heard enough sermons on Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus that we think we know what Jesus meant when He said that. For Nicodemus, who expected that keeping the Law was sufficient, however, this came as a radical answer. It is a radical answer because a radical change has to take place within the heart.

All too often when this passage is read by television and crusade preachers (and, unfortunately, by many Reformed preachers), the conclusion is: "You must be born again. You must make a decision." That is not what Jesus is teaching in John 3. As a matter of fact, Jesus is saying you cannot make the decision to be saved by yourself. It's not up to you. You must be born of water and the Spirit. Just as with our first birth, we are completely passive in our rebirth.

It is not baptism that saves you. It is not the elements of the Lord's Table that save you. It is not living a moral, Christian life that declares you as one of God's own children. It is not "You must . . . you must . . . you must . . . that gives you salvation. The only "you must" is this: You must be born again—and that is the work of the Holy Spirit. You can't do that! It is a gift to you from God. It is grace!

To be born again is to receive the gift that God freely gives. It involves an abandonment of every attempt to become righteous by yourself and depending entirely upon the sacrifice Jesus made on Calvary's cross. By depending on Christ alone, through faith alone, you can have the assurance of salvation and the guarantee of eternal life. It is all about trusting in Jesus!

Salvation is a gift from God. If you are going to respond to your salvation in the right way, you have to recognize as such. It is really that simple. So simple that it is hard for us to understand.

It is like reading the want ads in the newspaper and finding an ad that says, "2015 Corvette for sale. \$500." Wouldn't it be amazing to get a brand-new Corvette for five hundred dollars? And yet, we won't pick up the phone and make the call because we instinctively think that it is a misprint or that there must be a catch.

Nicodemus and many popular preachers today think that salvation comes through an act of man. Somehow the Bible contains a misprint. There has to be some kind of catch. We have to earn our salvation. How wrong they are!

## **The Assurance of Jesus**

Too often in popular preaching the "must" in "You must be born again" is misinterpreted. When Jesus spoke those words, He was not saying, "By all means see to it that you are born again." Jesus was not saying that this was something you had to do.

Rather, Jesus was teaching, "Something has to happen to you." The Holy Spirit has to plant in our hearts the life that is from above. That is where the assurance comes in. It is not by your own deeds that God decides to choose you for eternal life.

Salvation was something that God Almighty preordained long before the earth was created.

*Ephesians 1:4 teaches: "He chose us in Him [that is, in Jesus Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight." He chose us not because we are nice people or because we have gone up and down monastery stairs on our knees or held our hands in fists. It is in Christ! It is according to His good pleasure that God comes to us and implants in us a new life through the Holy Spirit. It is an act of God and God alone!*

That should not have been anything new to Nicodemus. As a leader in Israel he should have known about the great power that God has to change lives and to change hearts. God promised that He would do so when He said, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26).

Study of the Old Testament Scriptures would have taught the teacher of Israel that God not only can give a person a new heart and a right spirit but also promises that He will do so. It is the rebirth Jesus was speaking of in John 3.

This is an instantaneous change! Ezekiel 36 teaches us that God comes and plucks out the heart of stone that is prone to hate Him and replaces it with a heart of flesh. We are given a heart that loves the Lord and longs to do His will—not out of fear but out of love and gratitude.

Rebirth is a supernatural change. It is the working of God redirecting the governing disposition of the soul. No longer is our life song "I Did It My Way." Through the Spirit of God we joyfully sing, "Thou art the Potter, I am the clay."

Rebirth is a radical change. It is changing the very root of our existence. We are given new hearts. Our life-support system is changed from one that will kill us because it is filled with poison and evil to one that will save us through Jesus Christ. We have been removed from the dead tree and are grafted into the Tree of Life. The blood that flows through this new heart that God has given us affects our whole person. Everything we say and do becomes focused upon Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus objected to the idea of being born again because he could not understand how such a radical change could take place in a person. That change comes to us as a promise of God through the Holy Spirit. That change in our lives—our rebirth—is in and of itself our guarantee of salvation. It is our assurance that comes to us by the grace of God, through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross, by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

### **The Assurance is a Promise**

For Martin Luther this was the great and marvelous revelation that sparked the Reformation. Climbing up and down those stairs, he recalled the words God had spoken to Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you." Teaching students from Romans led him to look more closely to Paul's teaching, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28) and "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 8:1).

No longer did Luther have to worry how many steps he climbed. It did not matter. The grace of God was sufficient for him! He could have that blessed assurance because he believed in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the all-sufficient sacrifice for his sin.

Our assurance comes not from ourselves that we have chosen wisely. Our assurance comes from God—that He has chosen us. Think about that! The most powerful Being ever has chosen us to be His children!

All too often we look at ourselves and respond by saying, "Oh, but my sin it is so great." Yes, it is! You sin against this most powerful Being every day. But here again, He has chosen you to be His child.

Have you ever had your first-grade or preschool child bring home a picture that he drew in art class?

After you stare at it for a while, your child says, "Mom, it's a picture of a fire truck."

Does it look like a fire truck? Probably not. It is not perfect. And yet you love it and put it on the refrigerator. You love it because it is something your child has done. And when he comes home with another picture, it will go on the fridge, as well. You might even get out some paper and crayons and have him make more even though you know it will look nothing like what he claims it to be.

The Bible says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Jesus Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). God has prepared good works for us to do. He knows those works will come back to Him stained with sin. They will not come back perfectly executed. God says, "Here. Do this. It will come back to me as beautiful because you are my child. You have been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ:"

Our assurance of salvation rests entirely upon the cross of Jesus Christ. Do you believe He died for you? Do you believe that His blood was shed for you?

The real question is not, "Am I doing the right thing for my salvation?" The real question should be, "How can I express this incredible joy that I have within me because Christ died for me?" The answer is simple: Seek to do the will of God. Do those good works that God has prepared for you to do.

The Law was given to the Israelites in the Old Testament after four hundred years of living in Egypt. After they were freed from slavery, God came to them and said, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage:"

WOW! Four hundred years away from the Promised Land. Cast into slavery. Beaten. Many had to throw their sons into the Nile River. And the great, almighty, sovereign God saved them. He killed Pharaoh's firstborn son in a horrible plague and set the sons of Israel free. How were they to express their incredible joy?

God said, "Love me with all your heart, mind, and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself" And then He showed them how by giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments.

Now look at yourself. You were a slave to sin. You were in bondage to Satan. You were dead in your trespasses and sin. God saved you from all of that. Pharaoh's firstborn son did not die in any plague to save you. God's only begotten Son had to die on a cross.

You have been set free. How are *you* going to express the incredible joy that you have with in you?

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