

JOHN 3:1–17. (EHV)

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.” Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” “How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus. “You are the teacher of Israel,” Jesus answered, “and you do not know these things? Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

In our politically correct day and age, we don’t like speaking in categorical terms. If I simply said without any further qualifications, “Black people are this way. White people are this way. Native Americans do this or that,” most, if not all, of you would become uncomfortable. It even makes us uncomfortable when the inspired writers of the Scriptures speak categorically. In the apostle Paul’s letter to Titus, whom Paul had left on the island of Crete, Paul quoted an ancient author from Crete who said, “Cretans are always liars, vicious beasts, and lazy gluttons.” Then Paul told Titus, “This testimony is true” (Titus 1:12–13). Paul knew that his good friend Titus would understand that he was painting with broad strokes, but we read that in our context today and it tends to make us uncomfortable.

But in John, Chapter 3, Jesus speaks in categorical terms, and he’s not just painting with broad strokes or making generalizations. He means it exactly as he says it. He teaches us that we humans are categorically lost by nature, and that we believers are categorically saved.

1.

Jesus begins by telling us that we are categorically lost as human beings on our own. He affirms it not just with one Amen, but two, and does so two times: “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God!” The clear implication is that, as we are by default, we cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. We

need to experience a new birth. Our earthly birth, or birth from below, if you will, will not suffice. We need to undergo a supernatural birth or a birth “from above.”

Jesus then confirms this by explaining: “Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” *Flesh* and *spirit* are commonly paired together as opposites in the New Testament. *Flesh* is used to describe our old Adam—our natural, earthly state. Jesus makes that clear here: “Whatever is born of flesh is flesh.” The apostle Paul describes that state when he writes, “The mindset of the flesh is death...because the mindset of the flesh is hostility toward God; it does not submit to the law of God because it is not even able to do so. Those who are in [the state of] flesh are unable to please God” (Rom. 8:6–8).

Spirit is used to describe not only the Holy Spirit, but also the spiritual state or condition the Holy Spirit creates, namely the new man or new person—a state of eternal life, peace, joy, trust in God, and a state of desire and ability to resist sin, lies, and the devil.

So again, listen to Jesus: “Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Every human being on earth fits into the first category. We are all born of the flesh. Not everyone is born of the Spirit. Not everyone experiences a second birth, a birth from above. So by nature, as we are conceived, as we come into this world, we are in a state of death, hostility toward God, and inability to please God, and therefore we cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. It doesn’t matter how cute we are when we come into the world. It doesn’t matter who our parents are or the good things they’ve done. We are categorically lost by nature.

Notice even the implication for Nicodemus. He begins his conversation with Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.” These are some of the kindest, most complimentary words for Jesus that come from a Pharisee’s mouth in the Gospels. Imagine if a politician from Washington, D.C., were to show up here and said to us after the service, “After listening to that service, I can tell that Jesus came from God and that God was with him.” Our instinct would probably be to nod our heads in agreement at this important figure saying nice things about Jesus. But Jesus immediately responds, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In other words, “You still don’t see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus. You still aren’t in it.” Nicodemus himself even realizes that he hasn’t undergone this birth from above: “How can a man be born when he is old?” “How can these things be?”

Knowing Jesus was a godly man, a man who came from God, a man who performed miracles by God’s power, a man with God on his side, isn’t enough. That’s the same thing the Muslims believe about Jesus. So do the Mormons. Not everyone comes to that conclusion, but it is possible to figure that out on our own, as those born of the flesh. With that knowledge alone, though, we would still perish and be condemned. By nature, we humans are categorically lost.

2.

But just as all are lost on their own, Jesus makes it equally clear that he came to save all. “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son... For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” It doesn’t matter whether a person is, to use our modern classifications, Native American, Latino, black, or white. It doesn’t matter whether a person is a citizen of the United States or the United Arab Emirates. God loved

the world from eternity, planned the world's salvation from eternity, and accomplished the world's salvation in time through his Son, Jesus Christ.

But it isn't just "Categorically Lost—Categorically Saved," period. We believe in universal redemption, but we are not universalists. That is, we do not believe that, because of and through the work of Jesus Christ, everyone is going to heaven. No, we actually confess with Jesus that, in spite of everything he has done for all people, most people are still going to hell. "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction," he taught. "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13–14).

Jesus paid for the sins of all, but we only receive that universal gift, we are only connected to that universal gift, through faith in him. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who *believes in him* shall not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever *believes in him* shall not perish, but have eternal life." In the Old Testament, when many Israelites were dying from venomous snakes, the Lord told Moses to make a snake and put it up on a pole meant for holding a banner. If anyone who was bitten by a venomous snake looked at it, he would live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and put it up on a pole. It was like the snakes that were biting the people, except it was powerless and had no venom. Whenever those bitten looked at the bronze serpent, not just with a passing glance as they were looking around, but in obedience to God's word and with faith in God's promise, they were healed.

