

Date: June 2, 2013

Theme: There is new life in Christ Jesus

Object: Butterfly Slides

Scripture: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3 NASB)

Slide One night many, many years ago a man named Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus. As they talked Jesus said something that Nicodemus did not understand. Jesus said, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus was puzzled he simply could not understand how someone could possibly be born a second time. Even today most people do not understand how a person can be born again a second time.

This morning I have some slides that I hope will help you understand what Jesus meant. Look at the beautiful butterfly on the screen. I think butterflies are one of God’s most beautiful creations, but butterflies did not start out beautiful.

As you probably know butterflies begin life as little caterpillars. Some people like caterpillars and boys like to play with them, but I do not think anyone thinks caterpillars are beautiful. As the caterpillar grows, one day it spins a cocoon about itself and stays in the cocoon for several weeks. And then it comes out. **Slide** Look at the screen and see what has happened to the caterpillar! It is not longer a caterpillar, but a beautiful butterfly.

God did not just grab the caterpillar and stick some wings on it and then paint the wing with different colors. **Slide** God changes the caterpillar into a whole new creation. The caterpillar is gone and the new creation is a butterfly.

This is what Jesus meant when He said a person must be born again to have a

relationship with God. When we invite Jesus into our heart He creates a new creation – a spiritual person called Christian. Jesus does not just change us a little bit – He makes us a new creation like a caterpillar into a butterfly. **Slide** People have a choice they can live their lives as caterpillars and crawl through life or let Jesus make the new and they can fly spiritually and God see them are beautiful. As you grow you will also have to make a decision is if you want to live in the sin of the world or let Jesus make you a beautiful new creation.

Dear Lord, we thank you for sending Jesus to die on the Cross, so that we, like the butterfly, can become a new creation. Jesus make us your creation of beauty.

Amen

READING – John 2:23-3:21

John 3:1-10

Slide New Birth

Sermon #15

Open in Prayer **Blank**

Our time this morning will be studying the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, but we must understand that even though the great work of reproducing the Bible accurately in the early church years was a tremendous effort the division of the chapter and verse numbers is not always done well. This passage begins in chapter 2 verse 23 and ends with chapter 3 verse 21. We need to understand this because the ideas put forth in a paragraph are related and affect each other. Let me review what we saw in verses 23 to 25 of chapter 2 from our last study before we move on to Nicodemus because it is related to Nicodemus.

I will begin by reading verses 23 to 25 the closing of chapter 2, “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.” Unlike the Jewish leaders that we saw earlier in chapter 2 that were concerned with their positions of power there were those who God was calling and they believed in Jesus by what He taught and the miracles and signs He did. These signs affected Nicodemus as we will see in a little while. We continue in verse 24 and 25, “But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. Jesus as God knows the hearts of men and not all who called Jesus Lord were sincere. **Slide** In Matthew Jesus said, “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ **Slide** And then I (Jesus) will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’ (Matthew 7:22-23 NASB) Just because

someone calls himself or herself Christian, unfortunately does not mean they are.

Blank With this as our backdrop we can now read of a Jewish ruler of the Pharisees coming to Jesus by night in John 3:1. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

Let's explore what a Pharisee was. They were one of the most important Jewish sects determining the character of Judaism during this time. The word Pharisee **Φαρισαῖος** means “to separate” and it is not completely clear as to its meaning, but we do know that a Pharisee was a person separated from the populace as a leader. What we know about Pharisees from the New Testament is that they acknowledged a bodily resurrection, angels and spirits from what we read in Acts 23:8. Jesus made clear the Pharisees desire to rule, but they ruled as hypocrites, Jesus said, **Slide** “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.” (Matt. 23:2). **Blank** This reminds me of the time I was placed on a church's “Ruling Board” because I was a respected businessman in the community. I attended church because that is what a husband and father was expected to do and because my wife wanted to go to church. I was not saved nor did I believe. Somewhat like the Pharisees, I think. The Pharisees did teach the scriptures, but they themselves did not live them, they were interested in their position in society. We know the Pharisees fasted to show their religious piety from Matthew 9:14. The Pharisees were lovers of money as we find in Luke chapter 16 and Jesus warns that one cannot serve two masters (LK. 16:13-15). We read that Pharisees, and all Jews, did not eat without washing their hands in Mark 7:3 and Jesus had this to say, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness.” (Luke 11:39) and Jesus continued saying, “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, hypocrisy” (Luke

12:1). Jesus said to those desiring to be righteous, **Slide** “... that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20). The Pharisees were righteous on the outside, they knew the scriptures and taught them, but they were not righteous on the inside – they did not seek God and live their lives for God’s glory. **Blank** There is the story Jesus tells in Luke 18:10 to 14 about the two men who went up into the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector and the story exposes the ego and self-importance of the Pharisee. Pharisees and lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves because of their egos as found in Luke 7:30. Like many religious people today who follow works and rituals, but they have no relationship with Christ and have rejected God’s purpose for their lives.

This brings me to something the Lord has placed in my mind and heart for several weeks now. I believe Jesus in chapter 2 conveyed with His statement about the temple, His resurrection – but, He was also pointing out that the time of the man-made temple in Jerusalem was over. The temporary sacrifices being offered at the temple was coming to an end and would be replaced by spiritual worship in the living temple of each believer and the atonement that Jesus would offer to anyone who believes as the permanent or eternal or the final and complete sacrifice. Judaism was no longer the center of God’s attention – His attention would be on offering all people salvation through Christ. All cults or false religions have one thing in common – they are based on works. There are the easy ones to identify – Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and Islam, but there are those that are not so easy. When our faith is based on works instead of a relationship with the living God through the salvation offered by God the Son and spiritual life through the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit we are headed for trouble – eternal trouble. One of the latest “trends” in American Christianity is to reconnect with our Jewish roots.

To understand Judaism, which Christianity has as its foundation - is a good thing. This is why we study the Old Testament. But, the springing up of Messianic "Christian" Churches based on rituals, festivals, traditions and calendars is to return to a broken system that was replaced by Christ with a better way. It is a system of salvation based on works. This is what Proverbs 26:11 warned of, **Slide** "Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." **Blank** As we saw in both the 2nd chapter of John and Matthew chapter 7 not all that use the name Christian are the children of God by His grace and by faith. I am not saying that we here at Canyon Bible have it all figured out, because we do not. However, it is our desire to not only know the scriptures, but to live the scriptures by the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gives meaning to our human minds of God's message in the scriptures. We desire to live lives of God's grace in an intimate relationship with Jesus as our all-in-all. Let us keep our focus, our desire, our life's purpose on Jesus and nothing but Jesus. Without Jesus as both our Savior and our Lord – then our focus will be like the Pharisees with great knowledge of the scriptures, like Nicodemus a good man and like some of the Messianic congregations – lost – lost – lost! In John chapter 6 is recorded Jesus's statement about "false" believers and Peter's confession and this exchange makes the point I have been speaking of. **Slide** We read, ⁶³ " 'It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. ⁶⁵ And He was saying, 'For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.' ⁶⁶ As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?' ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall

we go? **You have words of eternal life.** ⁶⁹ **We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.’ ”** (John 6:63-69 NASB) Let us be aware or we too may fall into the human desire to seek salvation by works placing ourselves in “**Chair of Moses**”, like the Pharisees, instead of our sitting at the feet of our Lord Jesus. **Blank** I am greatly concerned with the many people and churches trying to be Jewish and returning to a broken system of ritual and law – we my brothers and sisters are NOT Jewish, we are Christians with Jesus as our complete and only Lord.

Now I am ready to return to John and our study of this meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus. Clearly Jesus taught and demanded that one must abandon oneself and our perceived rights and submit to Him as our Savior. This was Jesus’ message both in His public ministry and His private conversations. John 3 verses 1 to 10 recounts such a private conversation in the night with a Pharisee of prominence named Nicodemus, who was a Jew with a Greek name meaning “victor over the people”. Verse one reads, “**Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.**” John identifies Nicodemus as “**a ruler of the Jews**”. This means he was member of the court of seventy elders, made up of scribes and Pharisees, known as the Sanhedrin, which was the highest religious and political leadership among the Jews. Their origin is said to go back to God’s command to Moses to appoint seventy elders in Numbers chapter 11. The word and title Sanhedrin is a transliteration of the Greek word meaning “sitting in council”. The Sanhedrin was the supreme authority in Jerusalem, somewhat like our Supreme Court, ruling on the Law and unlike our Supreme Court they ruled on all religious matters also. With the disappearance of the Sadducees in 70 AD after the Temple was destroyed and the Zealots in 135 AD after the Bar Kochba revolt was crushed, the Pharisees became the dominant force in Judaism and their teachings with the completion of the Mishnah was the primary teaching source of Judaism. The Sanhedrin was