In this bronze serpent, Jesus was prefigured. Like the bronze serpent, Jesus was made like us in every way, except without our poison. Like the bronze serpent, Jesus was lifted up onto the cross like a banner on a standard. Like the bronze serpent, Jesus on the cross proclaims *the* serpent's (the devil's) inability to harm us. Like the bronze serpent, whoever looks to the crucified Jesus in faith for healing from the poison of sin, a poison introduced into this world by the devil possessing a serpent, receives that healing.

This faith delivers us from death and gives us eternal life. Which means that this faith is the new birth, the birth from above, that Jesus said we must experience in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. We are categorically lost by nature, but all those who believe in Christ the crucified are categorically saved.

But how do we receive this faith? Jesus himself explained being born from above as being born of water and the Spirit. Now many Protestants who confess Christ with their mouths go through all sorts of mental gymnastics to try to explain this. Some say that "born of water" refers to the amniotic fluid that comes out when a woman goes into labor. So they say that Jesus is saying that we have to go through a natural birth, that is, be born of water, *and* a spiritual birth, that is, be born of the Spirit, before we can enter the kingdom of God. Notice how this allows them to escape any reference to baptism. The birth of the Spirit then becomes your own verbal commitment to Christ after you reach the age of accountability, or it is a born-again experience or feeling that you have after you ask Christ to come into your heart, or it is the pouring out of the Spirit on you that enables you to speak in tongues, or something along those lines—all of it revolving around you.

But there are even Protestants who reject the power of baptism who realize that this interpretation has big problems, because nowhere in ancient literature does anyone describe a natural birth as being "born of water." But those Protestants have difficulty coming up with

anything better. They usually say that Jesus is using water to symbolize a cleansing from moral impurities and idolatry. But they only interpret the water as a symbol, not the Spirit.

Jesus is clearly identifying both water and the Spirit as joint agents of the new birth. They together cause the new birth from above to take place. So we avoid all these mental gymnastics if we simply understand “born of water and the Spirit” as referring to baptism, since the New Testament consistently describes baptism as something that gives rebirth and renewal and saves us. Some say that Nicodemus couldn’t possibly have known Jesus was talking about baptism, but John the Baptist had already been baptizing for some time, had baptized Jesus, and had been preaching about Jesus, and at the beginning of the very next chapter, we’re told that Jesus’s disciples were also baptizing in order to make more disciples of Jesus, and that the Pharisees knew about it. There is no other way Nicodemus could have understood Jesus.

In other words, no one can enter or see the kingdom of God unless he is baptized into the saving faith, which is the faith in Jesus Christ.

Now of course Christians have questions like, “What if a child was unable to be baptized?” On the one hand, we have to uphold what Jesus says about our categorical lostness by nature. We have to take his words seriously. If you give birth to a healthy child, and then put off baptism for a long time, you’re the one putting your child in danger, not God. On the other hand, when God himself removes the opportunity for baptism from Christian parents, for example, through a miscarriage, there are other passages that we can go to for comfort, like Acts 2, where God says that he not only wants to be our God but also the God of our children.

But in general we need to keep returning to these two truths: We are categorically lost on our own, but we are categorically saved through faith in Jesus, and that is given to us or sealed for us in our baptism. It is possible to lose that faith after being baptized. That’s why we should cling to his Word and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, where the Lord continues to give us the Holy Spirit whom he first gave us in our baptism.

To conclude, I would like you to focus on and ponder these words of Jesus: “The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” There’s a play on words here we can’t quite capture, because the Greek word for *wind* is the same as the word for *spirit*. So Jesus is saying the physical spirit, or wind, blows wherever it pleases, and you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the heavenly Spirit.

Did you ever stop to think about that? Why were *you* baptized? Why not someone else? Why were *you* given saving faith? Why not someone else? Just as you can’t tell where the wind starts, where it’s going, and where it ends, so also we cannot get to the bottom of the ways of the Spirit. You are God’s child, you have faith in Jesus, because it pleased the Spirit to have it be so. And that’s it. We often spend so much time getting bent out of shape over, “What about this person? Why not that person?” that we forget to bow in humility and awe at the question, “Why me?”

After all, just like everyone else, you and I were lost. But it pleased God the Father to send his Son to pay for your sins, just as he paid for everyone else’s, and it pleased God the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit, to save you—to give you new birth from above through baptism, to give you saving faith in Christ crucified as your Savior. It is only due to his

grace that you are in a whole new category, not the category of the lost, but the category of the saved.

Glorify his name, and praise him for his grace shown to you in Christ. Amen.