replaced by the Beth Din (Court of Judgment) however, unlike the Sanhedrin it consisted solely of scribes or as we know them today as lawyers. The Pharisees zeal for the Law developed them into ritualized and external worship and without hearts of flesh and having hearts of stone the best they could hope for was mere behavior modification of the Jewish people by compliance not true spiritual change. Let me read what Jesus had to say from Matthew chapter 23 beginning in verse 23 and reading to 33. You may wish to read along with me. **Slide** Jesus said, ²³ **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! ²⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. ²⁷ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. ²⁹ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and say, ‘If we had been *living* in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in *shedding* the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure *of the guilt* of your fathers. ³³ **You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?****

(Matthew 23:23-33 NASB) **Blank** Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, you know better, you know the scriptures and you do what benefits you anyway. You serve

yourselves not God and certainly not His people.

Now this was the background of Nicodemus and he has become conflicted in his heart by the teachings of Jesus. For he says in verse 2, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Nicodemus had a love for the Law of Moses, but he could not bring together in his mind, the mind of Pharisee, the Law and Jesus’ teaching. Although this verse is tied to verse 25 of chapter two Jesus did not respond to Nicodemus with “Woe to you” because He knew Nicodemus’ heart and knew he was seeking answers. In spite of Nicodemus’ position as a Pharisee and as a member of the Sanhedrin he addresses Jesus as “Rabbi” showing respect towards Jesus. Nicodemus says Jesus is a teacher from God; this also is showing respect, although not yet identifying Jesus as the Messiah, as God. Nicodemus zeros in on the signs that Jesus had demonstrated during the Passover in chapter 2 when he said, “no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” But, Jesus is not interested in discussing His signs, which resulted in superficial faith and temporary change for most. Jesus goes straight to the real issue – the transformation of Nicodemus’ heart by the new birth. Jesus says in verse 3 in answer to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “Truly, truly” only appears in John’s gospel and emphasizes the truth and importance of what Jesus is now sharing with Nicodemus. The “kingdom of God” in its broadest sense refers to God’s sovereign rule over all creation. This is made clear in Psalm 103:19, **Slide** “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.” But here Jesus is not speaking of the universal kingdom, but instead He is speaking specifically of the kingdom of salvation. **Blank** Jesus is speaking of the spiritual realm where those who have been “born again” by divine power of God and living by faith now live under the authority of God and are wholly owned by the Son. Nicodemus

like many Jews looked forward to this glory of being with God in heaven, but like many he thought that by being the descendants of Abraham, observing the Law and performing external religious rituals (particularly circumcision, as well as many others) would gain them entrance into the kingdom. Jesus now puts forth simply and clearly that this thinking is wrong and without spiritual birth all mankind, even those who are kind and good are destined for Hell. So even though Jesus' words are simple the implications are staggering. Nicodemus had worked hard all his life to be righteous, but this will not gain him the kingdom of God. Like the rich young ruler who said to Jesus, **Slide** "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up. Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and **you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.**" (Mark 10:20-21 NASB). Just as the rich young ruler was saddened by Jesus' words so too Nicodemus struggles. Without ritual and tradition Nicodemus was a ship without a rudder. The same was true for the Apostle Paul until he was born again. In Paul's letter to the Galatians he wrote, **Slide** "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." (Galatians 1:14 NASB). Paul worked hard and Nicodemus had worked and strived to advance by becoming a Pharisee and even rising to the select Sanhedrin. **Blank** Jesus now calls him to forsake all this and start over. To live with hope in Jesus and to realize that human effort, no matter how noble, is powerless to save. Nicodemus is confused, but we can see he is beginning to know he has a great need and the old ways will not meet this need. According to Jesus, the starting point in the Christian life is rebirth. Before rebirth every, every person is a child of wrath before God the Creator. This Pharisee was not obtuse and would have not misinterpreted Jesus' words. He knew the Lord was **not** talking about physical rebirth. Even though, Nicodemus responds

to Jesus by asking, “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?” His question conveys confusion, but God was awaking him. God comes and plants saving faith within a person heart, for the scriptures tell us that not even faith comes from ourselves – it is a gift of God. In Ephesians we read, **Slide** “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB). **Blank** Is it not amazing – God the Holy Spirit comes and takes the words of scripture and plants them within the womb of our hearts and there conceives and births a new life – a spiritual life for all eternity.

Moving onto verses 4 and 5 of our passage. 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, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” This has been a verse of much confusion and debate. Some see two births here, one physical and one spiritual. Water is referring to the amniotic fluid that flows from the womb just before childbirth. However, verse 3 is speaking of one birth, thus there is only one birth being dealt with here. Some say Jesus is referring to the baptism begun by John the Baptist and then continued for Christians as the symbol of rebirth and conversion. But Nicodemus would not have understood this at this time. The concept of baptism to wash away sins was known, but not Christian baptism as a sign of being born again. If baptism was necessary for salvation then Jesus would not have refrained from baptizing people as found in John chapter 4 verse 2. Since we know by what Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 10 of our study passage, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” that Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand, then Jesus’ was using what was familiar to Nicodemus.

Water and **Spirit** are often used in the Old Testament, the only scriptures at the time, to symbolically refer to spiritual renewal and cleansing as found in Numbers 19; Isaiah 4, 32, 44 and 55; Joel 2 and Zechariah 13. There is a passage in Ezekiel describing Israel's restoration to the Lord by a new covenant. Ezekiel is a major prophet of the Old Testament and the Book of Ezekiel is found after Lamentations and before Daniel. **Slide** Turn in your bibles to Ezekiel chapter 36. Israel profaned the name of God and God scattered the people. In verse 22 God speaks through Ezekiel saying, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went." God makes a new covenant with Israel and speaks through Ezekiel. Let me read beginning in verse 24. "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. **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;** and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." Here we read a passage showing regeneration to be an Old Testament truth with which Nicodemus would have been familiar with as a scholar. **Blank** This concept of spiritual regeneration is also found in Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34 and ; Ezekiel 11:18-20. Christ is using this Old Testament foundation of spiritual regeneration to make His point. I believe this is what Jesus meant by verse 5, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Without the spiritual washing of the soul, which can only be done by the Holy Spirit – no one can enter into God's kingdom.

Jesus continues with this thought by emphasizing that this spiritual cleansing is wholly the work of God and not the result of human effort or works. Verse 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Just

as human nature gives birth to human nature, which is corrupt, so too the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual transformation or spiritual birth - this is what it means to be “born again”. Although we have seen that Jesus’ words to Nicodemus were based on Old Testament revelation they ran completely contrary to everything Nicodemus had been taught and was able to see in the scriptures with his human eye and mind. As many today, including those trying to return to Judaism as Messianic Christians, are trapped like Nicodemus in believing that salvation, at least in part, comes through their effort to keep the Law and traditions and festivals and accomplished by their works. Aware of this ingrained thought Jesus continued saying, “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ” The verb translated here as “must” is a strong word indicating the absolute necessity. It was used in this gospel of John when speaking of the absolute necessity or “must” of the crucifixion. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he “must” get over his astonishment at being wrong in his concept of righteousness and how one enters into the kingdom of God and he “must” seek to be “born again” spiritually if he wants to enter the kingdom of God. To enter the kingdom cannot be accomplished by righteous works.

Jesus wants to help Nicodemus with his struggle by continuing with using a familiar example from nature saying, “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.” God’s sovereign work of regeneration of the human heart and soul can neither be controlled nor predicted, like the wind. Yet, its effects, like the wind, can be seen in the transformed lives of those who are “born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus just could not seem to let go of his training and past, he responds, “How can these things be?” How could salvation be this easy – not based on his efforts or

works or rituals or traditions or the Temple. Jesus tries to get Nicodemus to turn the corner and at the same time convict him by saying plainly, “**Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?**” Nicodemus’ lack of understanding was inexcusable considering his knowledge of the Old Testament and his position as a **teacher of Israel**. Nicodemus is a clear example of the numbing effect that external, legalistic religion has on people’s spiritual perceptions and why they do not understand. We see this today in the leadership of some churches even though they call themselves Christian. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 says, **Slide** “**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.**” I believe this is why the Lord has placed on my heart my concern and my warning to those who will listen the danger of the movement of Messianic Jewish Christianity that is growing in popularity. **Blank**

In closing, although nothing in this passage indicates Nicodemus was converted or born again that evening I believe there had to be an awaking spiritually for later he defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin and helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’ body for burial and these are actions that indicate the presence of genuine faith and a life that has changed. He now publicly supports Jesus and no longer comes in the night. I believe that at some point after the evening conversation with Jesus Nicodemus came to believe and was born again.

So too may we follow the example of our Lord Jesus and be bold enough to share the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus with anyone who will listen for this is our calling by God.